

Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967

Selected reviews by Alice Hamilton, Cyrus Hoy, Frank Kermode, Julian Markels, Leonard Nathanson, and Marion B. Smith.

Additional reviews are listed at the end.

1. Hamilton, Alice. *Dalhousie Review* 47 (Summer 1967): 279, 281.

Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy is a series of three papers, presented at the University of Toronto as the Alexander Lectures for 1965–6. The first lecture, entitled “My father as he slept: The tragedy of order,” deals principally with *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*. The second, “The tailors of the earth: The tragedy of passion,” speaks about *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. The third, “Little world of man: The tragedy of isolation,” deals with some twenty plays and Dante. *Othello*, *Lear*, and *Timon of Athens* are the plays intended chiefly for discussion.

Tragedy, for Dr. Frye, finds its ultimate meaning in the reenactment of experience, within time, of the contract between man and “nature”; death shapes the experience; and the mood of tragedy is concerned with a man’s feelings about the annihilation of experience in, for him, the conclusion of time. The two great tragic conceptions of “being” and “time” involve the heroic struggle of man, separated from his social context, confronted with nature. What is man, in this nauseating and absurd vision? Is there any force that desires the destruction of this man of tragic vision?

Dr. Frye goes to Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* for the idea of Apollonian and Dionysian views of social order. He sees the Apollonian as the “sense of the limited and finite” in man, the Dionysian as the “sense of infinite heroic energy . . . where the individual is not defined and assigned a place in the scheme of things.” Though he sees these as central insights into a critical theory that we must reckon with, he is not always consistent in following the ideas through. In theory he sees ours as a Dionysian approach that cannot understand the Elizabethan Apollonian one; in practice, he sees the Shakespearean hero as a man whose infinite desires, good or evil, release a nemesis that shows itself as a moral or social force, beyond present time, concerned in human affairs.

Although Dr. Frye’s terms, whether from Nietzsche or Blake, are unusual, the chief difficulty in the book lies not in the unusual but in the usual that has not been clearly presented. It tells us little to say that history’s continuous action ties it more closely to fortune’s wheel than does tragedy’s “rounded action.” At one place, Dr. Frye is saying that tragedy is linked to past time, lost ideals, and a strong ruler dead. At another place he can see that “time” in Shakespearean tragedy involves a swift present for a person alive, working his way to the next death, as in history, where nothing is ever permanently done.

Nor does Dr. Frye’s idea of the three areas of conflict in “time” reveal much that is new. Disturbance of the social order, the collision of duty with passion, the social dismemberment of alienation all have been noticed before in Shakespeare. The newness may lie in the illustrations. Henry IV as a successful hero; *Henry V* as a man with a passion for France; *Coriolanus* as a man with a passion for Bellona, who fights a patrician army of occupation; these interpretations may interest producers of the plays. Even Shakespeare’s heroes being “fools of time” (surely a misreading of words taken from their context in Sonnet 124) may be appealing at first glance. But these bright remarks cry out for more justification than Dr. Frye has given them.

Basically, the disturbing areas of this book involve both focus and fact. Dr. Frye's concern is to place trios of figures neatly opposite each other: the order-figure is contrasted with the tyrant; the rebel-figure with the traitor; the nemesis-figure, presumably, with various figures seen in isolation in society. In fact, the book is concerned with man at the mercy of fortune (seen as hostile) in time (undefined), or responding resolutely and spontaneously as an agent of nature (again undefined) to events in time.

Since "nature" and "fortune" are placed in antithesis, the basis for reading the book is removed, for usual medieval and Elizabethan concepts are either challenged or confused. If Dr. Frye were doing that—facing the problem of man's place in society within "nature"—something valuable might be gained. But unfortunately this book bears the signs of hasty writing, opinion, confusion, contradiction, and unfounded statements. Because he has given us so much more that was illuminating in the past, more is now expected of Dr. Frye.

2. Hoy, Cyrus. *Studies in English Literature* 8 (Spring 1968): 365–8.

Wit, says Addison, paraphrasing Locke, lies "most in the assemblage of ideas and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy . . ." By this definition, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearian Tragedy* (University of Toronto Press, 1967), Northrop Frye's Alexander Lecture for 1965–66, is the wittiest book of Shakespearean criticism in years. As printed, they are three in number: "The tragedy of order," "The tragedy of passion," "The tragedy of isolation." The groundwork for this tripartite division is laid at the outset in a highly schematic series of equations. "The basis of the tragic vision is being in time, the sense of the one-directional quality of life" which issues in death, death being "what defines the individual, and marks him off from the continuity of life that flows indefinitely between the past and the future" (p. 3). But also present in tragedy—and it is this that makes it truly tragic, and not simply ironic—is "a counter-movement of being" which Frye terms "the heroic, a capacity for action or passion, for doing or suffering, which is above ordinary human experience" (pp. 4–5). The dual sense of finite limitation and infinite heroic is now related, respectively, to Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian distinctions, and these in turn—with specific reference to Elizabethan tragedy—to the dichotomy of Nature and Fortune.

Nature as an order, though an order permeated with sin and death as a result of the fall of man, is the conception in Elizabethan drama corresponding to what we have called the ironic vision or being in time—Nietzsche's "Apollonian" vision. Fortune as a wheel rotated by the energy and ambition of man, which, however gigantic, can never get above a certain point, and consequently has to sink again, is the "Dionysian" or heroic vision which complements it. (p. 13)

There are more schematizations yet in store. The structure of Elizabethan tragedy is now viewed as a reversal of the structure of comedy, specifically with regard to the type of comic action that Frye has elsewhere called "a drive towards identity" (p. 15). There are three kinds of identity: (1) "plural or social identity, when a new social group crystallizes around the marriage of the hero and heroine in the final moments of the comedy"; (2) "dual or erotic identity, when the hero and heroine get married"; (3) "individual identity, when a character comes to know himself in a way that he did not before. . . ." (pp. 15–16). Correspondingly, "there are three main kinds of tragic structure in Shakespeare and his contemporaries": (1) "a social tragedy with its roots in history, concerned with the fall of princes"; (2) "a tragedy that deals with the separation of lovers, the conflict of duty and passion,

or the conflict of social and personal (sexual or family) interests”; (3) “a tragedy in which the hero is removed from his social context, and is compelled to search for a purely individual identity” (p. 16)

In Greek drama, these tragic structure might be called the Agamemnon type, the Antigone type, and the Oedipus type. In terms closer to Christianity, they might be called the tragedy of the killing of the father, the tragedy of the tragedy of the killing of the father, the tragedy of the sacrifice of the son, and the tragedy of the spirit. . . . In Shakespeare, we have a group of tragedies of order, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*; a group of tragedies of passion, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Coriolanus*; and a group of tragedies of isolation, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Timon of Athens*. (p. 16)

Professor Frye is careful to add that “These are not pigeonholes, only different areas of emphasis; most of the plays have aspects that link them to all three groups” (p.1 6).

Nothing in the argument that follows is set forth as rigorously as this. The discussion that follows has, indeed, all the outward appearance of proceeding by a fairly free process of association, though the appearance is deceptive; there is never any doubt that process of association is controlled by a very sophisticated critical imagination. It leads us in to some very odd ways, which are sometimes revealing and sometimes dead ends. We hear, for example (to cite some instance from the second lecture, “The tragedy of passion”), that “Romeo’s story follows the general outline of the various dying-god stories available to Shakespeare, in Ovid and elsewhere, the closet analogue being that of Pyramus” (p. 48: was Pyramus a God?); that “several touches in the imagery” relating to *Henry V* “makes him a preternatural figure, a Messiah treading the winepress” (p. 52); later, in relation to France, the same Henry “is an angel of death” (p. 54), and his Princess Katharine, “representing France as the object of fetal love, modulates into the sinister Queen Margaret of the earlier *Henry VI* plays” so that “the theme of the fateful bride is thus present by implication in *Henry V* also” (p. 56; the author has elsewhere argued that the figure of the fateful bride, the “white goddess,” is adumbrated in such characters as Cressida, Juliet, Cleopatra). Strange as it may seem, *Coriolanus* has its links “to the other tragedies of passion in which a woman’s love [in this case, Volumnia’s] is fatal” (p. 58).

This is all extremely ingenious, and as a verbal artifact Professor Frye’s lecture can be pondered almost endlessly, and with considerable fascination. The contrivance is dazzling; the most heterogenous elements from the Shakespearean canon are blandly yoked together with an agility of invention that is only matched by the dash and panache which the author brings to the task of waving his invention before us. It is all great fun, but very much an end in itself. We do not look beyond it to the plays that are its ostensible subject. As used here, these amount to very little more than sources of raw materials: veins for the critic to mine, attics for him to rummage in and extract what he will to fashion the verbal image of his critical fancies. The reader’s gaze is riveted on the critical performance, and Shakespeare comes off a distinctly poor second in the race for attention. As for the critical performance itself, our admiration for its undeniable virtuosity is dimmed by the conclusion that the critic here has showed himself possessed of a great deal of wit and very little judgement, judgement lying, as Addison went on to note, in the careful separation “one from another [of] ideas wherein can be found the least difference thereby to avoid being misled by similitude and by affinity to take one thing for another.”

3. Kermode, Frank. “Reading Shakespeare’s Mind.” *New York Review of Books* 9 (12 October 1967): 14–17. [also reviews Eleanor Prosser’s *Hamlet and Revenge*]

The one obvious thing about *Hamlet* is that nobody could possibly say what it *means*; but people who think they have stumbled on something in it that everybody else has overlooked do not notice this. Although the graduate schools now go in for all manner of metacritical precautions, it is still a common enough ambition to find and follow the clue which will show that *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, that trinity of squares, have been wrong all the time. For instance, it can be argued that we shall be nearer a true understanding of *Hamlet* if we get close to what an Elizabethan audience might have thought it said, and the result of the research is almost certain to be a conviction that everybody since then, everywhere and practically always, has been getting it wrong; which is the conviction that prompted the inquiry in the first place.

In principle the difficulties of such an undertaking might seem a strong deterrent to all but the most subtle historians; but they have not proved so, and Miss Prosser is not the first scholar to read the mind of *Hamlet's* audience and author. What, in the prescribed period, did people think about revenge? What were they told to think, in the theater and out of it? If we know that, we shall know what Shakespeare intended. Leaving aside the argument about Intention, it is probably enough to say that *Hamlet*, as Miss Prosser knows very well, is remarkably unlike other revenge plays; that it is a play by a writer of sufficient merit to have distinguished himself from the run-of-the-mill dramatists who “gave the public what it wanted”; and that it is in many ways the strangest and most crucial of his works, a sort of *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, painted and repainted, a piece of the past technically prepared for a new age, changing theater, drama, and audience as it changed itself. It would have to have been some extremely dull member of the audience who did not sense any of this, but stared stupidly through *Hamlet* to some diagrammatic ethical revenge play beneath. Nowhere did Shakespeare do more to disconcert his audience, and quite possibly much of the initial interest lay in wondering what in God's name was going to happen next to the familiar story. One can, certainly, imagine a man dull enough to see only what matched his commonplace expectations, but who wants to know him? For scholars who recreate “the *Hamlet* of Shakespeare's Audience” he is a *memento mori*.

Does it follow that a great deal of Shakespeare scholarship has been and still is founded on a false historical premise? It does. It does not, however, follow that all literary history is bunk. It is like any other form of history, which is, incidentally, why a notorious review on Donne in the *TLS* a few months back was wrong when it said that in the field of English there was little left to be done. History changes—not the documents, but the explanations that link them. Worse still, we live in a time when what we examine with most tenderness is our own instrument of investigation, so that the philosophy of such explanations compromises the explanations themselves. Change is accelerated; criticism nowadays requires a lot of thought. Whether the reason for this is the *Zeitgeist*, or the fact that over the last half-century a number of people who really know how to think have drifted into the profession (a good effect of its having grown so, just as the explosion of sub- and non-books is an effect of the same expansion) this is no place to decide. This ought to make life harder for the simple philologist, reconstructing Shakespeare's “ideal audience” or somebody else's ideal reader. It doesn't, very noticeably, simply because the two wings of the profession don't read one another's books. They are too many, and usually too long. The time has come for a vogue of aphoristic brevity, a favored manner at once allusive and transparent, and calling for brain and skill.

Shakespeareans, of all people, have little need to spell everything out. Miss Prosser spells everything out. Mr. Frye, allusive, transparent (I do not say lucid: only the other day I noticed a reviewer calling a book “objectionably lucid”) does not. Mr. Frye is one of the thinkers mentioned in the previous paragraph. Miss Prosser isn't. She thinks we are all wrong about *Hamlet* because it does not occur to us that Shakespeare might have been as moral about revenge as we are, and proposes to herself the task of answering the unfashionable and perhaps unanswerable question: “How does Shakespeare

intend his audience to regard the ethics of private revenge?" First she studies what contemporaries said about the ethics, and then writes a 200-page commentary on *Hamlet* to show that it conforms.

An important point seems to be that the audience, far from assuming that Hamlet should obey the Ghost, would have known that it was a devil speaking the truth only for its own purpose, and would therefore want the hero to disregard it. This is not an absolutely new view, as it happens; Greg long ago argued that the Mouse Trap showed the Ghost to be lying, and even if it was telling the truth there obviously remains the question whether it was recommending a proper course of action. That Shakespeare made the Ghost theologically ambiguous has long been a matter of scholarly comment. In the original *Hamlet* it was doubtless a simple plot agent, a way of letting Hamlet know. Shakespeare certainly makes it complicated, but the conclusion is neither what Miss Prosser thinks to be the old wrong one, "Hamlet is bound to do as the Ghost tells him," nor is it Miss Prosser's own, "The Ghost is not honest but demonic and gives wrong advice which Hamlet ought not to follow." Like so many other things in *Hamlet*, the Ghost is elaborately overpainted, defying schematization and asking you, if you choose, to consider not only its own status but that of theatrical illusionism in general. If Hamlet puzzles about it at his level—he must act, or not act—we have a problem which is a shadow of his, for we are not ourselves acting, but considering a dramatic action in which the actor won't act, as Hamlet himself later points out.

It is essential to this kind of pleasure that the Ghost, like everything else, should be far from simple. But Miss Prosser holds that an Elizabethan audience, brainwashed by its media, could never, whatever its feelings, have allowed such ambiguities; for them and for Shakespeare the right answer was for Hamlet to leave revenge to heaven. So Shakespeare stresses that the Ghost is a demon, not a soul from purgatory, and he makes Hamlet melancholy because that predisposed a man to demonic influence. When Hamlet takes the devil's bait he grows more and more depraved by unregenerate passion; Nature takes over from Virtue. "The moral code from which he escapes is basically medieval," says Miss Prosser, "but his instincts are with the Renaissance." Or, to descend from these historiographical heights to simple instances, Hamlet is very nasty to Ophelia in the Nunnery scene because his Renaissance Nature is getting the better of him, so that it is unfair of Ophelia's critics "to castigate her for lacking spunk." The audience would also have thought Hamlet shockingly depraved when he spoke of sending the King's soul to hell. However, he returns from his abortive English trip converted to the view that he must not try to do God's work for him; and so he saves his soul. The reason why we basically, and now with a clear historical conscience, feel the same way about it, is that we are in the same Christian tradition as the original and ideal audience: "*Hamlet* cannot be understood outside the Christian perspective." In fact Shakespeare is more Christian than the other revenge writers, since he asks us to apply to his Ghost certain "established Christian tests."

Miss Prosser has one of the merits of the scholar-critic, which is that in the course of her argument she forces us to take another look at something we may have filed away in our memories as settled—always a mistake with a great writer. She certainly makes a few theatrical points along the way. But it is plain that no amount of contemporary evidence—on revenge, ghosts, or anything else—can tell us what to think about a play in which the greatest of all dramatists finally found his full voice. Hot for certainties, such inquiries ignore a great deal that is obviously in the play, which is partly about doubt and ambiguity, about the relation between fictive and existential imperatives, fictive and existential action. The play itself doubts, delays, acts; is cautious and mad, sweeps to and abstains from revenge, prevaricates and speaks true. The minute you forget that the play does all these things, and begin instead to speak of a necessary conformity—in the play, and in *all* its audiences—to Christian precept, or to the audience's ethical set, you are talking about something else, not about this unique work. It shrugs you off, leaving you to talk, as lengthily as you like, about other revenge plays and the authors of handbooks of Christian morality.

Mr. Frye's book is brief and contains within its own characteristic plot, a fantastic number of insights. The line Miss Prosser takes is dismissed in a muttered aside, when he says that Shakespeare doesn't expect us to "take a view that coincides with whatever Shakespeare had in mind" (though even this implies too powerful a certainty concerning these expectations); Frye illustrates this from *Henry V*, of which it is impossible that there should be one correct view. But the recurring question, when we are dealing with what is certainly one of the really distinguished minds, is not whether he gets this elementary point right, but whether it is tolerable that the Frye insights require the Frye apparatus. He has recently replied to this very criticism, remarking that without the apparatus there would be no insights. All right, but this does not mean that we should venerate the apparatus. Indeed this remarkable book—it is a series of three lectures—seems to prove that Frye's systems are mnemotechnical in character, a way of making fruitful connections between disparate activities of an extraordinary mind.

The system here is not closely related to those of other books, being a once-for-all Shakespeare affair, dividing the tragedies into the three categories (three lectures) of order, passion, and isolation. The categories fit where they touch, and I shall not expound them. What matters is Frye's unhesitating attack on the heart of the problem, the human situation in time, subject to death, and open to the experience of heroic energy. While it is the small men who carry on, it is the big ones who look into the abyss; and this is tragedy. (It is also, in a way, criticism.)

Frye is the mater of unexpected and rewarding collocation. He will show you how acute and dramatic was Shakespeare's habitual sense of history, and show not only the history plays but also the "tragedies of order" in a new light; he will remark, with as much originality as rightness, that "the tragic vision begins with being in time, and time is always time *after*." It is not only time after the great catastrophes: Troy, Actium, Richard's England; it is time after the death of the heroic parent, as when in *Hamlet* "all this magnificent vision of heroic energy is poured out as a sacrifice to a dead father, to a ghost who returns [*pace* Miss Prosser] screaming for blood from what is supposed to be a place of purification." Miss Prosser, you, I, may disagree with a lot of the detail, but it is there to be disagreed about; what matters is that heroic energy.

The "passion tragedies" are distinguished from the first set by powerfully lacking any "ironic" order figure; the issues are more exclusively Dionysian, and the rhetoric changes. Since *Troilus and Cressida* is such a tragedy, Frye has to demote Ulysses from his conventional place as an order figure. The reward is some very acute writing on this play, which contains Ulysses's great speeches on time and being, the "two great tragic conceptions," and the remarkable central debate in the Trojan council, on the Dionysian Will. The Dionysian night-world which formerly found its imagery in the Falstaff plays now dominates *Antony and Cleopatra* (a play which is here given half a dozen brilliantly original pages).

Frye's last group of tragedies are the tragedies of isolation, which culminate in visions of "absurd anguish." In these there is none of that compliance with the stock moral responses of an audience which characterizes melodrama; being authentically tragic they have no design that is intelligible "to human imagination, human emotions ... human moral instincts." Nor is their heroism subject to the qualification or correction that we might apply if the plays encouraged us to measure them by some external religion or idea of order—a process Frye regards as ultimately ironical, since irony breaks up the Dionysian, heroic energies of tragedy. Since such plays represent an anguish which is morally unintelligible, what becomes of the old question: Is tragedy compatible with a Christian view of life? Frye's answer to this illustrates as well as anything he has ever written the originality and authenticity of his own critical imagination:

Christianity as an institutional religion, giving a mysterious sanction to society's moral anxieties, is inconsistent with tragedy because it is simply incapable of the tragic vision. But the reality,

that is, the myth, of Christianity is very different: it tells us that all we can see, out there, of the activity of God in human life comes to a focus in the absurd and anguished figure of the crucified Christ. The heroic effort which Christ made against the irony of universal death was, Christianity tells us, successful. But the earthly end of his career, so far as we can see it, was exactly the same as the end of a failure, and of all Christian doctrines, the doctrine that Christ died is the most difficult to disbelieve. The moral or melodramatic attitude can do nothing with this crucifixion vision except reverse it, seeing it as followed by a second moral judgment in which Christ is the judge and those who condemn him are his writhing victims. In this double gyre of sadomasochism there is no place for the heroic struggle against irony, which is, so to speak, the tragic enzyme. A genuinely tragic Christian attitude would see suffering as a participation in the passion of a hero who was both divine and human, and so would establish a place within Christianity for the tragic hero.

I have quoted this at length because it has so much of the best of Frye in it: an old topic will never look the same again, not because it has been reclassified, but because a strong and idiosyncratic intelligence has focused it. Frye's Apollonian and "ironic" structures are not for me, except in so far as the Dionysian critic needs them. Like any other schemata, like philosophical or aesthetic prepared positions, they are the fictions by which criticism gets done. Within them we can look for the parenthetical, Dionysian insight. For all such structures are self-ironical; they know they cannot be of interest for long. It is clearer than ever that the preeminence of Mr. Frye depends upon the self-consciously fictive character of his schemes as well as upon their power to make him speak more than they know. Criticism is now most certainly an art, though one can say so without meaning to add to its dignity; and it is good in so far as it helps, in the manner appropriate to art, to make sense of the world. Mr. Frye's book is, accordingly, a successful work of art. The sociological force which assisted at the creation of its genre also threw up hundreds of other books which are not. We must not mind this, any more than we object to the fact that there are dozens of worthless Elizabethan plays, or that *Hamlet* belongs to the same genre as *The Atheist's Tragedy*, *Hoffman*, and *Lust's Dominion*.

4. Markels, Julian. *Wascana Review* 3, no. 1 (1968): 95–8.

This rewarding book, comprising the Alexander Lectures for 1966, is also for this reader an intense moral experience. There is something deeply moving, which may only be compared with the grace of an athlete, in Frye's deployment of his high wit and immense learning always to serve his argument, and never to make weight or show. Equally moving is the way he meets the responsibilities of a thinker who has had repeated occasion to remind his critics that his particular insights are inseparable from his large conceptual program and must stand or fall with it.

Frye begins by characterizing broadly the tragic vision as the sense of "being in time," limited by death. He particularizes by distinguishing the tragic from the ironic vision on the one hand, and from romance on the other: unlike the ironic, tragedy is concerned with the heroic: unlike romance, it sees the heroic within the framework of ordinary experience, "something infinite imprisoned in the finite." There follows an historical account which attempts to characterize accurately the distinguishing feature of Greek, Senecan, and Elizabethan tragedy. For the Greeks, Fate and the conflicting will of the gods, and for the Elizabethans, the order of nature and the wheel of fortune, constitute the historically particularized "organizing conceptions" of tragedy. Then the nature and fortune of the Elizabethans are seen as variations on two broader forces in human experience, the Apollonian and Dionysian. Having thus scrupulously provided the context required by his larger theoretical commitment, only now does Frye turn to Shakespeare: and on page sixteen he distinguishes the three

types of Shakespearean tragedy that are to be the subject of his three lectures: the tragedy of order (*Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*: the tragedy of passion (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Coriolanus*); and the tragedy of isolation (*King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Timon of Athens*).

The analyses that follow are richly disconcerting in ways we might now expect. They depend largely upon the swift upon the swift enumeration of a multitudes of parallelisms and contrasts, with almost no variations in emphasis, among the three major types and the complexly hybridized parts of which they are nevertheless the characterizing wholes. Tragedies of order, for example, are said to share a pattern in which the order-figure is killed by a rebel figure, who in turn is brought down by a nemesis-figure. Next it must be shown that any one of these three positions in the overall design may be that of the play's actual hero (e.g. Caesar, Macbeth, Hamlet). But then it may become relevant to observe, say, that the nemesis-figure as hero is more likely than the order-figure as hero to share certain specified traits with the hero of the tragedy of isolation. And so forth, until there accumulates a detailed awareness of, not the differentia but the various possible circumstances of the order-tragedy, the flexibility of the type, and its difference only in emphasis from the other types. In such analyses it is not surprising to find more attention given to works outside the category under discussion than to those inside it, or to find a rhetoric that alternates between a Dionysian synthesis of overlapping qualities ("The divided world of the passion-tragedies usually shows some correlation with another division between day and night. Apollo and Dionysus, common sense and romance, reality and desire, in which the Dionysian world is defeated"), and an Apollonian discrimination of sharply distinct qualities ("These three types tend to be attracted to two opposite poles"). These procedures are indispensable to a critic with Frye's aims of comprehensiveness and flexibility: they need not be confusing if one will only not be distracted by the speed and modesty with which the argument moves from point to point: and they are just the procedures through which Frye achieves those fruitful insights that are indeed inseparable from his theoretical program. He is consistently able to put the plays in arresting perspectives that are not just superficially fashionable, for all the talk of secular Christ and nemesis, but are what Ralph Waldo Emerson might have called "fatal": perspectives, that is, through which we can see something true and final that we could not have seen any other way.

It is hard to give a good example out of context. In a digression on *Titus Andronicus* (pp. 109–110) during a discussion of *Lear* and *Timon* as tragedies of isolation, Frye says that when Titus withdraws in favor of Saturninus and thereby allows a perverted social order to be established, in effect he creates two concentric sphere of tragic action, "which might be described as the Goths within and the Goths without." The mutual revenge of Titus and Tamora constitutes the inner action, which verges on absurdity, and this is contained by "the morally intelligible [outer] action of the tragedy of order," in the form of Titus' son returning with an army to destroy the evildoers. Then the next paragraph begins with his sentence: "In *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens* there are also two concentric spheres of action, but their relation is reversed: here the morally intelligible action is inside and the absurd one contains it." There is perhaps nothing electrifying in that observation; it is only just relevant and true; and the book is full of such illuminating and undebatable perceptions, all made possible through the informing genius of Frye's system and method.

What is debatable, for this reader, is the comparative value of the particular kind of illumination intrinsic to Frye's method. While I hope I have shown that it has much to teach us, one way in which Frye's book also impress me is by the large number of characterizing features of Shakespearean tragedy that it fails to account for. To be sure, what Frye has called the flexibility of his method often enables him to look at his subject through secondary perspectives that recognize out the side window some grave limitations of the frontal view. In the lecture on the tragedy of isolation, Frye identifies a type of character whose isolation "has intensified his consciousness, and who now sees the social world as something objective:

But he is seeing it, so to speak, from our own side of the stage, and his thoughts are for the moment ours. Most of the really titanic figures of Shakespearean tragedy are in this position for most of the play, *Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth* included, and it is the presence of his perspective that makes the tragedy authentic. (p. 97)

The first sentence is meant I think to disarm us for its sequel, implying by its “But” and “for the moment” that the “perspective” about to be describe is somehow ancillary to the tripartite perspective of the book. But if it now turns out that all four conventional Shakespearean heroes (Who are the other “really titanic figures”?) are in the same position for most of the play, and their common perspective is what makes the tragedy authentic, then in the name of A.C. Bradley we must ask what it means to have this perspective pushed aside by a perspective that locates two of them in tragedies of order and two in tragedies of isolation.

The implied answer is that it doesn’t mean anything, that rhetorical appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, in Frye’s method nothing is subordinated, and a flexible analysis confers peaceful simultaneity upon all perspective. At this point one hesitates to criticize a colleague of Marshall McLuhan’s for being non-linear; but the next and unavoidable question is how far a distinctly Shakespearean perspective is really consonant with those other perspectives derived from Blake, Nietzsche *et al.* In their internal structure I think *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* may be called more appropriately tragedies of isolation and degeneration than tragedies of order; that in part is what both mean in killing off their kings early instead of late, as in *Julius Caesar*, and then turning to the private experience of the hero. *Macbeth* in his degeneration, moreover, really gets outside the realm of time, and in his “tomorrow” speech becomes if anything a fool of space. On the apparently safer ground of *Julius Caesar* as a tragedy of order, there are also moments when Frye’s perspective is muddled by the play. Frye says that the order-figure commands loyalty and gives shape to the kingdom by his power of personality, and that this power and the social order it sustain are Apollonian, while the subversive power of the rebel-figure or the Roman mob is Dionysian. But Shakespeare’s Caesar, with his love of fat men and wine, his courtship of the mob at the Lupercal, and his interest in becoming Emperor on the Ides of March, is quite a Dionysian type: and the one personal loyalty he commands is that of Antony, who in Caesar’s name works up the mob to just that frenzied cry which Frye identifies as pure Dionysus: “Tear him to pieces!”

No system or method with Frye’s comprehensive aims can fairly be expected to do full justice to the internal details of individual works of art. We must be grateful for any effect of this magnitude to establish the larger conceptual provenance of the literature we love. But I suspect that a systematizes like Aristotle, with his apparently more rigid formal concepts like beginning and end and reversal and catharsis, finally gives us more flexible tools than Frye’s for the fruitful analysis of individual works. What Frye gives us, like his master Blake, is not so much a method as a practice, not so much a system as a vision, not so much a theory as a poem. It is not a Shakespearean poem, finally: but in what it does get said about Shakespeare, it is full of instruction and delight.

5. Nathanson, Leonard. *Shakespeare Studies* 5, ed. J. Leeds Barroll (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1970), 329–31.

The three chapters of this little book were originally delivered as the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto for 1966–67, a signal honor bestowed upon Northrop Frye by his own university. The focusing of a critical mind like Frye’s upon Shakespeare’s tragedies commands our interest, quite aside from any conclusions about the plays, to how his particular approach will intersect

with this body of literature. I have previously remarked in these pages that Frye's very important *Anatomy of Criticism* functions as a *summa literarum*, as an essentially encyclopedic study aimed at an overview of all the continents of literary endeavor rather than at the contours of individual works. This inevitable outcome of his critical method is very much in evidence in this study, which amounts to small-scale anatomy of Shakespeare's entire production of tragedy, cast in three brief essays. Given the line of interest and the severely limited length, certain usual expectations are futile to bring to the book. Frye does not engage in fresh analysis of action, character, or language. Instead he writes about the plays by tacitly assuming the most discriminating received opinions about the shape of a plot, the significance of a character, and the thematic implications of various motifs, patterns of imagery, and other details. Working for generally accepted conclusions as *données*, Frye partitions Shakespeare's achievement into three basic patterns under which the individual tragedies fall and which bear reference to large movements of thought—chiefly philosophical-mythical. Accordingly, what the reader takes away from the book is less a sharpened awareness of individual plays as unique entities than a more complex perspective upon the inter relations among the tragedies as they, in turn, fit into the larger order of literary works. The pursuit of this kind of speculative interest necessarily involves the neglect of others, and my delineation of what Frye sets out to do is exactly that, and not complaint. Since squint-eyed dramatic, verbal, and intellectual analysis of the plays as autonomous entities is the staple of criticism, there is good reason to welcome so richly and widely suggestive a discussion as Frye's.

Two familiar Elizabethan concepts are invoked at the outset—the order of nature and the wheel of fortune. Frye equates these respectively with Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian vision. The Greek sense of man as a limited and finite gives rise to the ironic vision of being in time. "Fortune as a wheel rotated by the energy and ambition of man, which, however gigantic, can never get above a certain point, and consequently has to sink again, is the 'Dionysian' or heroic vision which compliments it" (p. 13). The second of these has long been thought to be the basis of *de casibus* tragedy. Since Frye's mythical approach avoids the kind of historicism of Farnham, the didactic emphasis which springs from the primacy of ethical presuppositions diminishes in importance.

The structure of Elizabethan tragedy, Frye reminds us, may profitably be taken as reversal of the structure of comedy:

Comedy exhibits a type of action that I have elsewhere called a drive towards identity. This identity is of three kinds. There is plural and social identity, when a new social group crystallizes around the marriage of the hero and heroine in the final moments of the comedy. There is a dual or erotic identity, when a character comes to know himself in a way that he did not before, like Parolles, Angelo, or Katherine the shrew. Translating this division into tragic terms, there are three main kinds of tragic structure in Shakespeare and his contemporaries. There is, first, a social tragedy, with its roots in history, concerned with the fall of princes. There is, second, a tragedy that deals with the separation of lovers, the conflict of duty and passion, or the conflict of social and personal (sexual or family) interests. And there is, third, a tragedy in which the hero is removed from his social context, and is compelled to search for a purely individual identity. (pp. 15–18)

The discussion unfolds from this thoughtful three-fold division. The tragedies of order are *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*; the tragedies of passion, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Coriolanus*; and the tragedies of isolation, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Timon of Athens*. Except perhaps for *Coriolanus*, this grouping is not likely to arouse much resistance.

The basic pattern in the social tragedies is the killing of an order-figure by a rebel-figure or usurper, which brings into play the nemesis figure. Frye points to Elizabethan social assumptions as

the moral guide for an audience's view of the relation of conflict with father-Claudius-Hamlet, Duncan-Macbeth-Malcolm and Macduff, Julius Caesar-Brutus-Antony and Octavius, rather than to the prescriptive ethical considerations critics apply from Christian dogma. "The good ruler is not, clearly, the ruler who performs good acts, but the ruler who does what has to be done at the time" (p. 31). This principle is, Frye notes, decisive in the history plays. It is worth noting, too I would say, that it continues to be operative for so different a man as Marvell, writing in such different times from Shakespeare's.

In the tragedy of order, then, the order-figure who is struck down embodies positive social values that can be restored only by striking down the rebel-figure. But there is also possible a mode of tragedy "in which the order itself is evil, and in which rebellion against it appeals to the sympathy of the audience" (p. 31). Frye prefers the label "tragedy of the sick society" for those plays by Webster and Middleton which are conventionally called Italianate or intrigue tragedies and seeks to show their relation to his second group of Shakespeare's tragedies. Discussion of these plays has tended to stress the lack of a fixed set of moral values in their world. Frye, more profitably perhaps, suggests: "In tragedies of a sick society the central figure is often a victim, and the victim's nature is too big for his fortune. What is squeezed out of the tragic action is not excessive ambition but excessive vitality, though it is only because of the perverted social context that it is excessive" (p. 44).

The final chapter, dealing with the tragedy of isolation, engages in *Lear* and *Othello* the modern concern with the existential predicament of the tragic hero. From the standpoint of Frye's thesis, the isolated figure is intimately related to the three-fold structure of the tragedy of order. "We have the parody of the order-figure in the tyrant, who, like Richard III or *Macbeth* is the leader of society but is not attached to it. . . . The traitor, like Iago or Edmund, is a parody of the rebel-figure, whose actions dissolve and disintegrate his society. . . . Third, we have certain characters isolated by the action of the play, like *Lear* or *Timon*, who become parodies of a nemesis-figure, making futile threats of revenge" (pp. 95-6). While these schemes give shape and direction to Frye's discussion, it would be inaccurate to suggest that such patterns are all that the book has to offer. Indeed, more readers are likely to be set thinking in new directions by the incisive individual observations which run through this study than by its controlling thesis.

6. Smith, Marion B. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (July 1968): 400-3.

Northrop Frye's *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, an expansion of the Alexander Lectures for 1965-66, reveals both the virtues and the limitations of a genre which the author confesses he finds "fantastically difficult." On the credit side, the necessity of communicating with a non-specialist if highly intellectual audience compels Professor Frye to eschew the elliptical giant-steps which sometimes leave the reader gasping in pursuit of the argument of *Fearful Symmetry* or *Anatomy of Criticism*. Here, terms which may be unfamiliar to the general reader are defined, as far as possible, in familiar terms. The steps in the argument and the relevance of quoted passages are clearly signposted.

Evidence of the difficulty which Professor Frye admits to experiencing with the public lecture as form shows itself chiefly in occasional distortions of emphasis or interpretation to fit a particular critical frame of reference. On occasion, the necessity of compression leads him to assume, rather than establish, the validity of that frame of reference for a particular dramatic context. Thus, in the discussion of *I Henry VI*, "brave Talbot" appears not as the heroic "terror of the French," but as the archetypal "murdered-father figure," even though, in the play, Talbot's son dies before he does and in his arms.

Again, Professor Frye sees the ubiquitous Wheel of Fortune image in what he terms "the tragedies of order" as "a wheel rotated by the energy and ambition of man, which, however gigantic,

can never get above a certain point and consequently has to sink again.” However useful as a link with modern applications of the myth of Sisyphus, this view of the Wheel of Fortune is neither of those commonly found in Elizabethan literature. There, Fortune is very often seen as turning her wheel without reference to the activities of men and, as that wheel comes full circle, quite arbitrarily bringing those who cling to it down to the nadir of its turning as she had previously raised them to its zenith. What goes up must come down. If, however, the writer’s emphasis is on human pride and ambition rather than on the fickleness of Fortune, he may present man as accelerating the motion of her wheel by his efforts to rise to a position of wealth or power. Far from falling short and sinking back, he commonly pushes so hard that he goes past the summit and into the downhill curve. This is the “vaulting ambition which o’er-leaps itself and falls on the other,” not on the same side.

But in all three lectures Professor Frye’s use of the archetypal frame of reference illuminates his materials far more often than it distorts them. For example, his discussion of the ambivalent female characters of the tragedies of passion as belonging to the loving-devouring “white-goddess” tradition provides new insights in to such fascinating or frightening characterizations as those of Cleopatra and Volumnia.

It is considering specific aspects of specific tragedies in the larger contexts of tragic conflict as the opposition of natural and social order, or tragic action as the addition of heroic “doing and suffering to the irony of being in time,” or the varieties of tragic isolation that Professor Frye is at his brilliant best. The significance of Cleopatra’s lament, “the odds is gone / And there is nothing left remarkable / Beneath the visiting moon,” is sharpened for the reader by his discussion of the restoration of order after the impact of heroic energy as involving a return to the normalcy of mediocrity. “We come to terms with irony”—that is, the irony of the death of vitality—“by reducing our wants.” Or do we, perhaps, thus come to terms with hubris? It matters little which way we view the tragic paradox. What is clear, as *Fools of Time* demonstrates, is that in Shakespeare’s tragedies the resolution involves not only the loss of the heroic but of “something mysterious and bizarre” which is above and beyond worldly considerations of order.

Some of the soundest criticism in the three lectures is to be found in Professor Frye’s discussion of the tragedies of the split society in “Tailors of the Earth: the tragedy of passion” and especially of those doomed characters such as Mercutio, Enobarbus, and Menenius, who try to hold the two halves together by keeping a foot in each camp, and who, while taking their public stand on common sense, rely heavily on myth and parable in their rhetoric. In the same lecture Professor Frye makes Red Brand mincemeat of those neo-romantic critics who insist that Shakespeare presents Coriolanus as a paragon, of Roman virtue at least, in the tragedy which bears his name. Neither the hero, however heroic, nor his party, however patrician, can be regarded as symbols of order in this play. Both are isolated emotionally from their society. Coriolanus scoffs at law and custom, and the senators behave like “an army of occupation.” Illusion clashes with reality, heroics with hunger, and only the threat of total destruction, as well as the loss of the hero who mistook illusion for reality, can restore any hope of order to Rome.

Although only one lecture is avowedly devoted to “the tragedy of order,” the order theme runs through all three. It is understandable, therefore, that the plays which have some historical connection—ancient or modern—provide most of the illustrations of the concepts discussed and that the author seems to be more at ease with such plays than with *Hamlet* or *Othello*, where the emphasis is more personal.

King Lear and *Timon of Athens* provide, of course, ideal material for the third lecture on “Little World of Man: The Tragedy of Isolation.” The rhetoric of isolation in these plays is “a bitter denunciation of human hypocrisy, the contrast of reality and appearance. Lear and Timon are in a position to see this hypocrisy because, like the hypocrite, they have separated their real selves from their social relationships. The denunciation . . . is the voice, not of pure detachment, but of a

detached consciousness. 'The feelings are still engaged. . . .' (109).

Hypocrisy, in Milton's words, is "the only vice which walks invisible, save to God alone," and there is something ironically God-like in the rhetoric of denunciation in which Lear and Timon in the extremity of their degradation and isolation lay bare "the sin and hypocrisy and corruption" whose discovery in a "social order in which reality is appearance . . . cannot be made by the reason, but only by *saeva indignatio*."

Full of good things though this small volume is, this reader found it almost as tantalizing as rewarding. Professor Frye may be less easy to follow when he is not restrained by the limits of the public lecture, but the game is worth the chase. Welcome as this his fifth published lecture series is, it is to be hoped that the demands of lecture audiences will not keep him too long from completing the full-length work of Shakespeare criticism to which the illuminations of *Fools of Time* will be as a Catherine-wheel to a revolving beacon.

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