CHAPTER THREE

# Tragic Drama

In the ordinary English of conversation or the newspaper a tragedy is simply a sad or unlucky event. Too often we read headlines like 'Holiday Bathing Tragedy' or 'Family Killed in Motorway Tragedy'. Even in the theatre the word is carelessly used to describe any play which has an unhappy ending or (like *Hamlet*) an unusual number of dead bodies on the stage. For the critic or student of literature however the word has a rather different and more specialised meaning. *Hamlet* is indeed a tragedy, but not simply because it includes so many sudden and unnatural deaths.

In this chapter I shall first say a little about tragedy in general, and then introduce the reader to some of the chief English dramatists who have written tragedies. In the modern theatre the distinction between tragedy and comedy has become a little out of date, so that one never knows whether a play by Pinter for example is one or the other. It could also be argued that there are tragic novels, like Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (see page 127), and tragic poems, like Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum* (page 45). For the present however we shall think about tragedy in the strictest sense, that is to say tragic drama.

The beginnings of tragedy, like the beginnings of so much of western civilisation, are to be found in ancient Greece. During the fifth century before Christ the great Athenian dramatists, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, wrote tragedies of a power and a beauty that has never been equalled. Fortunately most of their plays still exist, and some of them are still performed in the modern theatre. At the time I am writing this some cinemas in London are showing a new film of *The Trojan Women* of Euripides, made by the modern producer Cacoyannis. Tender-hearted Londoners drop tears as the little boy Astyanax is taken from his mother Andromache to be killed by the Greeks, just as tender-hearted Athenians did when they saw the same scene in 415 B.C. The *King Oedipus* of Sophocles is as exciting and as terrible on the modern stage as it was when performed in Athens twenty-four centuries ago. Many readers of this book will already know something

about Greek tragedy—they may have read some examples in Greek, or in translation in their own language. For those without such knowledge however it may be helpful if I mention the chief points in which it differed from the drama of our own time, or of Shakespeare's. These were:

1. Stories already well known to the audience: the dramatist was not expected to invent new characters or plots, but to use the old stories of gods and kings and heroes.

2. A strong religious element: the great drama festivals in Athens were held in honour of the wine-god, Dionysus. Even when people no longer believed in the old gods as actual persons, they felt that the world was controlled by moral law (*themis*) and that men who broke that law would be punished by divine justice (*dike*) and fate (*nemesis*). This feeling or belief lies behind all the great classical tragedies.

3. A dislike of horror and violence on the stage: the subjects of tragedy were often shocking and terrible, but the evil deeds were done off the stage. The audience learned of them from the chorus or from 'messengers'.

4. Few actors: the earliest plays had only two actors and a chorus. In the great days of Athenian tragedy however there were four, five or even six chief actors, and a chorus of fifty men. No plays had anything like the number of actors found for example in a Shakespeare play.

5. Characters above the level of ordinary men: all the chief figures in a tragedy were kings, queens, princes, princesses or heroes. The idea of 'domestic' tragedy, in which the people on the stage are 'just like ourselves', would have been quite strange to a Greek tragedian. The Greeks may have invented democracy, but it does not appear in their tragedies.

6. No mixing of tragedy and comedy: a Greek tragedy had 'unity of action'—that is to say, it had *one* story and only one. It would have been unthinkable for Aeschylus or Sophocles or Euripides to include comic characters and scenes in serious plays, as Shakespeare so often did. The Greeks liked fun as much as any other people however, and many of them no doubt felt a little tired after watching a tragic trilogy (that is to say a set of three tragedies) for several hours. It became usual therefore to end the performance with a 'satyr play'—a play quite separate from the tragic trilogy, and often crudely comic.

It would be interesting to look at Greek tragedy in more detail, but to do so would be out of place in a book like this, which is intended for students of English. However before we turn to Shakespeare (who must necessarily dominate any discussion of English tragic drama), there are three points of view which we ought to consider with regard to tragedy in general. These points of view (they are too vague to be-

called theories) are connected with three men standing centuries apart from each other, namely Aristotle, Chaucer and G. W. Hegel.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) wrote a little book now called the *Poetics* into which he put some of his thoughts about literature in general, and tragedy in particular. Living at the time when Greek tragedy was at its height, and being familiar with the works of the great dramatists who were almost his contemporaries, he found himself asking two questions about the psychology of theatre-going. The first one was this: why do we get pleasure and satisfaction from seeing in the theatre things we should certainly not enjoy in reality? Aristotle's answer was that certain emotions, especially the emotions of pity and fear, do not get used enough in civilised life. One of the effects of tragedy is to stir up these emotions so that they flow away from us like the waste products of the body after purgation. The Greek word for purgation is *catharsis*. To watch a tragedy is a sort of psychological medicine. In post-Freudian jargon, it helps to make us free of 'inhibitions'. In Milton's words at the end of his Greek-style tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, it leaves us

> With peace and consolation...
> And calm of mind, all passion spent.

In the words of the great film-director, Alfred Hitchcock,

> Civilisation has become so screening and sheltering that we cannot experience sufficient thrills at first hand. Therefore, to prevent our becoming sluggish and jellified, we have to experience them artificially, and the screen is the best medium for this.

One need not agree with the last phrase, but Hitchcock's own films have certainly helped many people to feel the emotion of fear which (happily) is not often present in civilised life, and which people therefore seek not only in thrillers and tragedies, but also in dangerous sports like skiing, or climbing or fast driving. Aristotle's idea of tragedy as *catharsis* is one which modern man has no difficulty in understanding.

The other important question which Aristotle tried to answer in the *Poetics* was this: what kind of person ought the chief character (or hero or protagonist) of a tragedy to be? If he is a completely *bad* man it is clear that he will not get the sympathy of the reader or spectator: when he suffers or dies we shall not feel pity, but only satisfaction, as we do at the end of a thriller or detective story when the criminal is sent off to prison or the electric chair. If on the other hand he is a completely

*good* man we shall feel shocked and depressed by the thought that there is no justice in the world, and no just God in control of it. It is therefore difficult to disagree with Aristotle's decision that the protagonist in a tragedy ought to be ' good but not too good '—in other words he should be a person we can admire and like, but his suffering or death should be caused by his own fault, by some weakness in his character, or by some mistake which he himself has made. In *Hamlet* for example we feel that the young prince has a good character—kind, thoughtful, gentle and cultivated—yet in some ways weak and indecisive. It is his weakness and indecision which in the end cause his own death and that of several others. The word which Aristotle used for this kind of fault or weakness in an otherwise good character is *hamartia*. When he wrote the *Poetics* he was naturally thinking of Greek tragedy as he had seen it and read it, but his thoughts about *catharsis* and *hamartia* are relevant to *all* tragedy, as the reader will find by thinking carefully about the tragic plays or novels he has read.

Aristotle's thoughts about tragedy are of course those of a highly intelligent and sophisticated man. There is however another and more primitive point of view which helps to explain why we get pleasure from watching or reading about the suffering of others in tragedy. Anyone with the smallest knowledge of literature and drama before the beginning of the present century must have noticed how undemocratic it is. I said that the chief characters in Greek tragedy were always kings, queens and other people of importance: there was no place in it for ordinary people like you or me. This was equally true of the tragedies of Shakespeare and of other great European dramatists, though the German poet Lessing (1729-81) had written, and argued for, a more domestic type of drama. Even the nineteenth-century novel was usually written about people in ' high society '. Why has serious literature, and especially tragedy, always been so snobbish? Part of the answer was given by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* (see page 34) when he made the Monk say

> Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
> As olde bookes maken us memorie,
> Of him that stood in great prosperitee,
> And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
> Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

The idea of a tragedy as a moral story to show the falseness of human power and wealth is a very old one. It can be seen not only in the stories of ancient Greece, but also in Christian and Jewish history and

legend, where God is sometimes thought of as the great Leveller: ' He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek '. It must be admitted that many of us who are ' humble and meek ' get a certain feeling of pleasure from seeing those who are clever and successful brought down to our own level. It is satisfying to think, in the words of John Bunyan's (1628-88) song, ' he that is down need fear no fall '; and to watch safely while heroes and leaders are, as we say, ' cut down to size '. Perhaps this is why so many tragedies have been written on the subject of Julius Caesar, and why, in our own time, the last days of Hitler and the fall of Mussolini have filled so many books and fascinated so many readers.

In modern drama however the theory of Chaucer's Monk no longer seems important. The protagonists in the plays of Ibsen, Shaw, Arthur Miller, John Osborne and Arnold Wesker are not kings or presidents or prime ministers. Even when a modern dramatist does choose a classical subject he does not usually emphasise the ' greatness ' of his characters. On the contrary he tries to show that they are really very ordinary people, just like ourselves. Two good examples from modern French drama are Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* (about the Greek story of Oedipus) and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*. To compare these with Sophocles's plays on the same subjects, *King Oedipus* and *Antigone*, is an instructive exercise for any student of literature.

It was in fact a study of Sophocles's *Antigone* which led the German philosopher and critic G. W. Hegel (1770-1831) to stress the importance of *moral conflict* in tragedy. The story can be told quite shortly: Antigone is the niece of Creon, king of Thebes. Her brother, Polynices, has been killed while leading an attack on that city, and Creon orders that his body is to remain unburied on the field. Recognising a religious and moral duty to bury her brother, Antigone goes out of the city at night and scatters earth over his body. Because she has broken the law, and in spite of the fact that she is going to be married to his son Haemon, Creon condemns Antigone to die. Haemon, having failed to persuade the king to change his mind, decides that he will die with her. In the end, persuaded by the old prophet Tiresias, Creon does change his mind, but it is too late. He finds that Antigone has already killed herself, and that Haemon is going to follow her example.

To Hegel it seemed that the *Antigone* was ' the perfect exemplar of tragedy '. The substance of all drama is conflict—conflict for example between the police and the criminal, the stupid father and the pretty young daughter, the American spy and the Russian spy. In such stories the conflict generally appears as a simple one between good and evil, right and wrong. In tragedy however things are less simple: the conflict is between two ' rights '. Antigone was caught between doing

the right thing, from a religious point of view, by giving proper burial to her brother, and doing the right thing, from the point of view of the law, by obeying Creon's order. Creon himself was caught between his duty as ruler and protector of the city, and his duty as the uncle and protector of Antigone. Such moral conflicts are a necessary part of life. Millions of Germans in the 1930s had to make the difficult choice between their duty as patriots to support the government and defend their fatherland, and their duty as Christians and Europeans to oppose the Nazi philosophy. Forty years later it is perhaps possible to see this as a simple conflict between right and wrong, but at that time it seemed a truly tragic conflict between two rights. Perhaps the commonest example of such a conflict is that between love and duty favourite subject of a thousand films and novels as well as of great tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*. Tragedy then can almost always be seen as a *conflict*: not between right and wrong (for that is simply melodrama), but between two opposite rights. This seems quite plain as soon as one begins to think about it, and it is strange that no one seems to have mentioned it until Hegel pointed it out in his *Aesthetik*.

So far we have been thinking about the history and theory which lie behind European tragedy in general. To the student of English literature however tragedy means above all the tragedy of Shakespeare. At first sight this seems very different from classical Greek tragedy. The differences however are of form rather than of substance. I shall try to show later how the theories of Aristotle and of Hegel, as well as the primitive idea of tragedy as the downfall of great men, can be helpful in understanding a Shakespearian tragedy (*Julius Caesar*). First however let us look at Shakespeare himself.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is such an important figure in world history that it is easy to forget how little is really known about his life. It is easy to forget also that he was only one of the many dramatists writing for the small London theatres at the time of Queen Elizabeth I. If anyone asked what made this young man from a small country town into the greatest literary figure the world has ever seen it would be difficult to give a short answer. He had three things however which everyone would agree about: an almost unbelievable understanding of human psychology (and this was a hundred years before even the word ' psychology ' had been invented!); a God-like love and compassion for the world and its inhabitants; and a richness and control of language such as no other English writer has had. To these one must add, without taking away anything from Shakespeare's greatness, the element of luck and chance which is needed for success in any activity: he was born in the right place and at the right time.

England under Elizabeth I was as good a place to live in as anywhere in Europe. At last there was peace at home under a settled monarchy. The middle classes, to which Shakespeare's parents belonged, were generally prosperous. At last the full influence of the Renaissance (late coming to England because of the savage Wars of the Roses which had not ended until 1485) was being felt. Scholarship and poetry and music were flowering. Even the English aristocracy, late in following the example of their French and Italian cousins, were building great palaces like Hampton Court and Knole and Hatfield, and doing their best to encourage artists of every kind. One of Shakespeare's fellow-countrymen, admiring the great outpouring of poetry and music at the time, went so far as to call England ' a nest of singing birds '.

In such conditions a young poet-dramatist like Shakespeare could find an intelligent audience—an audience whose ears were open to poetry, and who were especially conscious of the beauty and wealth of their own language. In ordinary use that language was not very different from modern English (indeed according to the divisions usually made in the history of the language—Old English, Middle English and Modern English—it *was* Modern English!). There was however a great difference between the simple, direct speech of ordinary people and the ' clever ', fantastical language of many of Elizabeth's courtiers. And this was very different from the language written by scholars, who were continually introducing new words from Latin and Greek. The very word ' theatre ' for example was imported during Shakespeare's own lifetime as a ' clever ' word for what he knew as a ' playhouse ' Even the ordinary noun ' animal ' was then a new and ' clever ' word for ' beast '.

Shakespeare himself used as many kinds of English as he needed. He particularly enjoyed making fun of the language of courtiers and scholars, and he liked making puns of a kind which would now seem childish. In short, Elizabethan English was extremely various and rapidly changing, and Shakespeare used it brilliantly. The result is that Shakespeare's English is quite difficult for the foreign reader (and indeed for many modern English readers). In the theatre the difficulties seem to disappear, so that the foreigner with a moderate knowledge of English can enjoy a performance in London or Stratford, even if he cannot translate the speeches into his own language. Perhaps the best advice, for those whose English is still uncertain, is not to attempt to read Shakespeare without the help of a good teacher. Alternatively it may be a good idea to study the play in translation in one's own language before trying it in English.

There is no room in a book like this to say anything of Shakespeare's

life. In any case, as I have said, we know very little about it except that he went from Stratford to London (leaving his wife at home) and became an actor. By the time he was thirty he had become well known as a dramatist. He was a successful dramatist, but no more so than some others of the time: indeed the critics thought he was inferior to Ben Jonson. Of the thirty-six plays which were almost certainly written by Shakespeare we shall only be concerned in this chapter with seven, namely the great tragedies written between 1598 and 1608: *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. It has always been the custom to divide Shakespeare's plays into comedies, histories, and tragedies. This is a useful arrangement, but is sometimes misleading. Some of the histories (*King Richard II* for example) are also tragedies, and the Roman tragedies (*Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*) are also histories. It is a little misleading, too, to call a darkly pessimistic play like *Troilus and Cressida* a comedy, but we need not discuss that here.

Like the other tragic dramatists of his time, Shakespeare followed a dramatic tradition which by then had become well established in England. This tradition came partly from the Roman tragic dramatist Seneca (died A.D. 65), and partly from the medieval 'mystery' plays which were still being acted in Shakespeare's boyhood, and which we shall be looking at more closely in another chapter. Seneca was a popular and highly successful writer of what we should now call thrillers. He specialised in stories of revenge, had no hesitation about showing bloody and horrible deeds on the stage, and frequently used ghosts in his stories. He owed something to the dramatic masterpieces of Greece; but, as sometimes happened when the Romans followed the Greeks in any artistic field, their plays were cruder, and altogether lacking in the dignity and high moral feeling of the Greeks. Seneca however was widely read and admired in England at the time of the Renaissance, and a number of tragedies were written in imitation of his style. Among these were *Gorboduc* (1551) by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, and *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) by Thomas Kyd, each of which used the typically horrifying Senecan ingredients (and incidentally the Senecan convention of dividing the play into five acts).

Shakespeare, as a tragic dramatist, worked in this style, though his genius saved him from some of the crudity of the Senecan tradition. It was however from this tradition, added to the tradition of the English medieval plays and the actual conditions of the Elizabethan stage, that the Elizabethan drama took its form and structure. Unlike the great French tragedies of Corneille and Racine nearly a hundred

years later, it owed nothing in these respects to the drama of classical Greece. On the surface therefore we shall not expect a Shakespearean tragedy to look like the plays of Sophocles and Euripides. It is when we look beyond form and structure, and examine the subject matter, characters and ideas, that we shall see how universal is the material of tragedy, and how correctly Aristotle pointed out its essentials in the *Poetics*. To give examples of this I shall finish these notes on Shakespearean tragedy with a more detailed study of *Julius Caesar*. First however I shall make some short comments on his other chief tragedies.

*Hamlet* is so well known that there is no need to say much about it here. Like many of Shakespeare's plays it began as a rewriting of an older play by an unknown writer. We are not sure when it was first seen on the stage, but it was almost certainly earlier than 1603 when the first printed copy appeared. This copy was careless and incorrect, but a better edition was published in 1604. Basically *Hamlet* is a story of murder and revenge in the tradition of Seneca, not unlike Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (see page 56). All this is transformed by the poetry and the psychological insight of Shakespeare into a work of great genius—perhaps the most famous single work of literature in the world. It is the longest of Shakespeare's plays, and perhaps the most universal because it has something for everybody: the strange and powerful opening, with the soldiers watching the stars from the castle wall while they wait for the ghost to appear; the sad, almost sentimental, story of the young Ophelia; the violent action which bursts into the play from time to time (Laertes and his soldiers threatening King Claudius, Hamlet's sudden killing of Polonius, the duelling at the end); the discussion of religious and philosophical topics; the study of human relationships (husband-wife, lover-lover, parent-child, friend-friend, young-old); the sense of humour as a necessary part of life; and above all the immensely attractive, immensely complicated character of Hamlet himself, a character in which every one of us sees a reflection of himself. So many thousands of books have been written about *Hamlet* that one hesitates to say anything about it in so short a space. I would suggest however that its unending popularity is due above all to the fact that it puts before us the most important of all human problems: thought versus action. We are all like Hamlet in that the more we think the more difficult we find it to decide (which girl to marry, which party to vote for, which religion to follow, which job to take).

*Othello* (first acted in 1604, and printed in 1622) is the most 'domestic' of Shakespeare's tragedies. It is a story of sexual jealousy which he borrowed from an Italian writer, Cinthio. The fact that

Othello is a Moor (usually taken to mean a black African) married to a white girl, Desdemona, has led some people to think that *Othello* is a drama about 'the colour problem'. This is partly true, but the chief subject is the terrible effect of jealousy (carefully built up by Othello's evil lieutenant, Iago) on the honest, simple mind of the Moor —a man whose bravery and skill as a soldier have won the gratitude of the Venetian government, and Othello's appointment as governor of Cyprus (then a Venetian colony). The final scene, in which a half-mad Othello accuses the innocent Desdemona of being unfaithful and then smothers her with a pillow before killing himself, is one of the most impressive in Shakespeare.

*King Lear* was first acted in 1605, and printed in 1608. The story comes from the old English chronicles, and is almost entirely fictitious, though there may have been a real ancient British chieftain named Lear or Llyr. It is possible that the city of Leicester was originally Llyr-cestre or Lear's Castle. *King Lear* has been thought of by many critics as the most powerful of Shakespeare's tragedies. Certainly it is one of the most pessimistic. The story is complicated and extremely improbable, but it gives opportunities for some of Shakespeare's most impressive poetry. In the nineteenth century, when realistic scenery was the fashion in the theatre, it was thought that *King Lear*, with its innumerable changes of scene, its storms and its battles, was almost impossible to produce on the stage. Now that realism is out of fashion this is no longer so.

The story is chiefly concerned with the king and his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. He decides in old age that he will divide his kingdom between them in proportion to their love for him. Goneril and Regan please him by exaggerated and false expressions of love, but Cordelia (though truly loving her father) fails to do so. Lear is so angry with her that he divides the kingdom equally between Goneril and Regan (and their husbands, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall), leaving Cordelia with nothing. Having control of the kingdom, Goneril and Regan soon forget their promises to care for their father, now old and powerless. Mad with rage at their ingratitude, he is driven out into the storm. Arriving at Dover after much suffering, he finds that a French army has landed there, and that Cordelia is with them, now married to the King of France. The scene in which the old man, confused, weak and almost at death's door, once again meets the only one of his daughters who truly loves him is one of the most emotional in all Shakespeare's work, and likely to draw tears from the most hard-hearted audience. Attended by Cordelia's servants and a doctor, Lear is carried into the royal tent where she greets him:

O, look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me:—
No, sir, you must not kneel.

Lear replies:

Pray, do not mock me:
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

But there is to be no happy ending: the French are defeated by the English under Albany and the treacherous Edmund. Cordelia is hanged by Edmund's order, and the play ends with Lear carrying her body on to the stage, where he himself dies. Meanwhile the evil-minded Goneril and Regan have quarrelled over their lover, Edmund. Goneril, having poisoned her sister, has also killed herself. Such a summary as this can do little justice to a tragedy on the massive scale of *King Lear*. It is one of Shakespeare's darkest and most powerful plays.

*Macbeth* is another ' dark ' play, full of cruelty and blood, and more exciting than any thriller. The exact date of its first production is uncertain, but its Scottish subject and some other unmistakable evidence in the play itself make it clear that it was written to please the new King, James I, who was also James VI of Scotland. He had succeeded to the English throne on the death of Elizabeth in 1603. The story of Macbeth (which has some little historical fact behind it) was one of several which Shakespeare took from the *Chronicles* of Raphael Holinshed.

Macbeth and his wife, moved by the strange prophecy of the witches, kill the King of Scotland, Duncan, and seize the throne for themselves. Banquo, Macbeth's friend and fellow-general, knows of their crime, and so Macbeth decides that he also must be killed. He is struck down while returning from a ride with his son, Fleance. In a famous scene the ghost of Banquo appears to Macbeth at a feast to which all the

Scottish lords have been invited to mark the coronation of the murder-
ous couple. Later Macbeth decides that Macduff also knows the
truth about the old king's murder. He sends men to attack Macduff's
castle and kill him, but Macduff, already warned, has escaped to
England. His wife and children, left alone in the castle, are mur-
dered by Macbeth's men.

By this time both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth realise that their
guilt is known. Afraid of the future, Macbeth visits the witches in
their cave. He is assured by them that he will never be harmed by
'man of woman born', and that he will rule Scotland 'till Birnam
wood shall come to Dunsinane'. This for a time gives him confidence.
He prepares to defend the castle of Dunsinane against the English,
who have joined with Macduff and other Scottish leaders against the
tyranny of the Macbeths.

Lady Macbeth's mind now begins to break under the pressure of
guilt and anxiety. In the famous sleep-walking scene she relives the
terrible night when she and her husband killed the sleeping Duncan.
Soon afterwards, while Macbeth is preparing to meet Macduff and
the English, she kills herself. There is an exciting scene in which a
soldier tells Macbeth that he has actually seen Birnam wood moving.
The audience knows (but Macbeth, of course, does not) that the Eng-
lish soldiers have been told to break branches from the trees in order to
hide them as they attack.

Macbeth, believing now that supernatural powers are fighting
against him, decides to fight to the end while still remembering the
witches' promise that no man born of woman can harm him. At the
height of the battle he comes face to face with Macduff. They fight
savagely, Macbeth still certain that no human being can harm him.
When they pause for breath he shouts to his opponent:

> Thou losest labour:
> As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air
> With thy keen sword impress, as make me bleed:
> Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests;
> I bear a charmed life, which must not yield
> To one of woman born.

But Macduff replies:

> Despair the charm;
> And let the angel whom thou still hast served
> Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
> Untimely ript.

In other words Macduff had not been ' born of woman ' in the ordinary sense, but by what is now called a Caesarian operation. Macbeth now realises that he has been tricked by the witches, and that there is no hope for him. His old bravery returns, and he fights desperately until Macduff kills him. The play ends with the arrival of more English forces, accompanied by Malcolm, Duncan's son, who is now true king of Scotland.

Summarised in this way *Macbeth* sounds almost like a crude Wild West melodrama. In fact it is a deep psychological study of a brave and sensitive man destroyed by his own ambition and a too-dominant wife. It is also one of the most poetic of Shakespeare's plays.

*Antony and Cleopatra* was written about 1606, but not published until the ' First Folio ' (1623), seven years after Shakespeare's death. The Folio was a collection of nearly all his plays put together by his friends and fellow-actors, John Heming and Henry Condell. For the story of *Antony and Cleopatra*, as for his other Roman plays, Shakespeare used Sir John North's translation of the Greek writer Plutarch (first century A.D.) who wrote the life stories of famous Greeks and Romans. Historically the events in *Antony and Cleopatra* followed almost immediately after those in *Julius Caesar*, and Antony is a central figure in both. Artistically however there is no connection between the plays.

It is not easy to summarise *Antony and Cleopatra* without a long explanation of the political situation at the time (about 30 B.C.). Its main subject is the love of the famous and powerful Roman for the traditionally beautiful Egyptian queen. Forced by political events and the death of his wife in Rome, Antony leaves Cleopatra in Alexandria and goes back to Rome. For political reasons he marries again, this time the sister of his former opponent, Octavius Caesar. Unable to live away from Cleopatra he soon leaves Rome and his wife, and returns to Alexandria. This causes war between Rome and Egypt. The Egyptian fleet is defeated at the battle of Actium, and soon afterwards Antony's army is also defeated at Alexandria. Cleopatra has taken refuge in her ' monument ', and there is a false rumour that she is dead. Hearing this, Antony tries to kill himself by falling on his sword. Failing, he is carried to Cleopatra's monument where he dies in her arms. Octavius, leading the Roman forces, tries to make peace with Cleopatra. She pretends to agree, but has secretly decided to kill herself. This she does by putting an asp (a poisonous snake) to her breast. There is some magnificent poetry in *Antony and Cleopatra*, especially in the death scenes, but it has not quite the same power and psychological depth as Shakespeare's other tragedies.

Like *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* was not printed until the Folio of 1623, though written about 1608. The story, which also came from

Plutarch, is about Caius Marcius, a Roman general who defeated the Volscians and captured the town of Corioli. In gratitude the Roman government gave him the surname Coriolanus, and wished also to make him Consul. The ordinary people of Rome however very much disliked his dictatorial arrogance (which is understandable when one reads the play, because Shakespeare shows him as a proud and insolent man who seems to go out of his way to express hate and contempt for the ordinary man). Popular feeling against Coriolanus forces the government to banish him from Rome, and he goes away in anger to join his former enemy, the Volscian leader, Aufidius. He agrees to lead the Volscian army against Rome, but when he is about to attack the city the Roman government send his friends and his family, including his mother Volumnia, to meet him and persuade him to make peace. In an emotional scene he listens to their prayers, and agrees. (The situation here is a good example of Hegel's theory of conflict between two goods: the hero's love of his own city and family, and his duty to keep his promise to the Volscians, even though that promise was one which he ought not to have made.) He leads the Volscian army back to their city of Antium, where he is killed by the Volscian leaders who feel that he has deceived them. *Coriolanus* is an interesting play in spite of its rather unattractive protagonist. It may be contrasted with *Macbeth*: in the latter we begin by admiring the protagonist, but find his character worsening as the play goes on; in *Coriolanus* we begin by disliking and end by admiring him.

I have chosen *Julius Caesar* (probably acted in 1599, but not printed until the Folio of 1623) as an example of Shakespearean tragedy for rather more detailed study. The chief reason for this choice is personal: *Julius Caesar* is one of my favourite plays. But it has other advantages for our present purpose: its language (though far from easy for a foreign reader) is by no means as difficult as that of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*; it is a popular play for study at school, so there is a good chance that the reader will know something about it already; it can be seen in at least one excellent film version; and it shows quite clearly most of the structural and psychological features of tragedy which we have been discussing.

Looked at from the Aristotelian point of view, or indeed from the point of view of any reader or spectator of common sense, the play is, despite its title, the tragedy of Brutus. He is the protagonist, the tragic hero, 'good but not too good', towards whom our sympathies are directed. When, after their defeat at Philippi and the death of his friend and ally Cassius, Brutus throws himself upon the sword held by his unwilling slave, we feel in full measure the emotions of pity and fear of which Aristotle wrote. We echo the words of Mark Antony,

'This was the noblest Roman of them all.' All through the play it is the nobility of Brutus which Shakespeare has worked to emphasise. His natural leadership, his devotion to the good of Rome, his thoughtful and humane character, his open generosity to his enemies, his love of his wife, and his kindness and consideration for servants—all these go to complete the picture of a man who is morally good and great:

> His life was gentle; and the elements
> So mixt in him, that Nature might stand up
> And say to all the world, 'This was a man!'

That such a man should come in the end to defeat and death as a result of chance or accident would be shocking rather than truly tragic; for (as we have seen) the downfall of a wholly good man is as unsatisfactory in tragedy as that of a wholly bad man. If we are to identify ourselves with the hero, and feel tragic pity at his fate, he should be shown as a man suffering and brought to ruin by some weakness or flaw in an otherwise good character. This flaw is Aristotle's *hamartia*, which has already been explained (see page 52). In the case of Brutus the *hamartia* grows out of his very virtues: he is himself so good and so honest that he finds it impossible to believe that other people may be different. Thus, for all his greatness of soul, he is a bad judge of character, and a rather stupid politician.

After Caesar's death he accepts Antony's offer of friendship at its face value, and allows him, despite the warnings of Cassius, to make a public speech at Caesar's funeral. With almost incredible foolishness he assures Cassius that all will be well, because he himself will speak first, and give the people full and satisfactory reasons for Caesar's death. And before this he has, on the highest moral grounds, refused to listen to the suggestions of Cassius and the rest of the anti-Caesar party that Antony and others of Caesar's closest supporters should be killed at the same time:

> Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,
> To cut the head off, and then hack the limbs.

Even on the battlefield he sets morality above military need, and condemns an important and useful officer, Lucius Pella, for accepting bribes. Cassius complains that the situation is too dangerous to allow of such strict morality,

In such a time as this it is not meet
That every nice offence should bear his comment—

but he is overruled once again by a Brutus determined to beha correctly at all costs. Thus, while we are moved to pity by Brutu tragic end, we are all the time made aware that it is caused by his ow fault.

If, as I have tried to show, Brutus is an example of the tragic he as described by Aristotle, the whole of *Julius Caesar* is an example of h general ideas on tragedy. Pity and fear are in his opinion the primar tragic emotions, and these are naturally aroused by the terrible even which make up the action of the play. The atmosphere of fear built u by the storm, the visions of the 'ghastly women', the dead rising fro their graves, the strange battle in the clouds 'which drizzled bloo upon the Capitol'—all these are the background to the butchery o Caesar 'Even at the base of Pompey's statue, which all the while ra blood'. Shakespeare does not hesitate to stress the physical horro of the deed by reminding us many times of the wounds and th blood.

Long before Aristotle the Greeks had developed the moral of *themi* and *nemesis* which I have already mentioned. *Themis* means some thing like moral order or natural law, and the man who defied i was punished in the end by natural justice or fate (*nemesis*). The greatest crime a man could commit was the crime of *hubris* (or excessive pride), whereby he set himself up as an equal of the gods. This is the crime of Caesar, and Shakespeare emphasises it in his last speech, where he compares his own strength and constancy with the weakness of ordinary men. Yet within a few seconds he is struck down, and when Antony comes in 'the foremost man of all the world' is no more than a dead body:

O mighty Caesar! does thou lie so low?
Are all thy conquests, glories, triumphs, spoils,
Shrunk to this little measure?

So *hubris* is punished, and the gods take their revenge on the man who dared to set himself up as their equal; or (for those who prefer a more cynical interpretation) the sub-conscious jealousy which we feel towards men greater and more powerful than ourselves is satisfied; and when we exclaim 'How are the mighty fallen!' we do so not with regret, but with scarcely concealed satisfaction. But the beginning of

the fourth act of *Julius Caesar* brings in a reversal of the situation—what Aristotle called *peripeteia*: it is now Brutus and his fellow conspirators who are the hunted, and Caesar's friends who are the hunters,

> And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
> With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
> Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
> Cry Havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.

The last two acts show Brutus's tragic qualities in a magnified form. In difficulty and danger his goodness shines more brightly than ever; on the other hand his weaknesses become more and more clear. His high principles blind him to the realities of the situation, and he shows a foolish disregard for the opinions of Cassius, wasting time and energy in argument as to which of them is the more experienced soldier. Everything depends upon their making the right military decisions before beginning the battle with Octavius and Antony. Cassius wants to remain where they are, so allowing the enemy to exhaust themselves by marching towards them. Brutus wants to advance towards Philippi because (he thinks) they will be able to strengthen their army by enlisting more soldiers on the way. By the force of his personality he overrules the objections of Cassius, and finally has his way The result is the destruction of their army and the death of both leaders. As the body of Brutus is carried off the field by Octavius's men our hearts echo Antony's words, ' This was the noblest Roman of them all '; but our heads remind us that this was also the man who, by his inability to understand that morality must sometimes bend, brought defeat and death to himself and thousands of others.

So far we have been looking at *Julius Caesar* in the light of Aristotle's ideas of tragedy, particularly with reference to Brutus as the tragic protagonist; but the play also illustrates very clearly Hegel's idea that tragedy arises out of a moral conflict of some kind. The conflict in the mind of Brutus is made quite clear in the first two acts and part of the third: his personal friendship for Caesar, conflicts with his belief that Caesar's power is a danger to Roman democracy. Brutus's devotion to the latter is continually emphasised, not only in what others say about him, but also in his own conversation with Cassius:

> If it be aught towards the general good,
> Set Honour in one eye and Death i' the other,
> And I will look on both indifferently.

Thus there is no doubt in Brutus's mind (or in ours as spectators) that he has a moral and political duty to do all he can to end Caesar's personal power. The only way is by his death. But Shakespeare has also emphasised the fact that Caesar loves and trusts Brutus. Brutus can only do his duty as a political leader by breaking the sacred rules of friendship and trust. Being the kind of man he is, Brutus decides in favour of public duty and against personal loyalty. One of the most agonising moments in all tragedy occurs when the dying Caesar recognises his trusted friend as one of his murderers, and cries out the words given to him by tradition and by Plutarch, '*Et tu, Brute!*'

We may also see the moral conflict in terms of private morality versus political morality. I have already suggested that almost every decision Brutus takes proves to be a wrong decision in the sense that it leads to the failure of his own policy. Yet judged by the standards of private morality each decision was right: in this sense it was right to spare Mark Antony; right to allow him to pay due honour to the fallen Caesar; and right to condemn Lucius Pella for abusing his authority and taking bribes. It is often said by moralists that a deed which is in itself evil does not become good merely because it is intended as a means to some good end. It is this principle that Brutus acts upon with such disastrous results.

What makes *Julius Caesar* a tragedy, and a great tragedy, is that it deals with problems of character and morality that belong not only to Shakespeare's time, or Caesar's time, but to the whole of mankind at all times. It is a play of action in every sense of the word, and this illustrates the truth of Aristotle's description of tragedy as 'an imitation of *an action* that is important, entire, and of a proper magnitude'. A great many plays of our own time (and especially some of those written for television) seem to be little more than tedious and not-very-intelligent philosophical discussions. It is appropriate therefore that we should end our examination of *Julius Caesar* with a reminder that the heart of tragedy, and indeed of all drama, is *action*.

Most people would agree that the great period for English drama was the time of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and James I (1603-25). For readers who know little of English history it should be explained that the term Elizabethan is often used rather carelessly to include also the reign of James I, which should correctly be called Jacobean. Historians also talk of the Tudor period (from Henry VII to Elizabeth) and the Stuart period (from James I to Charles II, broken by the Commonwealth and Cromwell's dictatorship). I am using the phrase 'Elizabethan tragedy' to include any tragedies written between about 1550 and 1630.

The tragedies written by Shakespeare were of such importance

that we easily forget the other great tragic dramatists of the time, several of whom, at their best, were not greatly inferior to him. Ben Jonson (see page 184) was chiefly a writer of comedies, and we shall hear more of him later. He did however write one tragedy, *Sejanus*, which is comparable to Shakespeare's Roman plays, and which (though now rarely acted) was distinguished by having Shakespeare as one of the actors in its first production in 1603. There are two other Elizabethan tragic dramatists who must be mentioned, even if we have no time to study them closely. They are Christopher Marlowe and John Webster.

Marlowe was born in 1564 (the same year as Shakespeare) and was killed in rather mysterious circumstances in 1593. During his short life he wrote at least five tragedies and a number of poems and translations. He angered many powerful people by his atheism, yet he seems also to have worked as a secret agent for the government. Four of Marlowe's tragedies can be counted among the great works of the English stage, and they are still acted quite frequently. In *Tamburlaine* (1590) he showed considerable strength and originality both in choice of subject and in his use of blank verse. Tamburlaine (more correctly Timur-leng) was the Scythian shepherd and bandit who built a great empire in Asia in the late Middle Ages, finally conquering much of India and setting up the Mogul dynasty. To use such a subject (rather than one from classical Rome or from British history) was in itself the sign of an original and independent mind. To treat it as Marlowe did with a new and splendid kind of poetry was to bring new life to the English stage. *Tamburlaine* (which consists of two separate plays, Part I and Part II) is full of colourful scenes of the sort we now see in film spectaculars: the Turkish emperor Bajazet kept prisoner in a cage and eventually killing himself by beating his head against the bars; the four Asian kings dragging Tamburlaine's chariot into Babylon; the death of his beloved Zenocrate.

If *Tamburlaine* shows us a man mad for political power, Marlowe's second play, *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*, shows us one equally mad for intellectual power. Its subject is the well-known legend of Faust's bargain with Mephistophilis—a legend which had attracted artists and poets for a thousand years before Goethe's masterpiece. Marlowe's *Faustus* is not a tragic masterpiece—indeed it is badly constructed, and spoiled by some childish comic scenes. Yet it contains much splendid poetry; and the final scene, in which Faustus waits for the striking of midnight and the dreaded arrival of Mephistophilis, is one of the most splendid and terrible in English literature.

Marlowe's best play is certainly *Edward II*, which is comparable to Shakespeare's best historical plays. The story is of a young and

irresponsible king who is destroyed by his own weakness and the treachery of his homosexual favourites. The scene in which Edward is murdered at Berkeley Castle is well known as a tragic and terrible one. Not only in this scene but in the whole of *Edward II* one is reminded of Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Both plays are concerned with the tragic fall of young men with a lot of power which they are not strong enough to carry. It has often been pointed out that all Marlowe's tragedies are about men whose minds are dominated by a single idea: with Tamburlaine it is power; with Faustus it is knowledge; and with Edward II it is homosexual friendship.

John Webster (1580-c1635) had little of Marlowe's poetic strength, but more skill as a dramatist. He wrote a number of comedies in co-operation with other dramatists, but is now chiefly remembered for two tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. The stories of both come from Italian *novelle* (long short stories), and they have much of the dramatic energy and the horror of *Macbeth*. They are thrillers which continue the Senecan tradition in English tragedy, yet they appear very modern when read or seen on the stage.

The field of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy is so wide and so rich that it is impossible to treat it fairly in a few pages. The few dramatists I have chosen would, I think, be accepted by most people as being the most important, but there are others (Tourneur, Middleton and Ford for example) who might equally well have been chosen.

The *Samson Agonistes* of Milton (see page 30) stands quite alone in the history of English drama, being written strictly in the style of a classical Greek tragedy. Milton believed (as he wrote in his preface) that tragedy was, and always had been, ' the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems '. In his puritanical way he thought that the English stage had become immoral, and that Shakespeare and the other great dramatists of his generation had been wrong in not following classical models. He took care to explain that he did not intend *Samson* for the stage: it is a play for reading rather than acting (though in fact it *has* been acted several times and, in my opinion, ought to be done again). The subject comes from the Biblical *Book of Judges*. Milton follows all the ' rules ' of Greek tragedy (including the use of a chorus). The language, as always in Milton, is difficult, but the ideas and the philosophical problems discussed are of great interest, as I have often found (to my surprise) while reading the play with students.

*Samson Agonistes* was written near the end of Milton's life, when he was blind and suffering for the political part he had played in Cromwell's dictatorship, so there was a close parallel between his own condition and that of his hero, Samson. The Restoration (of the monarchy after the death of Cromwell, Charles II having returned

from his French exile in 1660) brought new life to literature and the arts, which had suffered badly under Cromwell's puritanical rule. Theatres, which had been closed for several years, came to life again with the flowering of 'restoration comedy'. Comedy suited the mood of the times better than tragedy, but there were still some successful tragedies, like Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved*, produced in 1682, and John Dryden's *All for Love*, which had appeared in 1678.

Dryden (see page 156) was the greatest literary figure of the time, and *All for Love, or The World well lost* was a tragedy on the same subject as *Antony and Cleopatra*. As a play it is probably better constructed than the latter, but Dryden had little of Shakespeare's poetic power. In his *Essay on Dramatic Poesie* he had argued in favour of 'modern' tragic drama (represented by Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans) against the 'classical', imitation Greek drama then being written in France.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a bad time for tragic drama in England. It was not that the theatres were idle or empty—indeed there were many famous actors and actresses who kept alive the great tragedies of the past. There was however a strange absence of dramatists. It seemed as if the great storm of energy that had created the Elizabethan and restoration drama had left everybody exhausted. Even the romantic revival failed to produce much dramatic writing, though one tragedy ought certainly to be mentioned: *The Cenci*, a verse tragedy by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Shelley is one of the best known of the English romantic poets, but his dramatic work is sometimes forgotten. *The Cenci* (the title is the name of a great Roman family of the sixteenth century) could easily be mistaken for an Elizabethan or Jacobean play. It concerns the cruelty and madness of Francesco Cenci, who hated his children and attempted to commit incest with one of them (Beatrice). In despair Beatrice decides, with the help of her brother and her stepmother, to have Cenci killed. Afterwards, and in spite of much public sympathy, the three of them are condemned to death.

Except for Shelley in *The Cenci*, none of the great writers of the nineteenth century succeeded in producing a great tragic drama for the stage. Tennyson made several attempts, and so did Browning; but these are now mostly forgotten. It is hard to understand why a period so creative in other ways should have been so unproductive in this field: we can only assume that the old style of tragedy was worn out, and a new one was not yet discovered.

Of the tragedies I have mentioned so far in this chapter, the reader may have noticed that most—perhaps nine out of ten—are about important people. In other words the idea of Chaucer's Monk (see

page 52) that tragedy ought to be *de casibus virorum illustrium* (about the downfall of famous men) seems generally to have been accepted without question. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that people began to see that ordinary men and women were interesting, and that tragedy as well as comedy could be found in everyday life. It was chiefly the work of the great Norwegian, Ibsen (1828-1906), that made this clear. English translations of *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* and other plays showed that the theatre could be used for discussing the moral and social problems of real life in a modern setting. Since the end of the First World War there has been a succession of 'realistic' dramatists writing for the English theatre. It was fashionable in the 1950s to speak of 'kitchen-sink drama': I will return to this soon, but let us first look at the chief dramatist of the early part of our century, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950).

As an admirer of Ibsen, and one who did much to make Ibsen known in the English theatre, Shaw believed that drama should be concerned with philosophy, politics and social problems. Both *Man and Superman* and *Back to Methusaleh* are philosophical plays dealing with the 'life force' or 'creative evolution'—ideas which Shaw borrowed from the French philosopher Bergson (1859-1941). *Arms and the Man* is an amusing theatrical debate about pacifism and militarism; *Mrs Warren's Profession* is about prostitution and sexual morality; and *The Doctor's Dilemma* is a serio-comic play about the social responsibility of doctors. *The Apple Cart* (1929) is a political play in which Shaw seems to have foreseen the problems of the 1930s and the rise of the dictatorships. None of Shaw's plays could be called tragedies in the older sense: they deal with serious subjects, but they deal with them in a light-hearted way; there is much philosophical debate and discussion, and generally an absence of real human feeling. This is probably because Shaw himself was a man of intellect rather than a man of feeling—and to write tragic drama one needs to be both! To many people Shaw's most successful work is *Saint Joan* (1924). It is more than a historical 'chronicle play', more than a theatrical debate between nationalism and internationalism or protestantism and catholicism: indeed it is almost, but not quite, a true tragedy.

Although Shaw was an excellent and successful dramatist (if not quite a great one) he may be blamed for starting one fashion which has influenced the English theatre in the years since his death in 1950: I mean the fashion for using drama as propaganda. In the past the purpose of drama has been, in the words of Hamlet, 'to hold the mirror up to nature': to show life as it is, and perhaps in passing to suggest how it might be. Since Shaw some dramatists (and actors and producers and even pop singers) have set themselves up as 'pro-

phets', using the stage as a platform for spreading their own opinions about politics or religion or history. No one (certainly not I) would wish to stop dramatists saying what they like; but I believe many people dislike being preached at (as in church) without having an opportunity to reply. This however is a matter which readers must discuss for themselves: I only mention it here as a possible criticism of Shaw's influence and a possible explanation of the fact that very little tragic drama has been written in England in the twentieth century. Some of the most important was the work of John Galsworthy, whose novels we shall be discussing later (see page 133).

None of Galsworthy's plays perhaps could be called a tragedy in the old sense of the word, but some of them are fine examples of the drama of conflict. *Strife* for example analyses the conflict between the two sides in an industrial dispute (a coal-miners' strike); its subject is by no means out of date. Neither unfortunately is the subject of *Loyalties*, which is about anti-semitism. In *Escape* Galsworthy used what was then (1926) an unusual method of constructing a play: a number of short scenes connected only by the figure of the escaping prisoner who is its chief character. *Escape* is still an impressive play on the stage, as are all Galsworthy's tragic dramas.

Two other writers of the period between the wars must be mentioned in any account of the drama of the time. The first, R. C. Sherriff (1896-1977), has generally been undervalued by critics because he wrote only one play of real importance: this was *Journey's End*, first produced in London in 1928. It would perhaps be misleading to describe *Journey's End* as a 'great' tragedy, but its strong mixture of realism and sentimentality made a great impact on millions of English people who had lived through the First World War. To the sons and daughters of such people it seemed strange and out-dated, its language almost comically so; but for their grandchildren, who think of that far-off war as a part of ancient history, it has a new interest, and has been revived on the stage recently. It can now be seen indeed as one of the most moving and powerful literary works to come out of the Great War.

Charles Morgan (1894-1958) was dramatic critic for *The Times*, and (perhaps for this reason) a rather self-conscious writer. *The Flashing Stream* and *The Burning Glass* had some success in the theatre, and they have a tragic seriousness which makes them worth reading. But they have little ordinary human feeling, and are written in a heavy sort of language which would sound strange on a modern stage, even though neither play is more than thirty years old.

Some of the most important tragic drama of the last fifty years has come from America, and although this book (for reasons of space)

is generally confined to *British* literature (see page 18) it would be impossible to write on modern drama without mentioning Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) and Arthur Miller (born 1915).

O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, like *Desire Under the Elms* and *Beyond the Horizon*, showed that he was a tragic dramatist of great power. These plays, written during the 1920s, were followed by *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a successful attempt to ' translate ' a Greek tragedy, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, into modern terms, with the action set in nineteenth century America. Although O'Neill was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936, his fame declined during the war years and little was heard of him until after his death. Since then his importance has again been recognised. *The Iceman Cometh*, written in 1946, was produced in New York and London during the 1950s; and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) has recently been revived in England with much success. It is now clear that O'Neill must be regarded as one of the greatest tragic dramatists of this century.

Arthur Miller has found, as Ibsen found, that real life and ordinary people can provide all the tragic material a dramatist needs. The subject of *Death of a Salesman* (1947) is one that must concern every human being in the so-called developed nations, namely the moral worthlessness of the lives most of us are forced to lead, and the difficulty of getting ourselves free from greed and dishonesty. Miller had treated a very similar subject in *All My Sons* (1947), but in *The Crucible* (1953) he went back to seventeenth-century America for a terrible story of witch-hunting. *The Crucible* is a powerful tragic drama however one sees it: seen (as Miller seems to have intended) as a parallel for Senator McCarthy's witch-hunt against so-called communists in America about that time, it has the force of a dreadful warning against fanaticism of all kinds.

It will be clear from what I have said of drama in the twentieth century that tragedy in the older sense of the word (tragedy as it was written by Sophocles and Shakespeare) has almost ceased to exist. There have been prose tragedies in the manner of Ibsen, and some poetic drama like James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan* (1922) or the plays of Christopher Fry (born 1907); but there is only one twentieth-century writer who would be recognised by almost everyone as a great tragic poet: I mean of course T. S. Eliot (1888-1965).

*Murder in the Cathedral* was first performed at Canterbury Cathedral in 1935, and it became clear that poetic tragedy was not dead, as so many people had supposed, but only asleep and waiting for the touch of a great poet to reawaken it. Like all great artists, Eliot borrowed largely from the past in order to produce a work that was brilliantly new. People who thought that modern English drama ought to be

like the plays of Shaw or Galsworthy were astonished and delighted. A detailed appreciation of *Murder in the Cathedral* would be impossible in the space of this chapter, but I hope that any readers who do not yet know it will try to read it as soon as possible, in spite of its many difficulties of language. It is worth mentioning perhaps that this is a play which should be read communally—possibly into a tape recorder—if it is to be properly appreciated. The tragic conflict in *Murder in the Cathedral* is between Becket's conscience (which he sees as his duty to God) and his duty to the state (in the person of Henry II). It has been said that Eliot's sympathies are too clearly with Becket, and that the play gives too much importance to his saintliness: I think this may be true, but we have to remember that Eliot was writing a tragedy, not a politico-philosophical essay.

In *The Family Reunion* (1939) Eliot used some of the methods of classical drama in a play with a modern subject and setting. The subject is similar to that of the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, the protagonist Harry being pursued by the Eumenides (or 'Furies') who personify his own guilt for the death of his wife. *The Family Reunion* is an impressive tragic play, but I am not sure whether the strange mixture of modern characters and settings with classical 'rules' is altogether successful. To most people *The Cocktail Party* is a more interesting play, though it can hardly be called a tragedy.

Although today we do not seem to have any single dramatist as important as Shaw or Eliot, the modern English theatre is probably more alive than it has been since the time of Dryden. It is however a theatre of experiment, and nobody seems to have very clear ideas about the purpose of drama, or even whether it has a purpose. Dramatists like John Osborne, John Arden, Harold Pinter, Henry Livings, N. F. Simpson, Arnold Wesker and Tom Stoppard cannot be classified as 'tragic' or 'comic' writers in the old sense. It is probable indeed that tragedy of the Shakespearian or Schillerian type will never be written again: such tragedy, like the classical epic, belongs to the past. This of course is not the same as saying that it is dead. The best Greek tragedies, like the best Elizabethan tragedies, are much more alive than most of the plays written last year or the year before, but this does not mean that modern dramatists ought to imitate them. Indeed there is nothing that modern dramatists *ought* to do, and this is perhaps why English drama in the last fifteen years has been so interesting. We shall return to it in the chapters on comedy and satire.

To answer the question, 'What has happened to tragedy in the twentieth century?' would require a book much longer than this one. I can only answer it here by pointing to two plays which have achieved much success (both popular and critical) during the last few years.

Both of them are by Peter Shaffer (born 1926), and both can be read without much difficulty by anyone with a fair knowledge of English. *Five Finger Exercise* (produced in London in 1958) is a domestic tragedy with five characters: an English middle-class couple, their teenage son and daughter, and a young German who joins the family as the girl's tutor. The play, a study of family life at its worst, combines comic elements with a deeply tragic central theme. It is written and constructed (and this is the point I want to make) in much the same way as Galsworthy might have written it fifty years ago—or even Ibsen, still earlier. There is nothing new or experimental about it, yet it is a most effective tragic play. It is very different from Shaffer's other successful play, *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964). This is a tragedy in the sense that Marlowe understood the word; indeed it has much in common with *Tamburlaine*: many changes of scene, colourful costumes and a subject far away, both in time and place, from ordinary life. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is set in South America in the sixteenth century, and deals with the conquest of the Inca Empire by the Spaniards under the leadership of Pizarro. It is a powerful and tragic play which has been highly successful on the stage. As tragedy *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* is neither better nor worse than *Five Finger Exercise*: what is important is the fact that one dramatist can write, within the space of a few years, two plays so utterly different in style. Whatever Shaffer's own importance in the history of drama may be, his writing must be seen as typical of the free and experimental nature of tragedy in the twentieth century. We have come a long way from tragedy as the Greeks thought of it. Whether or not our tragedy will last as long as their tragedy is a question impossible to answer.