

**Kiernan Ryan. 2021. *Shakespearean Tragedy*.
London: Bloomsbury Publishing**

Jonathan P. A. Sell
Universidad de Alcalá

Kiernan Ryan's *Shakespearean Tragedy* "deliberately echoes the title of arguably the greatest and most influential modern study of its subject, A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*" (xii); and as did Bradley's, Ryan's work places center-stage Shakespeare's four "crowning achievements as a tragedian" (xiii), namely, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. "[T]he extraordinary consistency of Shakespeare's tragic vision" (xiii-xiv) is further demonstrated through shorter readings of 2 and 3 *Henry VI*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Julius Caesar*—the appetizers preceding the main fare—and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, the liqueurs to help the rich feast down.

Let it be said at the outset that Ryan's chapters on *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, incomparable in their coverage, depth and reasonableness, should become obligatory reading for anyone interested in those plays. Let it also be said that the main lines of Ryan's thesis were already defined in his *Shakespeare's Universality* (2015), where he set out his stall as a "reactionary" (my term) critic, unimpressed by half a century of historicist efforts to divest Shakespeare of transcendence and reveal his connivance in "perpetuating social, sexual and racial injustice" (2015, x). Slightly overstated, perhaps, but one takes Ryan's point: the time is surely ripe for the academy to abandon Theory-driven politicking and address the questions which should properly concern the literary critic, namely, in what literary greatness consists and how it is achieved. Future historians of literary criticism will be surprised at the extent to which Theory displaced close reading and common sense as the favored methodology in literary studies. To be fair, even reactionary criticism like Ryan's is indebted to those theorists who rediscovered the circumstantial weight of history: his *Shakespearean Tragedy* is in so many positive ways Bradley's, except that the impinging factors on the human condition which lead to individual subjective tragedy are no longer Bradley's "huge universal powers working in the world of individual fate and passion" (Bradley 1912, 185), but the very

inhumanity of patriarchal, hierarchical, capitalist, dog-eat-dog society. The chief outcome of Ryan's relentless argument is the objectification of all that was "nebulous, metaphysical" (223) in his predecessor.

Thus, Ryan is a methodological and theoretical "reactionary" of the same ilk as William Hazlitt, George Bernard Shaw, Middleton Murry (in his Marxist and pacifist aspects), and (a despiritualized) Wilson Knight, who together form Ryan's critical pantheon, alongside Coleridge, whose political wavering is mitigated by his fathering of close reading. The principal tenets of Ryan's credo are that Shakespeare is a universal author; that his universality hinges, not now on any WASPish imperialist conspiracy, but on the "transfigured" perspective of the human condition his plays offer; that those plays are "committed to the emancipation of humanity" (2015, xiv); and that Bradleyan "analytic interpretation" — that "close familiarity with the plays, that native strength and justice of perception and the habit of reading with an eager mind" (Bradley 1912, 3; 2; qtd. xi) — is the best means to elucidate the Shakespearean text.

Ryan's term "transfiguration" denotes that capacity of Shakespeare's tragedies to inscribe proleptically the utopian potential inherent to humanity but as yet unfulfilled. His tragedies are, therefore, prosthetic in the Sidneyan sense. Though the child of his age, Shakespeare's is "the prophetic soul" of sonnet 107, "dreaming on things to come"; his mind, certainly, reflected ages past, but also addresses our present and holds out the hope of a better future, "the better way" divivable in Cordelia's "smiles and tears" (*King Lear* 4.3.18–19; qtd. 179). Because the tragedies' utopian prescriptions have still to be effected, they are strictly timeless, as pregnant with meaning to us today as they were for audiences in the original globe and as they will be for succeeding generations, until the social and political agenda they pursue has been implemented in some future of social, sexual and racial equality which "men and women are still striving to create" (46). Because that new covenant lies beyond history's ever-receding horizon, the tragedies' message remains vital and fresh. But — and this is a corollary Ryan neglects to mention — that utopia's very inaccessibility may be the greatest Shakespearean tragedy, for readers and auditors are ultimately marooned in a rebarbative present to which the only antidote is nostalgia for an egalitarian Eden now lost or an all but ineffectual yearning for a future "community of equals" (269). Viewed thus, Shakespeare tragedies look like the sop

of comfort power concedes to the oppressed: they alert us to man's potential but have no effective force to change the world. At best, they may inspire the more enlightened not to wallow in the Hobbesian nightmare but to come up occasionally for invigorating utopian air, and that at least (and we should be grateful for small mercies) might arrest regression towards the brutish existence of the woodwoses and salvage men Thomas Wilson would have recognized as they milled around the Capitol in January 2021.

On Ryan's account, Shakespeare's tragedies feature two brands of hero. The tragic protagonists are victims of the historical circumstances which beset them. Romeo and Juliet patent a "boundless" love between equals but are historically deprived of any discourse of mutual affection which might authorize it. Brutus is "possessed by the same pathologically competitive, hierarchical mentality" (61) as the rest of Rome's patricians, including Caesar, a pattern that Ryan also detects in *Macbeth*. Hamlet's "tormented resistance" to avenging his father's murder is not his fatal flaw but "the heroic virtue which sets him at odds with his world for reasons he can't understand" (73). Before Iago's venom does its work, Othello and Desdemona (like Romeo and Juliet before them and Antony and Cleopatra after) "act [...] as if they were already free citizens of a truly civilized future, instead of prisoners of a time when racial prejudice and sexual inequality are so pervasive that even their heroic hearts are tainted by them" (113). Cordelia (and here Ryan quotes Wilson Knight) "is of the future humanity, suffering in the present dispensation for her very virtue" (178), while Lear's "violent awakening from the sleep of reason, in which 'Humanity must perforce prey on itself | Like monsters of the deep' (4.2.50-51)" removes the scales of custom from his eyes, opens them to the "radical utopianism" (173) of a world which might be our friend—a world where, as Gloucester puts it, "distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough" (4.1.73-74)—and puts Lear on the wrong side of what the hegemony regards as sanity.

The second brand conforms to the type of what another utopian called "working-class hero", Ryan "generic humanity" (199). Rarely has that type or its vindications received such sympathetic attention as here. Thus Jack Cade (for all his megalomania), Aaron (the proud and loving father), *Romeo and Juliet's* apothecary, *Julius Caesar's* nameless tradesmen, the Gravedigger, the Clowns in *Lear*, *Othello* and *Antony*

and *Cleopatra*, the Porter, the citizens in *Coriolanus* join chorus in an egalitarian manifesto the tragic heroes can intuit but, hidebound by their hierarchical privilege, never accomplish. In this respect, Ryan applies to Shakespeare Alain Badiou's claim that "emancipatory politics is essentially the politics of the anonymous masses" (qtd. 199). It is a politics born of "Shakespeare's complete alienation from the travesty of human life that confronted him in Jacobean Britain" (205) and fueled by a Juvenalian wild indignation which, Ryan suggests, more than any pandering to groundlings hesitating between blood sports or theatre and more than compliance with the gory requirements of Senecan drama, explains the sheer violence of the plays, a violence bardolatry often overlooks.

Ryan's argument cruises along implacably like a Coriolanan juggernaut, so cogently that the conclusions to later chapters and the crowning clincher, "There is a world elsewhere" (*Coriolanus* 3.3.134; qtd. 285), come as no surprise. The readings are occasionally overdetermined, most grievously perhaps when all irony is discounted in the inflationary rhetoric of *Antony and Cleopatra*. For a work, too, which champions the plays' engagement with historical circumstance, except for passing references to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 (108) or the Midlands Revolt of 1607 (273), there is a lack of contextual evidence to support sweeping assertions about social, racial, and sexual injustice in the period, or about a culture of Renaissance courtiers hung up on revenge, or about Elizabethan England's desire to emulate the grandeur that was Rome. This might be due to Ryan's aversion to historicizing criticism, but the risk is of dispersion into Bradleyan vapour, which Ryan is equally anxious to avoid. His reading of *Macbeth* illustrates the point: as if aware that the tragedy must be about more than individual human potential handcuffed by dark-age Scottish tribalism, Ryan makes it an allegory of "th'milk of human kindness" (*Macbeth* 1.5.17; qtd. 232) running sour on contact with toxic history, which is fair enough but has less specific political gravity than one might wish for.

But these are minor cavils when measured against the extraordinary virtues of Ryan's book. Not only for its overall argument but also for its judicious dismissal of old critical canards (Hamlet's Oedipal fixations, Iago's "motiveless malignity") and its realist firming-up of the gossamer Bloomean human, Ryan's *Shakespearean Tragedy*

is of incalculable value. It is Hazlitt writing after Marx, an equal to Bradley's monument, and a timely defense of Shakespeare's political relevance as the twenty-first century struggles to find its "better way."

References

- Bradley, A. C. (1904) 1912. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan & Co.
- Ryan, Kiernan. 2015. *Shakespeare's Universality: Here's Fine Revolution*. London: The Arden Shakespeare.

How to cite this review:

Sell, Jonathan P. A. Review of Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021). *SEDERI* 32 (2022): 149-153.

Author's contact: jonathan.sell@uah.es

Postal address: Universidad de Alcalá, Facultad de Educación. Calle Madrid 1, 19001, Guadalajara, Spain.