

## NO SUCH THING AS SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

*The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited: Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light. For the law of writ and liberty, these are the only men.*

Polonius was talking to Hamlet about the Players. Shakespeare was perhaps writing about himself and his own company, not wanting to put a label on his plays. A play was just a play.

Whatever he was as an individual, as a writer Shakespeare was a humanist. There are frequent mentions of the gods in his plays, but they never appear, never descend *ex machina* to dispense justice and right wrongs. All his plays, tragical and comical alike, end in the same way, with someone making a speech, tying up loose ends, apportioning praise or blame. The message is 'time to move on'.

*So, thanks to all at once, and to each one,  
Whom we invite to see us crown'd at Scone.*

Thus Malcolm, speaking while Macduff holds up Macbeth's severed head.

Octavius Caesar, glad to be rid of Antony and Cleopatra, is not unwilling to offer them posthumous praise.

*She shall be buried by her Antony:  
No grave upon the earth shall clip in it  
A pair so famous.*

Vicentio, Duke of Vienna, ends a play that doesn't quite fit any of Polonius's hybrid expressions, by addressing each of the participants in turn, as a kind of curtain call.

*She, Claudio, that you wrong'd, look you restore.  
Joy to you, Mariana! - Love her, Angelo.*

And so on, in turn, to Escalus, Provost, Angelo and Isabel, before leading them all offstage.

*So, bring us to our palace; where we'll show  
What's yet behind that's meet you all should know.*

Fortinbras just wants to tidy up.

*Take up the bodies. Such a sight as this  
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.*

When Othello falls dead on the corpse of Desdemona, Lodovico takes charge, putting the blame on Iago (*Spartan dog... This is thy work*), disposing of Othello's estate (*Gratiano, keep the house*), delegating responsibility for Iago's punishment (*The time, the place, the torture*), reserving for himself the task of informing the state (*This heavy act with heavy heart relate*).

Prince Escalus delivers an epitaph in rhyme to end an early play.

*A glooming peace this morning with it brings;  
The sun for sorrow will not show his head:  
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;  
Some shall be pardon'd and some punished:  
For never was a story of more woe  
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*

Albany delivers another, at the end of a later one.

*The weight of this sad time we must obey;  
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.  
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young*

*Shall never see so much nor live so long.*

It is all very human. After the epitaph, life goes on. A conclusion too banal, too human, for Seneca, but nothing was too banal for Shakespeare, whose characters, from the greatest to the least, are only human.

The plot of his first play, *A Comedy of Errors*, was borrowed from Plautus, but he never took anything from Seneca, much less the Greeks. The only time he put the gods on stage was when they were conjured up by Prospero in *The Tempest*, only to be exposed as a magic trick when he remembered what Caliban and the two drunken sailors were up to. Apologising to his future son-in-law for bringing the curtain down before the show had ended, his only excuse is that he is getting old.

*Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled,  
Be not disturb'd with my infirmity;  
If you be pleased, retire into my cell,  
And there repose; a turn or two I'll walk,  
To still my beating mind.*

These lines testify as well as any to the humanism which is above all what Shakespeare stands for. Ben Jonson, his friend and contemporary, could do both Plautus and Seneca, but never the two together. Shakespeare saw the funny side of tragedy and the sadness that is the other face of comedy. His plays balance the heaviness of one and the lightness of the other in the scales of humanism, which are even-handed, able to see two points of view and accept both.

In the mind of a humanist, the conflict between justice and freedom, or 'writ and liberty' as Polonius puts it, can never be resolved, only kept in balance. *Deus ex machina* is a trick whose only purpose is to relieve humans of the burden of responsibility.

When Olivia discovers the trick that has been played on Malvolio, she makes him a double-edged promise.

*This practice has most shrewdly pass'd upon thee:  
But, when we know the grounds and authors of it,  
Thou shalt be both the plaintiff and the judge  
Of thine own cause.*

Quite how she expects Malvolio to deal justly with his case, she does not explain, but to be both plaintiff and judge in our own cause is what humanity has to do, if it is to do without gods.

Shakespeare's humanism is implicit in the absence of divine agency. Humans are left exposed, with no one to blame but themselves. Exposed, in Lear's case, to the elements, when his daughters, Goneril and Regan, turn him out. Buffeted by the storm, he calls on the gods (*That keep this dreadful pother o'er our heads*) but finds no help there. All he can do in his humiliation is rage and try not to cry.

*You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!  
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts  
Against their father, fool me not so much  
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger;  
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,  
Stain my man's cheeks! - No, you unnatural hags,  
I will have such revenges on you both  
That all the world shall, - I will do such things, -  
What they are yet I know not; but they shall be  
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep;*

*No, I'll not weep: -  
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart  
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws  
Or ere I'll weep. - O fool, I shall go mad!*

Heavens and the gods are often mentioned by Shakespeare's characters, but never seen and never known to be of any help. Gloucester, after his blinding, has no illusions about the gods' benevolence.

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,  
They kill us for their sport.*

Shakespeare embraced contradiction. His tragical-comical-historical-pastoral plays let people of all kinds be who they were. There is no such thing as Shakespearean tragedy. Tragical, comical, historical, pastoral or, more often than not, a bit of everything, all his plays have the same subject: people, with no one to blame but themselves and no one to turn to but each other.

As Lear says to Cordelia, near the end of the play.

*Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish.*

Or Othello, before he kills himself.

*Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well.*

Or Macbeth, receiving the news that his wife is dead.

*Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more.*

Or Hamlet, with his dying breath.

*The rest is silence.*

Or the Clown, who brings the asp to Cleopatra.

*Truly, I have him: but I would not be the party that should desire you to touch him, for his biting is immortal; those that do die of it do seldom or never recover.*

Or Lear again, holding Cordelia's dead body.

*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!*

Or Viola, when she finds herself in a tricky situation.

*O time! thou must untangle this, not I;  
It is too hard a knot for me to untie!*

There is no point in asking the gods to help you. All you can do is wait and hope for the best.