

Are the witches in **Macbeth** an embarrassment or can they mean something to a 20th-century audience? Is **Hamlet** really mad or is the world insane?

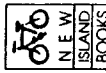
In this provocative but scholarly guide to two Shakespearean tragedies on the Leaving Cert course, Fintan O'Toole – Ireland's foremost theatre critic – shows how **Macbeth** and **Hamlet** have been made unintelligible to modern students by being filtered through outdated concepts that have nothing to do with what the Bard wrote, and often everything to do with keeping the world safe for conservative values.

O'Toole uses both the broad context of the plays and a close and rigorous reading of the texts to make them fresh, fascinating and above all understandable. **Macbeth & Hamlet** will prove an invaluable aid to Leaving Cert, "A" Level and University students, teachers and parents, and to general readers interested in the work of the world's greatest playwright.

"Fintan O'Toole presents a challenge to the traditional textbook approach to studying Shakespeare. This fresh, iconoclastic study contains many new, penetrating insights which will help readers to a more absorbing and invigorating appreciation of these tragedies."

John Coolahan, Professor of Education, Maynooth College.

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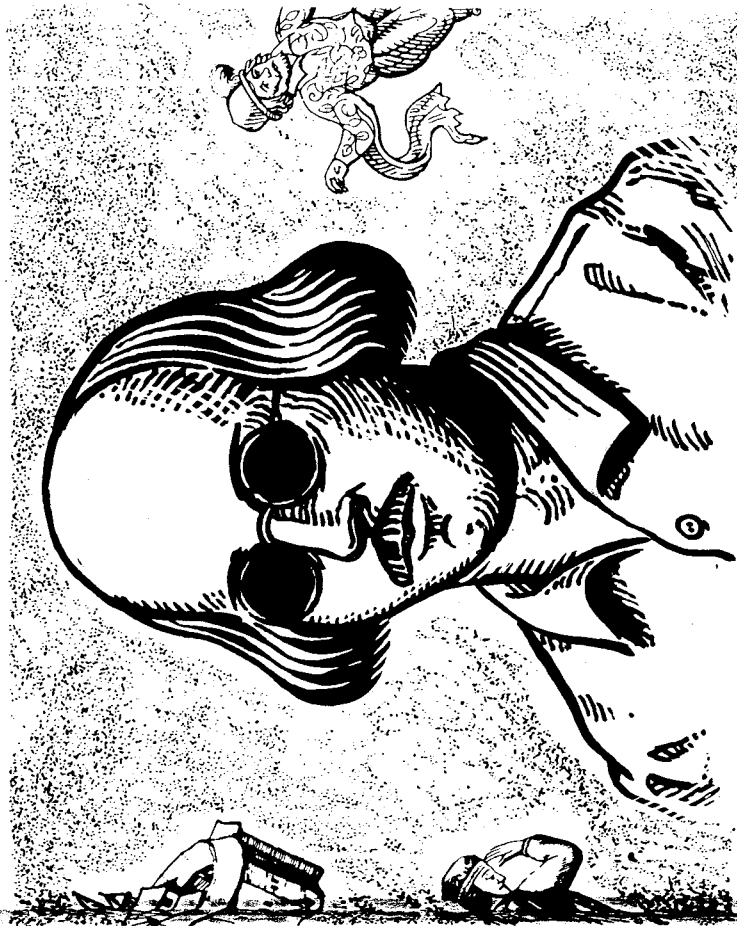
Outburst

A Radical Guide to

MACBETH & HAMLET

For Leaving Cert
and University Students

Fintan O'Toole



Fintan O'Toole

"I've never read a schoolbook like this before –
challenging, irreverent and funny" – **Roddy Doyle**

Shakespeare is Hard, but So is Life

For Clare with love

1. Why is Shakespeare so boring?

The plays of William Shakespeare were written on the playing fields of Eton. Or rather, the plays of Shakespeare as they tend to be taught in school, were. Very often, *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, *King Lear* or *Othello* are made to seem as if they have very little to do with the theatre, with the seventeenth century, with a man trying to create new rituals for a world that was changing at a frightening pace, and everything to do with building character, with the nineteenth century, with teaching us lessons about how we should behave. They are the mental equivalent of a cold shower, shocking, awful, but in some obscure way good for you, bracing you for the terrors of life and keeping your mind off bad thoughts about politics, society and the way the world changes. They are an ordeal after which you're supposed to feel better, a kind of mental muesli that cleans out the system and purges the soul. And, like muesli, they are boring, fruity and full of indigestible roughage.

The plays that Shakespeare actually wrote, on the other hand, are full of great stories, extraordinary people, wonderfully rich language and a skill with drama that has seldom been matched. They are not always easy, partly because the language of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even when it appears to be the same as ours, can work very differently. When, for instance, Henry Vaughan in the seventeenth century writes "How fair a prospect is a bright backside", he doesn't mean what you think he might mean; he's saying that it is nice to have a garden behind your house. And it works the other way too - Hamlet can sound like he's talking very respectfully when in fact what he's saying is pure filth. So

Shakespeare's language takes a bit of work. Shakespeare is hard, but so is life, and so long as you can see that there's a lot of life in Shakespeare, then the effort begins to make sense.

What doesn't make any sense is the idea that Shakespeare is trying to demonstrate moral ideas to us, that he's a kind of excruciatingly long-winded head nun. If you look at him this way, then he's not just boring and banal, he's also pretty stupid. One set of school notes on *Macbeth*, for instance, tells us that in "moralistic terms, the Tragic hero and in particular Macbeth, may be seen as a warning to all that evil will be punished in this life as well as the next." Leaving aside the fact that this is not a particularly startling thing to want to tell us, and that Shakespeare might have been better employed writing sermons rather than plays if this was really what he wanted to do, we might well ask what moral message Shakespeare was trying to give us. The message of *Macbeth* is that it's a bad idea to kill kings. The message of *Hamlet* is that Hamlet should have killed the King sooner. Othello is doomed because he is too jealous of what he has. Lear is doomed because he is not jealous enough and wants to give away what he has. If this is what Shakespeare is about, then he's clearly not very good at it. Either there is something else entirely going on in his plays, or else we should all go back to watching soap operas where at least the moral messages are fairly consistent.

2. What about the Tragic Flaw?

Before we can begin to understand, and therefore enjoy, Shakespeare's tragedies, there is a great deal of undergrowth to be cleared away, all that stuff about Tragic Heroes, Tragic Flaws, Fear and Pity, Character, and so on. Almost every school textbook on one of Shakespeare's tragedies starts out by showing that there is a thing called Tragedy which was defined by a man called Aristotle two thousand years ago and that the play in question, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, or whatever, conforms to this definition. The assumption seems to be that if for some reason the play did not do what Aristotle said a tragedy should do, then it would somehow cease to be any good and we wouldn't want to read it or see it. By a happy coincidence the textbooks always find that there is no difficulty in showing that

Shakespeare's plays were in fact written to Aristotle's formula, that they are therefore the Real Thing, and that it's okay to go ahead and study them.

The reason *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* have to get a dog licence signed by a Greek who died hundreds of years before the birth of Christ has very little to do with ancient Greece and still less to do with Elizabethan England. But it does have a lot to do with Victorian Britain, with the critics and teachers of nineteenth-century England who laid down many of the categories through which we are still looking at Shakespeare. Shakespeare himself may or may not have been aware of Aristotle's book, *The Poetics*, from which the rules of what tragedy is supposed to be like are derived. We know very little about Shakespeare's life and very little about what he read other than what he used for his plays, but even if he was familiar with Aristotle's "rules", he felt free to ignore them.

The strongest of the so-called Aristotelian rules was the idea of the unities of time, place and action - the idea that tragedies should happen in a single day, in a single place and through a single story. Shakespeare's plays can take up to sixteen years to unfold, hop all over the place, and usually include at least two connected stories. They show no interest whatsoever in the classical rules of tragedy as Aristotle was supposed to have written them. And anyway, Aristotle was merely trying to describe what he thought the best writers of tragedy in his own time were doing.

The only evidence of Shakespeare's attitude to Aristotle that we have from his plays is that he didn't know very much about him. Aristotle is mentioned twice in Shakespeare: once as having written before Homer (which he didn't), and once as being the opposite to Ovid, references that are either wrong or simply obscure. The most important of Aristotle's ideas about tragedy, "catharsis" (the idea that tragedy works by purging our emotions), is never mentioned by Shakespeare and is mentioned only once by any Elizabethan writer: and then only to mock at it.

Even the word "tragedy" itself is something that is forced onto Shakespeare's plays long after they were written. The Stationers' Register, which recorded the titles of his plays in Shakespeare's own time, lists *Hamlet* as a "revenge", *King Lear* as a "history", *Antony*

and *Cleopatra* as "a book called Antony and Cleopatra". *Othello* is listed as a tragedy, but then so are *Richard II* and *Richard III*, which we now call "history plays".

When the plays were printed during Shakespeare's lifetime, their categorisation as tragedies is even more dubious. *Hamlet* is a "tragic history", *King Lear* is a "true chronicle history". Whatever else he was doing, Shakespeare was not sitting down to write something which was called "tragedy" and which followed prescribed rules. He certainly knew that he was *not* writing the most respected and highbrow kind of tragedy of his day, the one which followed classical (mostly Roman) models.

3. So how did Greek ideas of tragedy get attached to Shakespeare?

The habit of seeing Shakespeare through Aristotle comes from Victorian England. The Victorians were at the centre of a great world Empire and liked to think of themselves as the essence of modern civilisation. Since they thought of ancient Greece as the essence of classical civilisation, they naturally wanted to identify themselves with it as much as possible. If they could show that Shakespeare, a central part of their own culture, was really the first cousin once removed of their beloved Aristotle, then Aristotle's ideas about tragedy would clean up Shakespeare, make him once and for all respectable, fit him in with their own taste for moral seriousness and good example. Out of this combination of Aristotle and soup-soap-and-salvation morality came the idea of the Tragic Flaw.

Victorian thinking about Shakespeare, much of which we have inherited, was dominated by Matthew Arnold's idea that literature had to be thought of as offering help to people who were perplexed about how to live. Living in what they considered to be a very stable and ordered society, the Victorians weren't much interested in those aspects of Shakespeare (easily the most important ones) which are about social and political change, about instability and its consequences. On the whole, they tended to view public affairs in general with distaste, as something which made life crude and corrupted its finer values. What interested them were the peculiarities of Shakespeare's characters and the possibility which

they offered for some kind of moral guidance. They also tended to regard the stories of Shakespeare's plays as outlandish and far-fetched, as a crude concession to the populace, saved only by the genius of Shakespeare's poetry. So they split his characters from his stories and gave us the notion of looking at Shakespeare's characters in isolation from his plots, from what is happening to them and around them. The main problem with this is that it makes much of what happens in Shakespeare almost incomprehensible and almost all of it very boring.

As well as reflecting their own view of the world, this idea of what Shakespeare was about also reflected the Victorian theatre. Victorian theatre was dominated by great actor-managers and by the picture-frame stage. Both of these contributed to the idea of the star as the really important thing in the play, so for instance *Hamlet* was about the actor playing Hamlet, to a lesser extent the actor playing Ophelia, and a few hangers-on to make up the numbers. Sir Walter Scott, for instance, wrote at this time that it was no longer the poetry or the plot which drew an audience to *Hamlet* but the desire to compare some turn of gesture or intonation in Kemble's performance with that of Garrick. This gave a great impetus to the isolated study of the Tragic Hero and of isolated moments in the tragedies, the big scenes and particularly the soliloquies which were the testing-ground of great heroic acting. Good modern productions of Shakespeare have long since moved on from this way of playing Shakespeare and towards the idea that, as the director Peter Brook has put it, "Each moment in Shakespeare should be as important as every other; each speaker should be the 'lead' as he speaks." But the way that Shakespeare is taught is still stuck with the actor-managers of the Victorian stage.

4. What did we get from the Victorians?

There are three basic ideas which we have taken from the Victorians via Aristotle and which combine to make the study of Shakespeare so tedious:

- i. **The Idea of the Tragic Flaw**, which invites us to ask the question what is wrong with these people? and to come up with witheringly useless answers - Macbeth's flaw is ambition, Hamlet's

is indecision. One set of notes widely used in schools tells us that the Tragic Hero should be "someone whose misfortunes are brought upon him by some error of judgement on his part. This error of judgement may arise from a flaw in his character, some human weakness. It is essential that to some extent he contributes to his own downfall. A simple "rule of thumb" definition of a Tragic Hero that should be adequate for general purposes might be that he is a potentially noble person who, through some flaw in his character, helps to bring about his own downfall, and who, by suffering, acquires self-knowledge, and so purges his faults."

The problem with this notion, which is taken directly from Aristotle without any reference to the enormous differences between Greek tragic heroes and Shakespearean ones, is that Shakespeare's plays make no consistent sense when seen in this way. It is also that many of those protagonists can only appear as less than intelligent. If you look at Othello from the point of view that he is merely jealous then it is clear that Othello must not be very intelligent. And if he's not very intelligent, then he's not very interesting. If Macbeth's ambition is merely a flaw in his character, then he's just another psychopath with an eye for the main chance. If Hamlet's indecision is a flaw in his character then he's wasting our time and his own and we are all supposed to believe that killing your uncle is a good thing. If Lear is merely a vain old man, then why does Gloucester have to have his eyes put out? And there is not the slightest evidence that any of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists understand themselves better at the end of the play than at the beginning. They may understand their world better, but that is a very different thing.

The whole idea of the Tragic Flaw presupposes that there is a kind of justice working in Shakespeare's tragedies, that even if the sufferings of the Hero, like those of King Lear, are out of all proportion to his supposed flaw, nevertheless the tragedies are about people bringing destruction on themselves. But this is exactly the opposite of what happens in the plays. The tragedies are littered with innocent corpses, people who have done nothing to bring death on themselves but who nevertheless meet it, often in the most violent and shocking way. Shakespeare goes out of his way in the tragedies to give us meaningless, gratuitous deaths. If ambition is Macbeth's flaw, what is Lady Macduff's? If indecision is Hamlet's flaw, what is Ophelia's? The whole idea of the Tragic Flaw can be maintained

only by searching out some evil in Lady Macduff or Ophelia (as some critics have ludicrously tried to do, ending up with complete nonsense) or by completely separating the Heroes from the plays in which we find them, by pretending that Shakespeare wrote his Heroes according to one set of rules and everyone else in the plays according to another. Again, Shakespeare comes out looking confused, inconsistent and hardly worth studying.

The real function of the Tragic Flaw theory is to reduce Shakespeare's tragedies to pretend that they are neat moral fables which we can easily assimilate. It tames the plays and makes them comfortable, bringing them back to a rational little world in which they offer no challenge to our way of looking at things.

ii. **The Idea of the Tragic Hero**, which cuts the central character off from the play and then goes on to examine in isolation the characters of all of the other people who affect what happens to him. In Shakespeare, as in all good drama, it is not character that is interesting, but the interplay between characters - the action. If you isolate the individuals in a play and then try to analyse their characters in a static way, they are not only tedious but impossible to understand. The writer C.S. Lewis, who had the experience of marking school exams put it well, with reference to Chaucer's *Priest's Tale* by boys whose form-master was apparently a breeder of poultry. Everything that Chaucer had said in describing Chaucer and Pertelote was treated by them solely as evidence about the precise breed of these two birds... They proved beyond doubt that Chaucer was very different from our modernised specialised strains and much closer to the old English "barn door fowl". But I couldn't help feeling that they had missed something. I believe that our attention to Hamlet's character in the usual sense misses almost as much."

The whole idea of looking at character in this sense in Shakespeare's plays is misplaced. Characterisation in the modern theatrical sense is a word which comes into use in the English language only in the mid-nineteenth century. Character, in the sense of a part assumed by an actor, comes in a hundred years earlier, but still a very long time after Shakespeare's death. To talk about

Shakespeare's characters in isolation from the action, to discuss their psychology and motivation, is to treat Shakespearean tragedies as if they were nineteenth century naturalistic plays. It is to miss their uniqueness and their power. It is also, all too often, to build up a set of stereotypes which take the place of the complex and often deliberately contradictory people that Shakespeare gives us.

The idea that there is a set of characters lodged in each Shakespearean play which only needs to be satisfactorily defined in order for us to understand the play, is one which ignores the whole nature of Shakespearean tragedy as theatre. Theatre is historical - the perception of individual theatrical characters changes over time. In the nineteenth century, for instance, Charles Lamb thought it was impossible to actually put King Lear on the stage, because "To see Lear acted is to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking stick." Nowadays, no one would dream of a Lear who is either tottering or with a walking stick. European poets of the nineteenth century invented a Hamlet who was very like themselves - romantic, enervated, sick at heart. Nowadays we may see Hamlet in our own mould, as a twentieth-century cynic. In the case of Othello, far from agreeing as to the nature of his character, critics and actors have been unable to even to agree on the colour of his skin. It may seem perfectly obvious to us that *Othello* is a story which depends absolutely on the relationship between a black man and a white woman, but to the more openly racist nineteenth century, even this most obvious aspect of Othello's character could, indeed must, be overlooked. A. C. Bradley, the Victorian critic from whom many of our ideas about Shakespeare's tragedies come, recognised that Shakespeare had intended Othello to be black, but still thought that this would be more than a modern audience could be expected to stomach: "Perhaps if we saw Othello coal-black with the bodily eye, the aversion of our blood, an aversion which comes as near to being merely physical as anything human can, would overpower our imagination..." Because Bradley and his British contemporaries were racist, Othello could not be black, whatever Shakespeare's views on the matter. And Macbeth, whom nineteenth century critics saw as fierce and primitive, can be envisaged in our time by an American middle-class writer like Mary McCarthy almost as an American middle-class businessman: "A commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess."

What these examples suggest is that it is the way we interpret the play that shapes our understanding of the characters and not the other way round. We decide what it is that the play has to say to us in our own time and then we shape the characters accordingly. And even then we are interested in the characters, not in their character. We want to know how they respond, how they shape and are shaped by all the things and people they encounter. Hamlet's character is only of interest to us if we ever have to write him a job reference. Only if we stick to the idea of the Tragic Flaw, which is a kind of secular version of Original Sin, seeing the people of the plays as ready-assembled packages complete with built-in flaw, does the idea of a fixed character make any sense at all.

But the whole point about creations like Hamlet and Macbeth is that they have no fixed centre, that they are all responses, never quite the same person from one moment to the next, changing even in the course of a single speech perhaps two or three times. At the end of the plays we do not know much more about their character than at the start - what we feel is that we have experienced something extraordinary through them and with them. Shakespeare's tragic protagonists remain enigmatic right to the end. If they didn't we would lose interest in them. They are interesting precisely because they have no fixed characters.

If we try to analyse character in isolation from the dramatic action, what we end up with is scenes which don't make sense. There are many scenes in the tragedies which are about giving us information, in which the people who are speaking are not revealing their characters but telling us what is going on. There are very many others which, as we will see in discussing the individual plays, are impossible to understand if we see them as being about developing the individual characters. And we must also remember that very often the people who talk most about themselves, who give us most material for character analysis, people like Hamlet, are the very ones who remain enigmatic, whose motives and aims remain most mysterious. We also have to remember that isolating characters from their situation makes for a grossly misleading interpretation of what other characters are like.

One of the reasons why Shakespeare's characters fossilise into stereotypes is that we tend to believe what other characters say about them, without taking into account the dramatic situation, the fact that they may have good reasons to tell lies. Someone like Claudius

in *Hamlet*, for instance, gets characterised as a filthy lascivious monster. We don't actually see him being filthy and lascivious, and we know that Hamlet has his own reasons for describing Claudius in this way, but the hunt for a fixed character for Claudius makes it useful to take Hamlet's assessment on face value. What gets overlooked is the fact that the crude language which Hamlet uses when he's talking about Claudius may tell us more about Hamlet than it does about Claudius.

iii. The Whole Idea of the Soliloquy, the notion that Shakespeare's heroes spend a great deal of time talking to themselves and, in a kind of spiritual striptease, revealing their true selves to us. It has become fundamental to the teaching of Shakespeare that the soliloquies are the most important part of any tragedy, that they deserve to be isolated, directed and analysed as the real key to the character of the Tragic Hero. Most guides to Shakespeare will tell you that in soliloquy lies truth. Nothing is more calculated to make Shakespeare's protagonists seem foolish and incomprehensible than the idea that they spend a lot of their days gazing at their navels and talking to themselves. In the plays that Shakespeare wrote, they don't.

Again our idea of the soliloquies is one which comes, not from the seventeenth century but from the nineteenth, in particular from the Romantic movement. The Romantics were interested above all in subjective feeling, in the idea of self-expression. They found, or thought they found, in Shakespeare's soliloquies a subjective form of drama, a kind of theatre that was about self-revelation. The whole centre of interest in Shakespeare's plays came to be located in the soliloquies. Shakespeare's True Confessions were born. And as the nineteenth century went on, the changes that took place in theatrical conventions made the soliloquies look more and more like people talking to themselves. And the whole interest in the centrality of the soliloquies as absolutely truthful self-revelation went hand-in-hand with the increasingly psychological notion of character. The soliloquies were important because in them the heroes were revealing their own characters for us.

The problem with all of this is that it has almost nothing to do with the kind of theatre which Shakespeare created and that it blinds us to many of the things that are going on in the plays. It again misses

the point that the tragedies are first and foremost plays. In the theatre, it is possible for an actor on stage to speak by himself, but it is not possible for an actor on stage to speak to himself. Unless the actors are really lousy, there is always an audience, always someone listening and watching. The difficulty arises with the fact that since the nineteenth century it has been the general convention of theatre that the actors pretend not to notice the audience, and that when they are talking they are talking only to each other. When there is only actor on the stage, he must be talking to himself. This is a convention which works for a great deal of modern drama.

It has, however, nothing whatsoever to do with Shakespeare. In Shakespeare's theatre there is no convention which says that an actor cannot notice and address the audience. There is therefore no reason to believe that when an actor is talking alone on stage he is not talking to the audience, that instead of a pure stream of internal monologue the actor is not indirectly addressing the audience. The soliloquies are not, therefore, in any real sense private and internal. They are a form of speech which is somewhere between the private and the public, which tries to marry the concerns of the individual with those of the collective. In the concern with the soliloquies as a pure form of self-expression, it is forgotten that even some of the most intimate soliloquies in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* use the word "we" rather than the word "I". As a consequence, many of these speeches are almost completely misunderstood.

The way in which this works in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* will be discussed in the subsequent chapters on those plays, but the important point here is that there is not in Shakespeare's tragedies, a mere switch between public speech and private speech. There are in fact whole layers of different kinds of speech, ranging from highly formal public exchange to intimate formal conversation to private informal exchange to different kinds of monologues. By simply focussing in on the idea of the soliloquy as the truest form of speech in these plays, you lose the whole drama of the way in which Shakespeare moves all the time from one kind of speech to another, blurring the borders between the private and the public. By not paying attention to the question of who is talking to whom and, more importantly, who is listening in, a great deal of the drama of the plays is lost. First and foremost the soliloquies and all other speeches in Shakespeare are not poems which can be taken out and studied, they are pieces of dramatic action.

So what is Tragedy?

Shakespeare, as we have seen, chose to ignore the Aristotelian rules for tragedy, and it is therefore absurd to analyse Shakespeare's tragedies as if they were versions of the Greek model. It is not that Shakespeare was unaware of what the rules were, it is that he positively decided that a different kind of theatre was needed if he was to successfully dramatise his own society. The most famous work of literary criticism of Elizabethan England was Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*. In it Sidney laid down the Aristotelian rules: "The stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precept and common reason, but one day. Moreover tragedy and comedy must be kept severely apart and the playwright should not thrust in the clown by head and shoulders to play a part in majestic matters." Shakespeare, of course broke all of these rules and knew he was breaking them. He didn't break them because he wasn't up to writing classical plays on the Greek and Roman lines. He could do it if he wanted to: *The Comedy of Errors* uses a single place and a single day. *Julius Caesar* is a perfect classical tragedy. He broke them because they were not good enough to deal with the complexities of the world he was living in. *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are tragedies but tragedies of a kind which cannot be analysed in terms of Tragic Flaws and Tragic Heroes. To understand what kind of tragedies they are, we have to understand what kind of world they were intended to reflect.

Successful tragedy is not something which is particularly common in the long history of the theatre. It gets written only at certain times, times when there is a great deal of tension between two sets of values, two world views, two ways of thinking about how individuals relate to their societies. The tragic figures are those who get caught in the middle between these two world views, and who therefore literally can do nothing right. They can do nothing right because what is right in one world is not right in another. They act according to one set of values in a world which is still dominated by a different set of values. Clear distinctions, the borders between things that are supposed to be opposite, are breaking down. The interesting and dramatic thing about people in a tragedy is that they are caught on those borders.

What was England like in Shakespeare's time?

For one thing it was highly stratified and the division between rich and poor was overwhelmingly obvious. On the one hand, between a third of the population lived at subsistence level and was chronically underemployed. On the other hand, at the top, there was the traditional landed elite, now challenged for power by the rising professional groups: merchants, lawyers, clergymen and administrative officials. The landowners and professional classes, though only five per cent of the population, between them enjoyed a larger proportion of the national income than did all the lower classes (over fifty per cent of the population) put together.

The social elite of Shakespeare's time was highly educated, and shortly after Shakespeare's death it was estimated that about two and half per cent of the young male population was receiving some form of third level education, a proportion that would not be attained again in England until well into the twentieth century. But at the same time between half and two-thirds of the adult population was unable to read. This was no simple, unified, primitive world, therefore, but a highly divided and diverse society, where social and intellectual change had long been at work, moving in many different directions.

It is a world which has been described this way by Grigori Kozintsev: "Everything was shuffled - the groan of death with the cry of birth. The lash whistled in medieval torture chambers, but the click of abacus balls was heard all the louder. Feudal outlaws discussed the price of wool, and rumours about the success of Flemish textiles were intermingled with authentic details of the witches' Sabbath."

So what should be the most obvious thing about Shakespeare's time is that it is a period of rapid change - of the transition between one world view and another. This obvious fact was obscured by the nineteenth century critics who wanted to look back on Elizabethan England as a Golden Age, a time of order, stability and a fixed universe, and to view Shakespeare in this light. This is where the notion of Shakespeare as timeless, as the bearer of universal values, comes from. But in fact Shakespeare's time is anything but stable, and his tragedies are plays which dramatise traumatic change and the way it affects our whole way of looking at the world.

It was certainly obvious to Shakespeare's contemporaries that they were living through a period of crisis. Five years before Shakespeare's death, the poet John Donne wrote that:

'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;

All just supply and all relation:

Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,

For every man alone that he hath got

To be a Phoenix and that then can be

None of that kind of which he is but he.

(The First Anniversary)

Looking at his and Shakespeare's England, Donne saw a world in which all order and coherence had fallen apart, in which the hierarchy of relations both within the state and within the family was breaking down, in which men were getting the idea that they were uniquely their own invention rather than the product of their place and status within a highly stratified society. His poem could also have been an exact description of Shakespeare's tragedies, of the inter-related breakdown of family and state in each of them, of the Phoenix-like Hamlet and Macbeth, each believing that he is a self-made man that he owes his individuality not to his status but to his free will. Their tragedy is that their world is not yet quite like that, that the pull of order and hierarchy is still very strong, not least within their own minds. The tragedies are about the conflict between status on the one hand and individual power on the other and what dooms Macbeth and Hamlet is that for none of them do status and power go together at the same time.

Shakespeare's age is the age in which a whole new class, the capitalist and professional middle-class, comes to substantial power and prominence in England. Elizabethan England depended on foreign trade and foreign trade led to the rise of merchant capital. The making of large amounts of money by a new class of people who were neither the traditional land-owning elite nor the mass of peasants and labourers meant that Shakespeare's lifetime became the period of the most rapid advance in mining and manufacture that England was to know until the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century. And at the same time, the centralisation of state power and the beginnings of a foreign trading empire made the development of a large professional, educated, administrative class necessary. These in turn brought the new humanist Renaissance

ideas into vogue in England. Both economically and intellectually, therefore, the absolutely fixed hierarchy of the old feudal order was being challenged as never before. There are two value systems, two world views in competition, and this is the essential context in which to understand Shakespeare's tragedies.

The extent of the changes which were underway in Shakespeare's times cannot be overstated. James I, who was on the throne when all of the major tragedies except *Hamlet* were written, preached that kings ruled by Divine Right and many political writers argued that the property of every subject should be completely at the disposal of the king. Within thirty-five years of Shakespeare's death, the English had executed their king and politics was being conducted as a rational inquiry, a matter of utility, experience, common sense. James I wrote a treatise on witches, and was no more superstitious than most of his subjects, who still took alchemy and astrology very seriously indeed. By the second half of the seventeenth century, science was in the ascendant and fairies, witches, astrology and alchemy were no longer respectable beliefs for an educated man to hold. In Shakespeare's time, the earth was the centre of a universe in which God and the Devil continuously intervened. In the second half of the century in which the tragedies were written, Newton would show the universe to be a self-moving machine. A world in which everything, both natural and supernatural, had its proper place and category, was giving way to one in which both society and the universe seemed to be made up of competing atoms. Shakespeare's tragedies are written at a time when nothing less than a fundamental re-ordering of our understanding of the world, the categories by which we make sense of our experience, is in progress. The plays contain and dramatise that re-ordering and to fail to understand this is to fail to understand the plays.

So Shakespeare is part of the Renaissance?

Shakespeare can properly be described as part of the English Renaissance, but only if the Renaissance is understood in certain ways. We think of the Renaissance as the time in which European culture re-possessed the cultural artefacts of the classical Greek and Roman civilisation, and because Shakespeare is a Renaissance figure this encourages the tendency to think of him in terms of that

classical world, in particular in terms of Aristotle and Greek tragedy. But this is to misunderstand both Shakespeare and the Renaissance. The repositioning of Greek and Roman antiquity is not so much a statement of continuity, of the continuance of classical into modern Europe. It is the opposite, for to repossess something implies a recognition of precisely how different it is from your own culture. The success of the Renaissance presupposed the recognition of a fundamental discontinuity between the culture of the present and that of the distant past. It implies that you have started to think of your own culture, not as absolute, which was the feudal conception of the Middle Ages, but as relative, as something to which there are fundamentally different alternatives. Shakespeare is a Renaissance writer only in the sense that he is aware of the extent to which nothing is absolute. In the tragedies there is an overwhelming sense that all of the most fundamental values of society have ceased to be absolute and have become relative.

8. But surely, the fate of Shakespeare's heroes is inevitable. That means that a lot of things in Shakespeare's world are still predictable?

This raises another of the hoary clichés about schoolbook Shakespeare. It is an article of faith, again taken from Aristotle, that in Shakespearean tragedy the downfall of the hero must seem inevitable. One set of notes on *King Lear*, for instance, tells us at the outset that "In tragedy, the hero's fall is inevitable, and presented as being so. The tragic dramatist organises his world in such a way that the chances of a happy outcome are nil." This is largely true of Greek drama where in general a train of action has been set in motion long before the play even opens and cannot be undone. There is a cold logic working itself out and we can only sit and watch as it reaches towards its inevitable conclusion. But this is almost completely untrue of Shakespeare. In Shakespeare there is no cold logic and indeed no logic at all. It is not inevitable that Othello should kill Desdemona, indeed it is amazing that he should do so. It is not inevitable that Cordelia in *King Lear* should be hanged. Indeed the whole point of it is that it is gratuitous. It is not inevitable that Hamlet should die, indeed Shakespeare goes out of his way to make his death messy, complicated, fumbled. Far from it being

inevitable that Macbeth should be killed, Shakespeare goes to great lengths to make his death a refutation of the idea of inevitability, showing prophecies to us which imply that everything is pre-ordained, but then exposing them as tricks.

The doctrine of inevitability implies an absolute world, a world in which once the stone is dropped in the pool, the ripples will be unstoppable. Shakespeare on the other hand gives us a relative world, a world in which causes don't have their effects, in which almost nothing is predictable, never mind inevitable. A stone is dropped in one pool and the ripples spread in another, seemingly miles away. Shakespeare is not concerned with a logical world but with an irrational one, a world made irrational by the fact that it contains two different sets of values, two separate logics, which refuse to hold their places.

In all four of the major tragedies, the central figure is someone who loses a sense of himself, whose grip on his own identity becomes weaker and weaker, leading to real or feigned madness (in the case of Hamlet and Lear) or to the kind of complete dependence on the words and judgements of others which is the mark of a loss of faith in one's own independent identity (Macbeth with the witches, Othello with Iago). This reflects the fact that in Shakespeare's time there is a transition in the way in which one's identity is defined. In feudal, mediaeval society, your identity is your role, and your role is determined by your birth and position, so long as that birth is legitimate. Legitimate birth confers not just a right of inheritance, but a whole set of duties and prescribed behaviour. If you want to know who you are, you examine your position in society. You are your status.

In the kind of commercial, capitalist world which is emerging in Shakespeare's time, you are your power. Your identity is the sum of your achievements. It is something you make for yourself. You are what you do. The tragedy of Lear and Macbeth, of Hamlet and Othello, is that they think they operate according to both of these principles, that they can base themselves both on a world of status and a world of power, even though these two worlds are contradictory and in active conflict.

It is the fate of these four men to enjoy either status or power, but never both together. Hamlet, as a royal prince who has been denied succession to the throne, has status but not power. Othello, as a

mercenary general admired for his skill but disdained for his colour, has power but no status. Lear keeping the title of king but not the reality of the office, has status but no power. Macbeth, killing Duncan, gains power but not status, not that essential aspect of the status of the king, the right to hand on his power to his children and his children's children in an unbroken assertion of order and tradition. Power and status are two worlds, two governing values, the one from the new capitalist world, the other from the old feudal one, which refuse to come together for any of the great tragic figures of Shakespeare's plays. And it is in the failure of this equation, the fact that they are caught between two worlds, that they are lost.

Shakespeare, of course, doesn't present us with abstractions called "power" and "status" in his plays; he gives us people trying to live their lives. And the way in which this conflict is played out is in the relationship between men and women. In each of the four plays, a man becomes separated from a woman. Lear loses Cordelia, Hamlet loses Ophelia, Othello loses Desdemona, Macbeth loses Lady Macbeth. And in each the woman who is lost represents the man's link to an ordered, traditional society. For Lear, it is Cordelia who puts forward the notion of proper degree and proportion in things, of everything having its proper place. Losing her, he loses his connection to that ordered, feudal world. For Hamlet, it is Ophelia who might represent marriage, loyalty, traditional morality. For Othello, adrift in the wild world of war, it is Desdemona who represents due loyalty, respectable society, the established moral order. For Macbeth, it is Lady Macbeth, haunted by the demands of conscience, duty and the proper order of things, who represents the moral universe with which he has broken. With the women representing one set of values and the men another, it is hardly surprising that men and women cannot function together in any kind of wholeness in these plays, that the sexual order as well the social and political order, breaks down.

This is why images of childlessness, of sterility, of the lack of continuity between the generations, are such powerful images in these tragedies. If men and women cannot fit together in harmony, then sterility looms. Hamlet condemns Ophelia to sterility: "Get thee to a nunnery" (the extent of Lady Macbeth's unnatural breast, measured by the fact that she is prepared to murder the breast. The farthest reach of her husband's madness murder of his king or of his friend but that of Ma

children. When Macduff hears of the event his curse on Macbeth (leading to all sorts of contortions on the part of literal-minded commentators as to whether the Macbeths have children or not) is "He has no children". When Macbeth himself wants to express the ultimate horror he can imagine, it is the killing of the seeds of future generations: "though the treasure of all nature's germens tumble together/Even till destruction sicken." And the very same image appears at the climax of *King Lear*: "Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once." In Shakespeare's tragedies, things are changing so fast that the whole idea of human continuity seems to be threatened. There is even, in *King Lear*, a powerful sense that the end of the world may be at hand.

8. That's all very well, but we have to learn about iambic pentameters and blank verse.

It is not just the content and the imagery of Shakespeare's tragedies that is shaped by the extremely fluid nature of the world he lives in, it is also the very kind of poetry which he writes. Shakespeare's iambic pentameter is not just a matter of individual style: it is a form of poetic rhythm that is superbly well adapted to including a whole range of contradictory things. It is free and boundless, able to sweep over an extraordinary range of dramatic situations (from the very intimate to the formal and public) and a huge diversity of speaking characters. But at the same time it also retains a strong sense of order, of shape and of form. The whole nature of the poetry embodies the contradictions that Shakespeare is dramatising: the contradiction between order on the one hand and individuality on the other, between feudalism and capitalism. And it is precisely the containing power of this poetry, the extraordinary inclusiveness of it, that gives the tragedies their formal power, their sense that in spite of the fierce tensions which they contain, they are still finished, ordered works of art. The plays invoke chaos without themselves being chaotic.

That's the form, but what about the imagery?

The momentous social changes that were taking place in Shakespeare's time help us to understand the kind of conflicts that are going on in his plays. But they don't really tell us all that much about the way the plays work, about how they have their effect on us, about what it is that we feel in watching the plays and why. To understand that we have to ask how the conflicts of Shakespeare's time could be expressed in ways that would seem to have a powerful gut effect on us. And to do that we have to understand something about the nature of tragedy as a social ritual.

All societies, whether they are what we would regard as primitive, tribal societies, or as modern sophisticated ones, have their rituals, and in general these rituals have similar functions. The main function of public rituals is to help us to put an order on our experience, to give us categories through which we can make sense of the multiplicity of the world in which we live. Rituals are basically systems of classification, the simplest ones being organised around simple opposites: left and right, black and white, male and female. They classify things as either one thing or the other, make us comfortable with our experience. And in all societies which have rituals, therefore, things which defy categorisation, which slip between opposites, which refuse to be one thing or the other, are dangerous and powerful.

Shakespeare's tragic protagonists are just such things, and his tragedies are rituals in which those dangerous and powerful things are contained. Shakespeare's tragedies come from a culture in which the whole idea of ritual is very much in question. He writes them at the time of the Protestant reformation, a reformation which presents itself as a deliberate attempt to take the ritual out of religion, to destroy the idea that public religious ceremonies have any ritual or magical function. Significantly, the most radical of the Protestants, the Puritans, saw theatre in the same category as superstitions and rituals, wanting to take the theatricality out of religion and then, after Shakespeare's death, to ban theatre altogether, a step that was absolutely in line with their attitude to religious ceremony.

It's important to realise that for the people of Shakespeare's time and before, religion was not so much a set of beliefs as a set of rituals, and that therefore the loss of those rituals with the rise of

Protestantism left a large gap to be filled. As the historian Keith Thomas has put it, "The church was important...not because of its formalised code of belief but because its rites were an essential accompaniment to the important events in life - birth, marriage, death...Religion was a ritual method of living, not a set of dogmas." With the changeover to Protestantism, the religious rituals were abandoned, but the things which had given rise to the need for them had not: "the fluctuations of nature, the hazards of fire, the threat of plague and disease, the fear of evil spirits, and all the uncertainties of daily life." And indeed to all of these uncertainties was added the uncertainty of unprecedented economic, political and cultural change. There were needs and no rituals to fill them. The theatre, and in particular Shakespeare, was one way of providing for that need.

In creating his tragedies as secular rituals, Shakespeare shows all categories, all basic opposites, breaking down. In the tragedies the basic opposites by which we are able to make any sense at all of things - life and death, black and white, man and woman - melt into each other. Shakespeare is dealing with a world which is re-ordering its knowledge, with the rise of a class whose first triumphant assault on power 150 years later will be, not the storming of the Bastille, but the writing, by Diderot and D'Alembert, of an *Encyclopedie*, a new classification of everything that is known. But in Shakespeare's time, that new classification has not yet emerged. The *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas, which classified all knowledge for the mediaeval world, is no longer good enough, and the *Encyclopedie* of Diderot and D'Alembert has not yet been written. There is no satisfactory way of categorising experience, so that things refuse to hold their identity and begin to slip into each other, becoming both powerful and dangerous. It is just such things that rituals are there to deal with and it is just things which make up Shakespeare's tragedies.

Things and people which refuse to stay within their proper boundaries both fascinate and horrify us, and as a consequence they take on ritual significance. Monsters like the elephant man and the wolfboy are fascinating because they defy the boundaries of the categories which we use to order our experience. Certain animals make our skin crawl because they slip between categories: slimy reptiles that refuse to belong to either the sea or the land; nasty rodents that come into our houses, yet refuse to conform to the

bounds of domestication. In-between animals, those that are neither fish nor flesh, take on special meaning and ritual value. Similarly, toenails or hair, those things which are on the border between ourselves and the material world outside us, go into magic potions. The animals in the witches brew in *Macbeth* - toads, cats, hedge pigs, snakes, newts, frogs, bats, lizards, - are all ambiguous as either reptiles or half-domestic, half-wild. It is not for nothing that the witches chant "Double, double": all of these things have double meanings and are therefore dangerous. Throughout the tragedies, as we shall see in looking at the individual plays, the imagery is of snakes, monsters, humans turning into animals and animals turning into humans, creatures that exist on the dangerous borders between categories. The plays themselves are a kind of witches' brew, where dangerous visions are conjured up in a powerful ritual.

For what is true of animals is even more true of people. Rituals everywhere are very concerned with people who go beyond the normal boundaries, who escape from their proper categories. Tribes have rituals in which a man will leave his band and wander in the forest in the guise of a madman, rituals based on the belief that by leaving the order of society and going out into chaos and disorder some kind of power can be gained. These rituals venture into disorder in a double sense - venturing both beyond the confines of society and into the disordered regions of the mind. Most obviously, this is what happens to King Lear, but in all of the tragedies there are marginal figures, people who are neither one thing nor the other - ghosts, witches, Banquo's unborn heirs, the dead Yorick in *Hamlet* who is momentarily brought back to life.

The protagonists of Shakespeare's tragedies themselves conform to what the anthropologist Mary Douglas has to say about figures who take on ritual significance in tribal societies, who are dangerous and fascinating: "Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is indefinable." Living in a time of transition, Shakespeare gives us tragic protagonists who are dangerous and powerful, who slip between all of the categories of our experience, and who therefore have about them the fundamental power of ritual. It is not because we can define their characters that Shakespeare's people are interesting to us, but because they are literally indefinable, eluding and denying

definition in a deliberate and systematic way. It is not because they teach us lessons that we care about them, but because they enact something that is dangerous, powerful and disturbing.