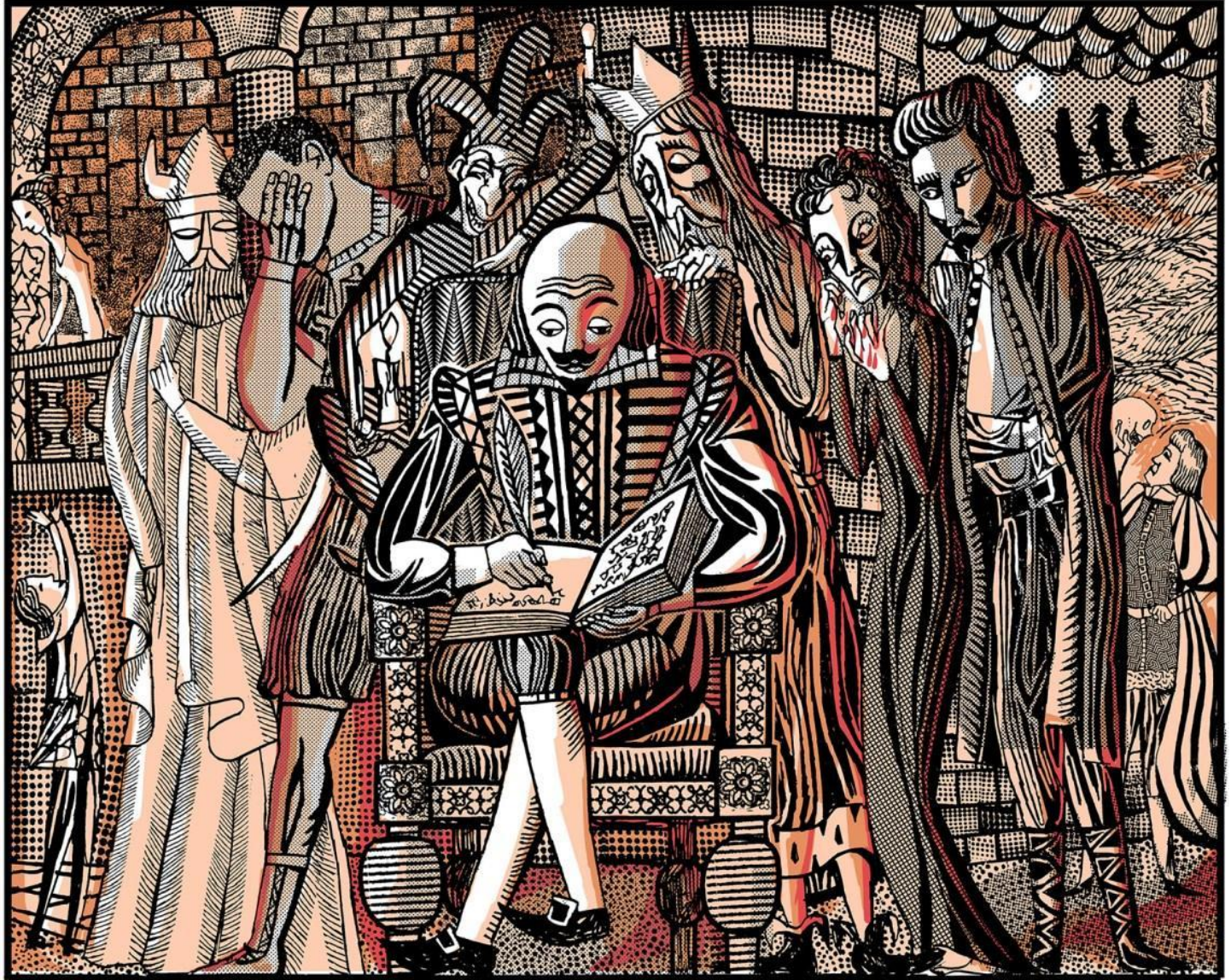


No Comfort

Fintan O'Toole *The New York Review of Books*, June 6, 2024 issue

As we encounter Shakespeare's tragedies it becomes terrifyingly clear that we are not in a moral universe of comeuppances and rewarded virtues.



William Shakespeare with characters from his tragedies; illustration by John Broadley

This essay appears, in somewhat different form, as the introduction to *Shakespeare Is Hard, But So Is Life* (Head of Zeus, 2024).

In his best-selling biography of Elon Musk, Walter Isaacson tries to explain how a man who attempts such “epic feats” can also be “an asshole.” He finds himself seeking help from William Shakespeare: “As Shakespeare teaches us, all heroes have flaws, some tragic, some conquered, and those we cast as villains can be complex.” How better to fill the gap between epic and asshole than with the lesson Shakespeare was apparently trying to teach us when he wrote *Hamlet* and *King Lear*? The only other time the word “tragic” appears in Isaacson’s book is when Musk is regretting his choice of outfit for an audience with the pope: “My suit is tragic.” When tragedy encompasses such trivialities, it’s not so hard to believe that those great plays really are trying to teach us something as trite as the possibility that humans are complex or that powerful people may have some serious defects. Who knew?

Isaacson is not unusual in making such statements about what Shakespeare's tragedies mean: they exist to instruct us, and their main lesson is that everything would be OK if only we could "conquer" our shortcomings. We can read in *The Guardian*, of the Harry Potter novels, that "some of the most admirable adult characters, as in Shakespeare, are also revealed to have a tragic flaw that causes them to hesitate to act, to make foolish errors of judgment, to lie, or even to commit murder." *The New York Times* informs us that "with Marlowe's Doctor Faustus or Shakespeare's Hamlet, their tragic flaws, enacted, became the definition of tragedy. It may be angst (Hamlet), or hubris (Faustus), but it's there and we know, watching, that the ruinous end will be of their own making."

The former British prime minister Boris Johnson, who has supposedly been writing a book about Shakespeare, and who compared himself in the dying days of his benighted regime to Othello beset by malign Iago, claims that "it is the essence of all tragic literature that the hero should be conspicuous, that he should swagger around and that some flaw should lead to a catastrophic reversal and collapse." Also in *The New York Times*, Stephen Marche tells us that "we go to tragedy to watch a man be destroyed. Macbeth must be destroyed for his lust for power, Othello for his jealousy, Antony for his passion, Lear for the incompleteness of his renunciation. They are tragic precisely because their flaws are all too human." In a review of a biography of Andrew Jackson, the president is called a "'Shakespearean tragic hero,' inflexible as Coriolanus, whose tragic flaw was 'his incessant pursuit of virtue in the political realm.'" Maureen Dowd notes that Barack Obama "has read and reread Shakespeare's tragedies" and "does not want his fatal flaw to be that he compromises so much that his ideals get blurred out of recognition."

This stuff is part of the language. Like most clichés, it perpetuates assumptions, not just about Shakespeare but about the world: your ruinous end is of your own making. Tragedies happen not because human beings are dragged between large historical, social, and political forces that are wrenching them in opposite directions, but because individuals are branded from birth with one or another variant of original sin. In seeking to understand ourselves, we can forget the epic and think of the assholes—who receive satisfyingly just deserts. As Johnson put it in 2011, Shakespeare "was, frankly, the poet of the established order" because the troublemakers in his plays "get their comeuppance." The tragically flawed heroes meet the gory deaths their flaws deserve. Alongside "many insights into the human heart," Johnson tells us, Shakespeare provides "such ingenious defences for keeping things as they are, and keeping the ruling party in power."

The most obvious problem with all that is, even if it were true, it would be crushingly dull. Moral tales in which people do bad things because they have wicked instincts and then get their comeuppance are ten a penny. The clichés shrink Shakespeare to the level of Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the author of a three-volume novel of "more than usually revolting sentimentality" who explains that in her book "the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means." If the definition of tragedy lies in the tragic flaw of the protagonist, we are reduced to a monotonous game of matching the shortcoming to the character: Hamlet = angst; Macbeth = ambition; Othello = jealousy; Lear = reckless vanity.

Fortunately, none of this bears even a passing resemblance to the experience of seeing or reading a Shakespeare play. It is terrifyingly clear to us as we encounter these dramas that we are not in a moral universe of comeuppances and rewarded virtue. "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods:/They kill us for their sport," says Gloucester in *King Lear*. Macduff's children are slaughtered. Ophelia is driven to drown herself. At the end of *Othello*, there are two innocent corpses on the stage: Desdemona's and Emilia's. Lear's terrible question over the dead body of Cordelia echoes through these tragedies: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,/And thou no breath at all?" Much of the time in Shakespeare, there is no answer.

There is nothing in Cordelia's or Ophelia's or Desdemona's or Emilia's characters that has led them to extinction. It is simply that in this cruel world, while the bad may indeed end unhappily, so may the good. At

the end of *King Lear*, we have the rather pitiful Albany doing a Miss Prism act: “All friends shall/Taste the wages of their virtue and all foes/The cup of their deservings.” This assurance of just deserts is immediately undercut by one of the most devastating images of absurd injustice, Lear raging at a universe in which his blameless daughter will not take another breath, in this world or the next: “Never, never, never, never, never!”

If the tragedies are supposed to show us the playing out of the innate flaws of their protagonists, *they are not very good*. Does anyone ever come out of the theater thinking that if only Hamlet had been less angsty, nothing would have been rotten in the state of Denmark? If Macbeth is already consumed by a lust for power, why does his wife have to goad him into killing Duncan? If Othello has an innate instinct for psychotic jealousy, why does Iago have to stage such elaborate plots to get him to believe that Desdemona is cheating on him? Lear may indeed be old and foolish, but he was surely not always thus—the shock of his decision at the beginning of the play to divest himself of the kingdom stems from his having ruled successfully for a very long time. (In the traditional story that Shakespeare adapted and that his audience would have known, Lear had reigned for sixty years.)

As for Shakespeare being “the poet of the established order,” it is certainly true that he was extremely adept in his navigation of a treacherous political landscape in which his greatest predecessor, Christopher Marlowe, was most probably murdered by the state and another fellow dramatist Thomas Kyd died after torture. He did so largely by avoiding references to contemporary England and setting his plays either in distant Catholic countries (where of course they do things no good Protestant ruler would countenance) or in the past. His political skill was rewarded. As of May 1603, after James I’s accession to the throne, Shakespeare was an official of the court as Groom of the Chamber. He and his fellow shareholders in the King’s Men (as they were now called) were each issued with four and a half yards of red cloth for the royal livery in which they were allowed to appear on state occasions. It is hard to think of Shakespeare as a liveried servant, but for him that red coat was surely also a suit of armor that protected him from the violence of his surroundings.

The wonder, though, lies in what he did with that position. He took his royal master’s obsessions and made unprecedented dramas out of them. James was interested in witches, so they appear in *Macbeth*. The king was—after the Gunpowder Plot in which Catholic conspirators tried to blow him up, along with his entire court and Parliament—worried about the way Catholic suspects under interrogation gave equivocal answers to avoid incriminating themselves. So the Porter in *Macbeth*, imagining himself as the gatekeeper to Hell, says, “Faith, here’s an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven.” As a Scot, James was anxious to establish the idea of Britain as a political union, with himself as “emperor of the whole island.” So Shakespeare shows in *King Lear* the terrors of a disunited kingdom. James was fascinated by demonic possession, so Shakespeare brushed up on its alleged symptoms in contemporary accounts and has Edgar, in his guise as Poor Tom, enact them on the blasted heath.

But if these plays start with the need of the King’s Man to suck up to his royal patron, they emphatically do not end there. A hack propagandist of the kind that Boris Johnson imagines Shakespeare to be would have shown, in *Macbeth*, that equivocation is just what you might expect from traitorous Catholics. Instead he makes the slipperiness of words and the inability to trust people universal aspects of life under rulers who imagine their power to be absolute. Almost everyone in *Macbeth* plays games with truth and lies, because that’s what you have to do in a murderous polity.

Poor Tom, in *King Lear*, may be there to flatter the sovereign’s desire to see a man who is (or is pretending to be) possessed by demons. But we don’t care about that because his performance becomes a heartbreakingly real enactment of mental distress: “The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale. Hoppedance cries in Tom’s belly for two white herring. Croak not, black angel. I have no food for thee.” What begins with a

brilliant opportunist keeping an eye out for what will appeal to his new master ends as some of the strangest, most searingly painful language ever spoken on the stage.

And even though Shakespeare undoubtedly started *King Lear* as a fable on the dangers of splitting up the kingdom, he lets it run off into the most devastating mockery of all arbitrary political power. Lear tells Gloucester that the “great image of authority” is a cur biting the heels of a beggar. It is perhaps not surprising that someone who thought Lear’s declaration that “a dog’s obeyed in office” is Shakespeare supporting the established order proved to be such a dog in office himself.

So what *does* Shakespeare teach us? Nothing. His tragic theater is not a classroom. It is a fairground wall of death in which the characters are being pushed outward by the centrifugal force of the action but held in place by the friction of the language. It sucks us into its dizzying spin. What makes it particularly vertiginous is the way Shakespeare so often sets our moral impulses against our theatrical interests. Iago in *Othello* is perhaps the strongest example. Plays, for the audience, begin with utter ignorance. We need someone to draw us in, to tell us what is going on. A character who talks to us, who gives us confidential information, can earn our gratitude. Even when that character is, like Iago, telling us how he is going to destroy a good man, we are glad to see him whenever he appears. Within the plot he is a monster. Outside it, talking to us, he is a charming, helpful presence. Drawn between these two conditions, we are not learning something. We are in the dangerous condition of unlearning how we feel and think.

Hamlet talks to us too. He is entertaining, brilliant, sensitive, charismatic, startlingly eloquent—and he has a filial purpose of vengeance that we understand. So what are we to do with his astonishing cruelties—his cold-blooded mockery of the corpse of a man (Polonius) he has just killed by mistake, his mental torturing of Ophelia, his casual dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, announced to us as a fleeting afterthought? How far would the play have to tilt on its axis for Hamlet to be not its hero but its resident demon?

Shakespeare can, when he chooses, turn our attitudes to characters upside down and inside out. In the first act of *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is bold, vigorous, and supremely confident that she can “chastise with the valor of my tongue” a husband whom we already know to be a fearsome warrior. She makes herself “from the crown to the toe top-full/Of direst cruelty!” In the second act she takes charge while her husband is breaking down under the strain of Duncan’s murder—it is Lady Macbeth who returns the daggers to the chamber and smears the sleeping grooms with blood. In the third act she is still a commanding presence, able to deal with the disaster of the royal banquet and dismiss the courtiers when Macbeth is freaked out by Banquo’s ghost.

We then lose sight of her until the fifth act, when she is suddenly almost a ghost herself, a somnambulist reenacting in tormented sleep the moments after the murder. There is no transition, nothing to lead us gradually from the direly cruel and potent murderer to the fragile shell of a person, floating in “this slumbry agitation”—a phrase that almost cancels itself and thus captures her descent to nothingness.

Even as the action of the play continues to hurtle forward, we are thrown back into this gap between the dynamic woman we last saw and the strange creature she is now, in this liminal state between life and death. We have to try to fill that gap for ourselves, but we can’t quite do it because the stage is suddenly filled with drums and flags and Birnam Wood is about to come to Dunsinane and we have no time to think. Nor do we know quite what to feel—should we still despise her for her ruthless malice or give ourselves over to the poignancy of her mental dissolution?

Usually, if a dramatist shows us an act of extreme violence perpetrated by a character, it is a point of no return. After the enactment of butchery there can be no way back to emotional delicacy and poetic grace. Yet Hamlet stabs Polonius to death, calls the dead man a fool and a knave, tells his mother, in one of Shakespeare's most brutal phrases, that "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room," and exits dragging the body along like the carcass of an animal. It makes no sense that even after this shocking display of callousness, Hamlet still gets to be the tender philosopher considering the skull of Yorick. But he does. He is still the "sweet prince."

Lady Macduff's young son is stabbed to death before our eyes by Macbeth's thugs. We watch a child—perhaps the most intelligent, charming, and engaging child ever seen onstage—being slaughtered in front of his mother. Yet fifteen or twenty minutes later we have the psychokiller Macbeth at his most affecting, playing the still, sad music of humanity: "And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle."

Othello wakes the sleeping Desdemona and twice calls her a strumpet. We listen to her heartbreaking plea: "Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight." In most productions, she tries to run away and Othello has to manhandle her back onto the bed. Then he takes a cushion and, as she continues to struggle for life, begins to smother her. But this is not quick. A short, staccato phrase of Othello's, "So, so," suggests that, as she continues to fight him, he either stabs her or pushes the cushion down even more violently on her face. But still Shakespeare prolongs the agony, for her and for us. Emilia appears at the door and gives Othello the news of Rodrigo's murder. All the while Othello is still trying to kill his wife. We hear Desdemona's voice again. Emilia opens the curtains and sees Desdemona dying. She gets two more lines and then expires. As Othello says himself: "I know this act shows horrible and grim."

It is hard to think how Shakespeare could have made it more horrible. Depending on the production, it can take around ten minutes from start to finish. What could we feel except loathing and disgust? And yet Shakespeare forces us also, within just a few more minutes, to feel compassion for "one that loved not wisely, but too well;/...one not easily jealous but, being wrought,/Perplexed in the extreme." It is not just Othello who is perplexed in the extreme. As audiences or as readers, we are left in a no-man's-land where what we feel does not map onto what we have seen, and where extreme ugliness of action alternates with extreme beauty of language.

And all the while that language is unsettling us further. Some of this is accidental: the passage of time has altered meanings, making the effects even stranger and more disconcerting than Shakespeare meant them to be. Words become treacherous because we think we understand them but in fact do not. In the opening scene of *Hamlet* alone, "rivals" means companions and "extravagant" means wandering. In the first scene of *Othello*, "circumstance" means circumlocution, "spinster" means someone who spins wool, "peculiar" means personal, and "owe" means own. We can never be quite sure of the linguistic ground beneath our feet. Especially as we experience these words aurally in the theater, stepping stones turn out to be trip hazards.

This effect may be unintended in itself (Shakespeare cannot have known how the English language would evolve over four centuries), but it merely exaggerates what Shakespeare is doing anyway: simultaneously offering and withholding meaning. One way he does this is with a figure of speech that is peculiar in his own sense, personal to him. A distinctive strand of his writing is his fondness for expressing one concept with two words, joined together by "and." No one has ever made such a humble three-letter word so slippery.

For example, when Hamlet thinks of Fortinbras's army going off to invade Poland, he remarks that the warriors are willing to die "for a fantasy and trick of fame." Laertes warns Ophelia against "the shot and danger of desire." Shakespeare uses this device sixty-six times in *Hamlet*, twenty-eight times in *Othello* ("body and beauty"), eighteen times in *Macbeth* ("sound and fury") and fifteen times in *King Lear* ("the image and horror

of it”). With these conjunctions, every take is a double take. When we hear “and,” we expect the two things being joined together either to be different yet complementary (the day was cold and bright) or obviously the same (Musk is vile and loathsome).

Shakespeare does use such obvious phrasing, but often he gives us conjunctions that are neither quite the same nor quite different. A trick and a fantasy are alike but not exactly. The shot and the danger are closely related but separate concepts, as are sound and fury. Sometimes our brains can adjust fairly easily: “The image and horror” can be put back together as a horrible image. The “shot and danger” is a dangerous shot. But sometimes they can’t. When Hamlet tells the players that the purpose of theater is to show “the very age and body of the time,” we get the overall idea: they should embody the life of their own historical period. But the individual pieces of the phrase don’t cohere. The time does not have a body—it is the thing to be embodied by the actors. The “age of the time” borders on tautology. When Hamlet talks of his father’s tomb opening “his ponderous and marble jaws,” we must work quite hard to get to what is being signified, which is the heavy marble construction of the tomb. That banal little word “and” leaves us in a place somewhere between comprehension and mystery.

Shakespeare also does this with the basic construction of his sentences. As readers or members of an audience, we are hungry for information, and exposition is one of the basic skills of the playwright. But Shakespeare loves to spool out facts like someone gradually feeding out the line of a kite, adjusting to the tug and tension of the words. He leaves us waiting even while we are being informed. A sentence has a subject, a verb, and an object. Shakespeare delights in separating them from one another to the point where they are almost cut adrift. Early in *Hamlet*, Horatio is giving us some important backstory: how Old Hamlet acquired Norwegian lands and how Fortinbras is trying to get them back. He starts simply: “Our last king...” He then takes eight words to get to the verb “was” and then another fifteen words to get to “dared to the combat.” And then we have another fifteen words before we find out that Old Hamlet killed Old Fortinbras in this duel.

Or in the second scene of *Macbeth*, we need to know that Macbeth has triumphed against the rebels on the battlefield. The Captain, bringing the news, tells us that “brave Macbeth...carved out his passage” through the ranks of the enemy. But between “brave Macbeth” and “carved out his passage” there are nineteen words. Lear, in the crucial caprice that catalyzes the tragedy, demands: “Tell me, my daughters...Which of you shall we say doth love us most.” Except what he actually says is:

Tell me, my daughters,
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state,
Which of you shall we say doth love us most.

We have to hang on for the dramatic point. This happens again and again in these plays: the language is used to keep us in states of suspended animation. The propulsive rhythms keep the words moving forward with a relentless energy. (Otherwise, we would lose patience and conclude that Shakespeare is really quite a bad writer.) But the import of the words lags behind. This is Shakespeare’s marvelous kind of syncopation: the meter is regular but the meaning is offbeat.

Frank Kermode, riffing on T.S. Eliot, wrote of how a strange piece of language opens up “the bewildering minute, the moment of dazzled recognition” for which all poetry searches. These plays work toward those bewildering minutes when we both recognize something as profoundly human and are at the same time so dazzled by it that we cannot quite take it in. Some of these moments are elaborately linguistic: Hamlet’s contemplations of whether or not he should continue to exist, Macbeth’s articulation of the ways in which his violence has utterly isolated him from humanity itself. But some are almost wordless. There is Lear’s terrible “Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh!” over the body of his dead daughter and Othello’s “Oh, Oh, Oh!” when he realizes that he has

murdered his wife for no reason. Shakespeare can make his eternal minutes from the most exquisite artifice or from the most primitive of sounds, knowing as he does that when words fail, after all the astounding articulacy we have been experiencing, the failure is itself unfathomably expressive.

None of this has anything to do with moral instruction. Moral destruction may be more like it: creating the “form and pressure” of the times through a great unraveling, in which what we know becomes un-known. If we have to go back to Aristotle’s theories of tragedy to understand what Shakespeare is doing, the place to go is not his idea of the fatal flaw—a concept Aristotle drew from Greek plays that could hardly be more different from Shakespeare’s. It is, rather, to Aristotle’s identification of the emotions that tragedy seeks to draw out of us: pity and terror. In Shakespeare’s tragedies, we have to supply the pity ourselves because there is precious little of it on offer to the people caught up in the violence of arbitrary power. But there is an abundance of terror. “Security,” says one of the witches in *Macbeth*, “is mortals’ chiefest enemy.” To feel secure is to be unprepared for the duplicity of reality. Shakespeare gives us crash courses in every kind of insecurity: physical, emotional, psychological, cognitive, even existential.

Ross, in the same play, explains to the soon to be murdered Lady Macduff:

But cruel are the times when we are traitors
And do not know ourselves; when we hold rumor
From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
But float upon a wild and violent sea...

This could be applied to all these tragedies, in which fear itself cannot be defined or contained. The plays are wild and violent seas on which even the boundaries of terror cannot be charted. If you had to live in one of them, your best course would be to listen to what a messenger tells Lady Macduff: “If you will take a homely man’s advice,/Be not found here; hence with your little ones.”

These violent wildernesses are not created by the flaws in Shakespeare’s characters. The jumpy guards on the battlements at Elsinore as *Hamlet* begins are not watching out for ghosts: war is already coming, as Young Fortinbras threatens to invade if the lands Old Hamlet seized from Norway are not returned. Before Macbeth even meets the witches, Scotland is beset by civil war and invasion. The play proper opens with the question: “What bloody man is that?” The still-bleeding Captain delivers gory descriptions of a man being cut in two and of his severed head being displayed on the battlements. Macbeth and Banquo are said “to bathe in reeking wounds.” As the action of *Othello* is beginning, messages are already arriving in Venice with news of the coming Turkish assault on Cyprus—war has begun. The only one of the four protagonists in the tragedies who can be said to unleash large-scale violence by his own actions is Lear—but even then, the speed with which his kingdom falls apart after his abdication makes us wonder whether it would not have descended into chaos anyway if he had merely died of old age.

What we encounter, then, is nothing so comforting as imperfect men causing trouble that will be banished by their deserved deaths. It is men who embody the hurly-burly that, contrary to the predictions of the witches at the start of *Macbeth*, is never going to be “done.” Hamlet and Macbeth, Othello and Lear are distinguished in these dramas by the illusion that they can determine events by their own actions. They have, they believe, the power to say what will happen next. But no amount of power can ever be great enough in an irrational world. The universe does not follow orders. That, as Miss Prism might have said, is what Tragedy means.

It is nice to imagine a time when these plays could be loved for their poetry alone. It would be a delight to think that their pleasure would be that they speak, as Horatio has it at the end of *Hamlet*, to an “unknowing

world/How these things came about.” But there is not yet a world that does not know the violence of these plays or the fury with which reality responds to all attempts to force it to obey one man’s will. There is no place in history where “Be not found here” is not good advice for millions of vulnerable people. We return to the tragedies not in search of behavioral education but because the wilder the terror Shakespeare unleashes, the deeper is the pity and the greater the wonder that, even in the howling tempest, we can still hear the voices of broken individuals so amazingly articulated. They do not, when they speak, reduce the frightfulness. They allow us, rather, in those bewildering moments, to be equal to it.