Shakespearean Tragedies

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In the First Folio, twelve texts appear under the title of Tragedies. These include the early *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*; the Roman history plays of *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*; the lesser-known *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Cymbeline*; and of course *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*. The last four are arguably Shakespeare’s greatest plays and will be the main focus here. But the Folio’s categorisation is, of course, complex and contested. The Roman plays could have been classed as histories, and while the Folio title is *The Tragedie of King Lear*, the original Quarto is the *True Chronicle Historie of the Life and Death of King Lear*. Conversely, several of the English history plays have tragic elements, and both *Richard II* and *Richard III* are titled as tragedies in their Quarto editions. *Troilus and Cressida* appears to have been added to the Folio at a late stage, and is similarly labelled as a history in its earlier Quarto. Nor is it possible to simply date Shakespeare’s tragedies. Most of the works mentioned above are written in 1599 or later, and his greatest tragedies are all mature works, but *Romeo and Juliet* comes from an earlier period, and *Titus Andronicus* is a very early play.

Shakespeare breaks with the classical tragic unities of place, time and action, proposed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. Few of his plays take place in a single location; their timescales stretch considerably beyond a single day; and often subplots supplement the key action. *Othello* is perhaps the closest tragedy to a classical model. Yet like his classical antecedents, Shakespeare’s tragedies do largely concentrate on a single main character, or in a few cases a pair, and trace their development in the light of an event or situation. Their inability to resolve this situation or deal with the implications of the event leads to their downfall and their death. *Julius Caesar* is unusual in that Caesar dies relatively early in the play, and much of the remainder focuses on the fate of his murderers, notably Brutus. The fact that Cymbeline survives the play that bears his name is one of the reasons why the play uncomfortably sits within the tragic genre and is often grouped with other very late plays such as *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. While the titular characters of the plays are almost always the key focus, there are many strong second parts. *King Lear*’s daughter Cordelia, *Lady Macbeth*, Hamlet’s uncle Claudius, and *Coriolanus*’ mother Volumnia are all central, and it is notable that all are relations by blood or marriage. Aside from Brutus, the key exception is in *Othello*, where the play is dominated by his fellow soldier Iago.

The tragedies are frequently studies in emotion, with the main character either unable to process an event because of some major character flaw; or where an aspect of their character which had previously been a strength becomes a weakness. The protagonists are either high-born or have achieved greatness through their actions; they therefore have further to fall. *Othello* is consumed by jealousy, having been manipulated by Iago into believing in his wife Desdemona’s infidelity. *Iago’s* reasons are, it would appear, at least in part inspired by his own envy of Michael Cassio being preferred for promotion to Othello’s lieutenant. *Hamlet* is paralysed by his inability to revenge his uncle’s murder of his father, and the taking of his mother as his uncle’s wife. His doubt gives way to resolve, but too late. It leads to the accidental death of Ophelia’s father; Ophelia’s own death and then the terrible final scene which ends up with almost every major character dead or dying.

*Lear* flies into a rage when Cordelia does not conform to his wishes for an obsequious display of love, as her more manipulative and less-caring sisters had done. Not only does he disinherit Cordelia, he also banishes the Earl of Kent, who had come to her support. *Macbeth* is consumed by ambition following the witches’ prophecy, and is spurred on by his wife to kill the King and seize the throne. But later, unable to convert his taking of power to respected authority he has to continue to kill to maintain his position, before being killed himself. *Coriolanus*, whose military prowess on behalf of Rome had won him so much honour and position, is unable to convert his attitudes to the more
subtle power strategies of civilian politics. Arrogance or inflexibility proves to his downfall, and expelled from Rome he joins with its Volscian enemies, only to be turned against them and be killed.

While the plays focus on character, and often the relations within a fairly small family group, there is always a larger context within which the events are embedded. In *Hamlet*, we learn of a threat to the kingdom of Denmark from Norway, which dates back to a rivalry between Hamlet’s father and King Fortinbras. The court of Elsinore is on land won by King Hamlet in a dual that happened on the day of Hamlet’s birth. Now, young Fortinbras wishes to regain the lost land, and is taking advantage of the disorder in Denmark with the death of King Hamlet and the accession of Claudius. Fortinbras plays a small, though crucial role in the play: introduced in an account of the background early on; Hamlet then meets his army on their way to Poland, and this episode marks his own transition from doubt to resolve; and then Fortinbras enters the stage in the final scene, to take the Danish crown.

*Coriolanus* is set within the contested politics of early Rome, both its internal, domestic politics and the rivalry with the Volscians; *Julius Caesar* lives and dies in the historical complexity of the late republic; and *Antony and Cleopatra* within the collapse of the second triumvirate and the struggle for control of the Roman world. *King Lear* precipitates the struggle for succession through his initial division of the kingdom, trying to balance the power between the Duke of Cornwall and the Duke of Albany, married to his two eldest daughters, with a strategic marriage of Cordelia to either the King of France or the Duke of Burgundy. This dynastic-geographical set of relations is thrown into disarray with Cordelia’s refusal to play along, and while she ends up marrying the King of France anyway, this leads to an external invasion of Britain. In *Othello*, the geopolitical rivalry is between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, with Cyprus the strategic goal. Othello gains further renown with his victory at sea, but then Cyprus becomes the site of the unfolding of the tragic events of that play. In *Macbeth*, similarly, his military prowess against external and internal enemies—Norway and the treacherous Thane of Cawdor—gains him recognition within Scottish tribal politics. But then his own choices lead to a situation where he becomes the enemy within, and lead Macduff and the dead king’s son, Malcolm, to bring an English army to overthrow him.

Many of the themes of the history plays recur in the tragedies, including political issues around succession, banishment, property, rule, order and law. The majority of the events in the tragedies are realistic, with extraordinary situations occurring but still within the natural world. Yet there are important exceptions. Macbeth’s tragic downfall is precipitated by the encounter with the witches, and he hallucinates a dagger, sees Banquo’s ghost, and the later apparitions of the line of kings. Horatio and the night watch, and then Hamlet himself, encounter the ghost of the King, learning of the manner of his death. In *King Lear*, the storm on the heath is both a natural event and the trigger for Lear’s descent into madness. Many other characters in the tragedies are mentally afflicted—*King Lear* also contains the transformation of Edgar, wrongly disinherited, into Poor Tom. Both Hamlet and Ophelia exhibit signs of madness, and Lady Macbeth is unable to sleep, haunted by the memories of what she and her husband have done, and the sense that her hands will never be clean of the King’s blood. All of the tragedies have some comic relief, from Lear’s fool to *Othello*’s clown, and *Macbeth*’s porter. In *Hamlet*, it is the title character who often provides the comedy, and in many stage productions of the tragedies scenes that appear as serious are often played for laughs. Equally there are darker, perhaps tragic elements within some of the plays conventionally labelled as comedies, including *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*.

Shakespeare’s sources are varied, but he usually worked on the basis of a historical text or previous story. He took stories from sources such Plutarch’s classical *Lives*, Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* and Giovanni Battista Giraldi (Cinthio)’s literary works, though radically reshaped them to serve his dramatic purposes. Shakespeare may have written some of these plays in collaboration. Notable examples include *Macbeth*, which is possibly an edited version of a longer original, but with some additions, probably by the hand of Thomas Middleton. Middleton is also the likely co-author of *Timon of Athens*; George Peele may have collaborated on *Titus Andronicus*. But the majority of the
tragedies are the work of a single hand, and the length of the texts suggests that they cannot have been performed uncut. Shakespeare was writing for the page as much as the stage, and in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* we have quite distinct versions of the text in the Quarto and Folio editions, which gives some insight into how they may have been written and revised. In these, and many of the other tragedies we have Shakespeare at the height of his dramatic genius.

Further Reading

A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*, Penguin, 1991. A reedition of a classic work from 1904 that examines the drama of the characters in these four plays, looking at their personalities, flaws and struggles. Two chapters on each of these plays are preceded by two more general lectures on tragedy.

Larry S. Champion, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Perspective*, University of Georgia Press, 2012. A thematic treatment of the Folio tragedies, in roughly chronical order, excepting *Cymbeline* and *Troilus and Cressida*, but including *Richard II* and *Richard III*.


Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare’s Politics: A Contextual Introduction*, Continuum, 2009. A valuable study of politics at the time Shakespeare was writing, with documentary sources to contextualise issues in the plays.

Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: Violation and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 2010. An important study which looks at the violent aspects of the tragedies, both in actions and words. Studies the major tragedies as well as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Titus Andronicus*.

