Small Latine and Lesse Greeke?
Shakespeare and the Classical Tradition*

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A Note on Methodology

This paper takes a wholly different line from T. W. Baldwin's two massive volumes dedicated to William Shakespere's Small Latine & Lesse Greeke. He is concerned with the precise question of what Shakespere's education at grammar school in Stratford may have taught him, and what traces the poet's reading of authors like Terence and Ovid may have left in his plays. That is of course a great work of scholarship. The debt to Terence and Ovid is particularly noteworthy, at least for anyone attentive to echoes of the European tradition, since Dante had already recommended Ovid's Metamorphoses to the budding poet in the De vulgari eloquentia, and it has been said that if Virgil had written dramas he would have written them like Terence.

These present remarks however are interested, not in exact reminiscence of one author by another, but in pattern and convergence. If the Greeks deserve the epithet "classical," it is because, thanks to

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* This is a version of a lecture first presented at the conference on "Classical Traditions in Shakespeare and the Renaissance" organized with characteristic energy and dedication by Professor Thomas Clayton at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, April 1982.
1 Urbana 1944.
3 Reuben A. Brower, Hero and Saint: Shakespeare and the Graeco-Roman Heroic Tradition (New York and Oxford 1971), has already emphasized that it is a question of kinship of imagination between the ancient authors and the modern.
their chronological priority, they defined certain classes. They established the boundaries within which imagination and creativity will tend to move among artists of the western family. Those who come after them, and even those who do not in fact know too much about them, will find that they bump against the same mental furniture as they grope in the half-dark about the mind's room. This is what is meant by saying that the Greeks, and their successors the Romans, are the architects — and even at times the interior designers — of our particular version of civilization.

What Shakespeare may or may not have read is not therefore my first enquiry. He was not a scholar in any usual sense, according to Baldwin. No, he was an artistic genius of the first magnitude, and therefore by methods not wholly those of discursive reason he knew things which scholars overlook. My first point will be that he knew something about dramatic poetry which was also known to Aristotle.

Shakespeare and Aristotle's Poetics

To pronounce in the same breath the names of Aristotle and Shakespeare is to be made aware of the riches of the European mind, and yet to despair of ever finding a central focus or principle in that mind beyond coincidence of time and space. Aristotle — it seems — represents one extreme: that of order, rule, exclusion of the irrelevant, insistence on category and genre. Shakespeare — it seems — stands at the opposite pole, bounteous and ungovernable by rule as Nature herself, laughing at categories and crammed definitions. Can these two great geniuses be brought into some sort of relationship other than the most distant of passing nods?

Those who would say "No" to this question have powerful academic allies. Bernard Weinberg has traced at great length the melancholy tale of critical reaction to the great masterpieces of Italian literature. It is not a wholly uniform history, and sometimes individual critics display unexpected flashes of insight. But the general tendency of such criticism is towards the establishment of a poetic calculus, so that a properly programmed computer, had one been available at the time, could have told immediately whether a given work of literature conformed to the Aristotelian / Horatian model, and have awarded it a passing or failing grade on that score alone. Weinberg remarks towards the end of his second volume that the rules there laid down by Angelo Ingegneri were in all essentials the rules which in the next

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century critics would be applying to French tragedy.\textsuperscript{6} We know what trouble was caused for Tasso by the late sixteenth-century devotees of Aristotle: and what problems would be raised by appeals to the same authority for the wayward genius of Corneille and the passionate brilliance of Racine.

It is as we pass under review the names of the great writers who fell foul of the classicizing critics — Dante and Ariosto as well as Tasso in Italy; in France, the masters of tragedy just mentioned, for works like Le Cid and Phèdre — that we are faced with a dilemma. We may indeed conclude, grasping one horn of that beast, that Aristotle was someone whose principles were so rooted in a particular Greek soil as not to survive transplanting. This is to postulate a radical discontinuity between the Greco-Roman world and our own which great geniuses like Dante, or in our own age Thomas Mann and James Joyce, belie. But, suppose we seize the other horn. Suppose we dare to suggest that the critics were more concerned with taking the intellect’s revenge on art than with understanding what Aristotle was really trying to say: and that, if we find out what Aristotle was trying to say, his poetics could also have accommodated Shakespeare. It is for this second position that I will be arguing here.

Aristotle’s Literary Criticism

Aristotle was the son of a doctor, imprinted by biology, called by Plato the “mind” of his school, and yet one who left Plato’s school after the death of its founder because he objected to the turning of philosophy into mathematics. His universal genius did not respect the “arts versus science” compartmentalizations to which in our time we have grown accustomed. He wrote two elliptical volumes on the art of poetry, of which we now only possess the first. These were notes intended to guide the lecturer, who would flesh them out with explanation and example delivered \textit{viva voce}. The more popular dialogues, in which Aristotle expounded his theories in a less crabbed style, using what Cicero calls “a golden stream of eloquence,” have vanished.

What we have left to work with in this context is the famous book \textit{Περὶ Ποιητικῆς}, devoted largely to epic and tragedy. Aristotle has an organic theory, as befits a doctor’s son, of the relation between these two genres. Epic is the ancestor of tragedy, and the reason why Homer is the best of the epic poets is precisely that he is \textit{δραματικός},

an adjective which it is suggested Aristotle may have coined. Drama in fact is superior to epic, since it contains all that epic can possibly offer, and yet attains its effect in a more concentrated way, and with a greater attention to unity.

The first point of contact between Aristotle and Shakespeare is now obvious. Paradoxically, and completely contradicting the easy notion that he was a backward-looking conservative, Aristotle asserts that the modern drama and not the long-established and prestige-laden epic is the highest kind of serious literature. Not surprisingly, he himself was in trouble with Renaissance critics for this lapse. The reason for drama’s superiority is that it makes a powerful and concentrated emotional impact, and it does that by not dragging out its story to undue length. Could the man of Stagira then, if he had witnessed one of the tragedies of the Jacobean period, and been presented, by contrast, with something like Ronsard’s Franciade, have been entirely unsympathetic to the man of Stratford? It is indeed now a commonplace, since the work of Wolfgang Clemen, that, whatever Shakespeare’s inattention to the so-called dramatic unities (of which it will be remembered Aristotle says very little), he did attend to that overarching unity which is conferred by repetition of image and metaphor. The classical Athenian playwrights, of whom Aristotle is thinking when he advances his revolutionary theory of the primacy of drama, did exactly the same thing.

This is, I suppose, what Aristotle means when, in another famous passage of the Poetics, he defines the qualifications which the poet needs. He has been talking about poetic language, which must be an appropriate combination of the compound and the “gloss,” a topic to which we will return later. But the most important thing for a poet is to be μεταφορικός. This is probably another of those tools of literary criticism now taken for granted which were first forged by Aristotle. “For this quality alone cannot be taken from someone else, and is a sign of natural genius. To use metaphor well is to be able to see what is alike” (Poetics 1459 a 6). When we think of that extraordinary power enjoyed by Shakespeare of seeing the similar in the apparently disparate, can we argue that Aristotle’s criterion for

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7 I. Düring, Aristoteles: Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens (Heidelberg 1966), p. 169, note 259. In fairness to Professor Düring however I should add that he and I disagree toto caelo over the general interpretation of the Poetics.

8 This is the argument of the final chapter (26).


10 Cf. De Subl. 40. 3 on Euripides, Her. 1245: τῇ πλάσει ἀναλογοῦν. The imagery is repeated from v. 631 (where see Wilamowitz’s note) and recurs at v. 1424.
great poetry is irrelevant or dated; or that Shakespeare fails to meet its demands?

A word is in order about Aristotle’s doctrine of poetic idiom. In the Poetics, he finds it difficult to sympathize with the idea that poetry can be written in everyday language, and he quotes with satisfaction a line of Aeschylus using the verb “eat” which was, he asserts, vastly improved when Euripides substituted for “eats” a word meaning “banquets upon” (1458 b 23-24). Although it displays a fondness for the “gloss,” the difficult and typically poetic word, this very example offers a most interesting case of Aristotle’s indifference to conventional literary stereotypes, since already as early as Aristophanes’ Frogs in the late fifth century it is Aeschylus who is distinguished by his grandiose vocabulary, and Euripides who is attacked for being too down to earth, too slick and modern. However in the Rhetoric, probably written after the Poetics, Aristotle has a somewhat different view. He speaks here of the orator’s need to persuade by using the art which conceals art. He compares the voice of the actor Theodorus with that of his rivals, and remarks that Theodorus has the advantage of appearing to use his own voice, while the others seem to have borrowed someone else’s. So with vocabulary: the orator will best cheat his hearers if he selects and combines his words from the common way of talking. “This is exactly what Euripides ‘does’ (the Greek is ποιεῖ as in ‘poetry’), and what he was the first to exemplify” (Rhetoric III. 1404 b 21-25).

Already in the Poetics Aristotle had said that Euripides, even if he does not involve his chorus as he should in the economy of his plays, is nevertheless “the most tragic of the poets” (1453 a 29-30). “Tragic” here seems to mean something like “tear-jerking,” or, less pejoratively, “heart-rending” (Lucas). In the Rhetoric, Aristotle had clearly come to understand something of that extraordinary mixture of the prosaic and the lyrical which contributed to Euripides’ success in capturing the sympathies of his audience.

At the same time, it must be recognized that Euripides was an artist far in advance of his age. His few victories in the state competitions in his lifetime, by contrast with his enormous posthumous popularity, are evidence of this. It is not surprising then that Aristotle himself should have had to struggle towards a theory of tragic effect which was at variance with his classical prejudice in favor of the rational, harmonious, elevated and symmetrical. He believed that the greatest of Greek dramas was Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex,11 that relentless search for self-destruction which is itself a powerful critique of the

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notion of classical self-sufficiency. At the side of this belief was growing up another realization, that the most characteristic effect of tragedy in fact was exploited not by Sophocles, but by Euripides, and that in the famous definition of tragedy as the arouser of pity and terror, it was ultimately the pity of it which would make the most lasting impression.

Aristotelian Criticism after Aristotle
Some kind of poetic then might be deduced from Aristotle which would find room at the top for a dramatic, concentrated, metaphorically unified, "pitiful" poetry, drawing on the "customary dialect" for its effects. This is not such an anodyne conclusion as it sounds when it is remembered that the Poetics has been thought to have had so little influence on subsequent generations that elaborate theories of its disappearance have been advanced to explain why this work of the great philosopher passed so unregarded. The truth is that Aristotle wrote in a period of rapid change. The Greek world was about to be measurelessly altered by Aristotle's own pupil, Alexander the Great. The post-classical poetry, at which Aristotle had aimed only by innuendo, seemed disconnected from an Aristotelian poetic increasingly interpreted by modern critics as normative, negative, apodictic, backward-looking. But the best readers of Aristotle's meaning were in the first instance those who belonged to his school, the so-called Peripatetics.

The existence of a Peripatetic theory of history, which means in effect a Peripatetic theory of formal prose narrative, has been disputed. A literary historian is nevertheless compelled to take account of the prescriptions which may be gleaned from post-Aristotelian authors about how this kind of artistic prose should be written. The most important aspect of their theory was its pursuit of what the Greek rhetoricians call ἐναργεῖα and their Latin counterparts evidentia. A scene had to be visualized so powerfully by the writer that his description of it would work equally powerfully on the reader. This is indeed a theory which owes something both to the Poetics and to the second book of the Rhetoric, and perhaps also to the treatise on history written by Aristotle's pupil and successor as head of the

12 Lucas gives a succinct statement: "Introduction," p. x. See also footnote 19 below.
13 F.g. by B. L. Ullman, "History and Tragedy," Trans. Am. Phil. Ass. 73 (1942), pp. 25-53, an article which makes many acute observations, but fails to note that the theoretical arguments about their métier by hellenistic historians are all conducted in Aristotelian terms. This may be seen from the materials assembled by P. Scheller, De hellenistica historiae conscribendae arte (Leipzig 1911).
Lyceum, Theophrastus. What seems to have happened is that, stung by the master’s criticisms of history in the ninth chapter of the Poetics as less universal than poetry, because it is too wrapped up with the particular, later historians determined to make their work as close to tragedy as possible, even though their medium was prose. When we read some of the arguments in favor of vivid and dramatic presentation by these historians and followers of the Peripatos, we seem to hear once again a criticism which could also do justice to Shakespeare’s incredible power of concrete visualization, placed at the service of overwhelming tragic effect. The Greeks certainly appreciated such poetry.

We know that they appreciated it because these are the terms in which the ancient post-Aristotelian commentators — the scholiasts (“schoolmen”) as they are called — praise the work of Homer. Curiously — at least, curiously to our modern and inflexible notions of literary decorum — both the Iliad and the Odyssey were regarded by the scholiasts as tragedies, though the Aristotelian notion was not lost that Homer was the founder of comedy too (a point to be taken up later). The supremely important criterion of poetic art for these commentators lay in its emotional appeal, and even the famous theory of catharsis has not entirely vanished. It was conceded that the emotions evoked by poetic art might at times be contradictory.

The scholiasts both regard Homer’s stories as historically true, and yet speak of the poet as the free manipulator of his material. His technique is distinguished by the alternation of suspense and rest (what Formalist critics in our day have called “staircase structure”), and by a non-linear presentation. At one point we read: “The poet commonly turns his story topsy-turvy by bending back, and stuffs the beginning into the middle. Experts say that in longer narrative poems to proceed in orderly fashion from the beginning to the actual tale makes for hard listening, while to start from something more exciting gives greater pleasure and tension.”

Homer, in the analyses of these critics, makes great use of anticipation and reminiscence, summing up in this way the whole of the story of Troy while only telling part of it. This at least is pure Aristotelian doctrine, drawn from the allegedly “lost” Poetics (1459 a 30 ff.). He found a particular successor here in Euripides. His use of connected imagery for this purpose was understood.


Renaissance critics made a great fuss about "verisimilitude," which became a handy stick with which to beat any author whose imagination soared. The scholiasts show that, in the ancient world, verisimilitude meant simply "persuasiveness." Homer is continually lauded for his ability to select just those details in a description which will convince his listener that he must have been there ("on the scene," as we might say). The poet's brevity is also commended, by which is meant his ability to say much in little. Brevity is aided by his use of multi-sensory metaphors, and of personifications which lend "emphasis" (i.e. concreteness: the noun is derived from φαινω, not from φημι) to what is said so briefly.

"Fantasy" is another important term in this ancient criticism, of varying nuance. It can be used of the purely imaginative flight, as when Zeus holds his hand protectively over Troy (ll. IX. 420). But it can also be the vehicle which transports the listener vividly into a given scene, so that in places the scholiasts speak of Homer as himself a witness of what he describes. By a happy choice of expression, sometimes of the simplest kind, the poet's own fantasy 16 is enabled in its turn to grip that of his audience.

Homer's narrative is especially vivid because it shows such closeness to painting. When the mourning Priam veils himself (ll. XXIV. 163), it is an anticipation of the veiled Agamemnon of the artist Timanthes. "Graphic" (i.e. "painterly") is a frequent term of praise.

But the poet's mastery of acoustic effects, of onomatopoeia and rhythm, is equally brilliant. All these devices contribute to the impressiveness and pathos of his story.

Homer avoids the banal, according to these ancient critics, but that does not mean that he writes in some monotonously "sublime" style. The very fact that ancient commentators discovered in him the models of all three of the later genera dicendi 17 shows how little they believed that the epic poet at least should confine himself to some artificial elevation. Briseis' lament over Patroclus (ll. XIX. 282 ff.) is said, for example, to belong to the middle style. The episode is impressive in its narrative parts, and "graphic," while working on our feelings of pity.

Yet such impressiveness is combined in the poems with variety. Here, the similes are particularly noted. They have a psychological as well as pictorial element.

16 The word is picked up both by Dante and Michelangelo: all' alta fantasia qui mancò posa, Paradiso 33. 142; Onde l'affetuosa fantasia / che l'arte mi fece idol e monarca, Oxford Book of Italian Verse, p. 177, no. viii, 5-6, from a sonnet to Vasari written in 1554.

17 E.g. Quintilian XII. 10. 64; Aul. Gell. VII. 14. 7.
Aristotle had praised Homer for his knowledge of when it was suitable to write in his own person.\(^\text{18}\) Such personal writing had to be restricted, since that was not the kind of imitation proper to epic. The scholiasts find Homer engaged in his own poetry rather more often than Aristotle would have liked. Sometimes, they believe, he is showing covert sympathy with Greek fortunes. Sometimes he is alluding to his own art. His allegedly Greek sympathies allow him nevertheless to admit the faults of Greek heroes such as Achilles. He is not a poet of black and white.

Aristotelian Criticism and Shakespeare

The classical, Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian tradition of ancient criticism proves then on closer acquaintance not to be the monolithic, normative, unyielding set of prescriptions which it became in sixteenth-century Italy, at least when expounded by its worst interpreters. Their view of Aristotle entails all sorts of awkward consequences for ancient literary history. The "vanishing body" theory has already been mentioned, by which Aristotle's papers are said to have been dispersed at his death and only recovered after three hundred or even seven hundred years.\(^\text{19}\) If in fact the Poetics had not disappeared, then according to another view it can have had no influence on the way in which subsequent poetry was written. But that is also implausible, since the very scholiasts or commentators on Homer's epic poetry we have been summarizing seem to be familiar with Aristotelian principles, while the desperate efforts of the historians to acquire literary respectability both imply an awareness of Aristotle's censures on historical writing, and try to answer those censures according to an Aristotelian program. What really seems to have happened is that the history of literary criticism both during and after Aristotle's day has been, to use a crude term, a mess. Aristotle was misunderstood. The poetic experiments of the post-classical ("hellenistic") period in Greek literature have been both divorced from the doctrines of the Poetics and dismissed as in some way "decadent." Roman literary criticism has been distorted, notably in the case of Horace's Ars Poetica, where scholars have been reduced to lamenting that Virgil's closest friend says nothing which could illumine the student of Virgil's masterpiece. In fact, Horace not only says much to illumine Virgil. He also illumines Shakespeare.

We can see this in his doctrine of the genres (AP 86 ff.). Although

\(^{18}\) Poetics 1460 a 5-8.

as a good teacher he lays down the theoretical importance of the differences between them, he is interested at the practical level in the occasional approximations which they show at moments of heightened tension. A comic character may express violent emotion, and so verge towards the tragic. In seeking to touch the heart, a tragic hero may resort to the simple language of everyday, abandoning the cumbersome and bombastic. A scholiast reminds us that here Horace is influenced by the Alexandrian poet Callimachus. Horace chooses his examples from Euripides, but he certainly also is close to Virgil's Hecuba\textsuperscript{20} at this point, as he is to the Shakespeare who is able to extract a world of tragic pity from the monosyllable. What a disservice to the history of our civilization is performed by the scholar who, in discussing this passage of Horace, fails to mention Lear with the body of Cordelia in his arms!

Finally, after centuries of uncomprehended tradition, the \textit{De Sublimitate} of "Longinus" has unaccountably been heralded as some sort of breakthrough, when in fact its chief theories, such as that concerning vividness, are inherited, and its novelty, the insistence on \textit{ekplexis} or "knockout" as the principal criterion of great literature, is a dangerous simplification. Where, for example, would such a criterion leave that master of the European tradition, and a master diligently studied by Shakespeare, Ovid?

There is a great work of clearing away to be done in our time by the classical scholar who wishes to unite the divergent streams of ancient literary achievement and ancient literary criticism. When the dust has settled, we will be able to see that Shakespeare is a lot less anti-classical than has appeared. Some of the lines which this reconciliation will take are already visible: the recognition, for example, that drama is the greatest form of serious literature; the ability to extract the maximum in heart-rending emotion from simple language, valued by Aristotle in Euripides; the power of vivid imagination, auditory as well as visual; the gift for metaphor. But Aristotle has even more to contribute to the most modern analysis of Shakespearean art, and in explaining this I will redeem my promise to return to the Aristotelian theory that Homer is the fountainhead not only of tragedy but also of comedy.

\textbf{Aristotle, Shakespeare and the Comic}

What must be remembered here is that Aristotle did not merely attribute to Homer the \textit{Iliad} and the \textit{Odyssey}. He regards as homeric

\textsuperscript{20} Cf. R. G. Austin's note on \textit{Aen.} II. 523.
also the now lost work Margites, "The Madman." Margites, the hero of this burlesque epic, which looks as if it was written in a variety of meters, was a Simple Simon of his day, "a jack of all trades, and a master of none." On his wedding night, for example, he proved unwilling to rise to the occasion because he was afraid, as he explained to his frustrated bride, that she would snitch on him to her mother. Eventually that resourceful girl dreamed up the story that she was suffering from a terrible malady affecting a certain area which could only be cured by energetic measures. When the situation was explained to him in these terms, Margites agreed out of humanitarian sympathy that perhaps he and she could go ahead.

This silly story savors of the music-hall humor of my youth, the kind of folksy anecdote with which studies of British working-class life are permeated. What is amazing is that the allegedly conservative Aristotle was quite prepared to accept this sort of poem as homeric, and he did so because he was far more aware of the popular roots of great literature than has been allowed by critics. It is the same Aristotle who apparently declares that tragedy originated from the satyr play (1449 a 20), a rough and clownish performance more akin to the Roman Atellan farce than to anything we normally think of as Greek. But then we remember that, even in the classical period, it was normal for the three plays in tragic vein to be rounded off by a fourth in the competitions at Athens. And this fourth play was usually a satyr play. What Aristotle seems to be saying (following a hint dropped by his master) about both the epic and tragic artist is that he is likely to show an unexpected kinship with the comic. This may be attested at quite unexpected places in the undeniably classical tradition.

The Comic in Racine and Virgil

Who, for example, would expect to find a debt to the comic in so purely "classical" an author as Racine? If we take a tragedy like Britannicus, for example, where the arch-villain Néron forces Junie to reject her uncomprehending lover in order to save his life, while

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21 Poetics 1148 b 36-40. Interestingly, Callimachus agreed with Aristotle: fr. 397 Pf.
24 He is of course here the true disciple of his teacher Plato, master of the serio-comic form, avid student of the mimes of Sophron, and proponent of the theory that the "scientific" poet will know how to write both comedy and tragedy (Symposium 223 D).
he himself is concealed behind a screen on stage to make sure that she says exactly what she is supposed to, do we not have a framework typical of Molière's comedy, even of the Commedia dell'arte? And does not the whole structure of French classical tragedy, in which the hero or heroine is always attended by a largely characterless confident(e), whose purpose is to give the main character an excuse to pour out his feelings in a long and often exquisitely musical monologue, smack both of Greek New Comedy and of Euripides. It was after all Euripides who for Aristotle represented both the avant-garde and the "most tragic" of poetry.

If the ancient tradition made room for comedy at the side of tragedy in the same author, and even in the same work (a feature particularly striking, for example, in Euripides' Bacchae), we can understand why Servius remarks at the opening of his commentary on the fourth book of the Aeneid, paene comicus stilus est: nec mirum, ubi de amore tractatur. This quotation has been the source of some puzzlement for the orthodox classical scholar. But Servius is not talking about "a laugh a line." He is talking about the stilus, the mode of expression and even, I think, the structure of this book of Virgil. It is indeed a French seventeenth-century tragedy before its time. Dido relieves her feelings in long monologues with her sister Anna, and later in head-on confrontation with her lover Aeneas, and then again in talking with her old nurse (a particularly "comic" touch). But to deny the relationship of this sort of mise en scène to New Comedy, which is all that Servius means, is to ignore a fundamental feature of the whole ancient tradition.

Scholarly interpretation of the Aeneid in our time has slowly come to recognize the profound irresolutions which echo throughout this work, once thought to be simply and ultimately a loud blast on an Augustan propaganda trumpet. The whole final book, for example, is shot through with ambiguity, not least in the characterization of Jupiter, at once the sublime father of the gods and guarantor of Rome's future greatness, and the heartless seducer of Turnus' sister Juturna ("Le Roi s'amuse"). And book XII, with its reminiscences of Dido, is hardly unique in the poem.

What must be realized is that the popular origins of the dramatic tradition, shared by both the ancient writers and Shakespeare, carry with them the stamp of a certain way of looking at the world. The

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25 E. Fraenkel, Elementi plautini in Plauto (Florence 1960), p. 203, note 2, emphasizes the debt of modern tragic technique not to Seneca, but to Plautus and above all to Terence, here the heirs of the Greek Middle Comedy, which flourished in the century following Euripides. See also T. W. Baldwin, op. cit. (above, note 1), I, pp. 641-42.
ordinary peasant, in his relentless struggle both with nature and his human enemies, cannot afford to take any one defeat as the final word, and still less any one triumph. Life must go on, and in the family and clan the circle of birth, maturity, death, birth has no finality. It is the lesson of the seasons, and of the crops and animals about the farm. Hard knocks are part of the game of life, and their recipient must grin and bear them.

What this means is that the prime genre is always comic, the conviction and assertion that things are never as bad or as good as they look, and ultimately the assertion of life. Tragedy, with its "reduced laughter," is a creation of special circumstances, and of an urban, sophisticated, reflective culture. It appears at certain periods, and then vanishes. But the comic persists, and it is from the comic (what Aristotle calls τὸ σατυρικὸν) that tragedy develops, and to which it returns at dissolution.

This can certainly be seen to be true in the ancient world, where tragedy is a creation of the Athenian fifth century, and in the France of Louis XIV, where the tragic moment ended when Racine, who had already written Les Plaideurs, turned towards history and operatic libretti, as carnival fare for the Court, in collaboration with Boileau. It is true of Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, where the absurd antics in the middle of the play go right back to the knockabout of medieval mystery plays, and find a parallel in some of the farce of Dante's Inferno, itself part of a Commedia.

The Comic in Shakespeare's Tragedies

But it is supremely true of Shakespeare, and accounts for those strange plays which end the canon, and which show the issue of the tragic genius in the comic. But even in earlier plays Robert Weimann finds elements of folk-drama combined with an artistic profundity which raises such "topsy-turvy patter," as he calls it, beyond the trivial to the level of social and metaphysical criticism. Lear speaks:

What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes.
Look with thine ears. See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? (IV. 6. 149-155)

Weimann compares a fool’s speech from a Weston-sub-Edge play:

I met a bark and he dogged at me. I went to the stick and cut a hedge, gave him a rallier over the yud jud killed him round stout stiff and bold from Lancashire I came, if Doctor hasn’t done his part John Finney wins the game.

He comments:

Quite surely it is a coincidence that Shakespeare uses the same image of the barking dog. Most probably it is also coincidence that the mad Lear uses precisely this image to show the absurdity of the prevailing system of law. But the decisive similarity is that in Shakespeare too there echoes the theme of topsy-turvydom. Even his highly developed art draws on the dramatic possibilities of inversion.

(Weimann, p. 85: my translation)

Weimann goes on to point out that the motif of the unfair distribution of goods is basic to the play. “So distribution should undo excess,” says Gloucester, “and each man have enough.” Shakespeare’s tragedy too therefore is in debt to, or at least converges towards, a “satyr” play. Part of the comic consciousness of ambiguity is shown by the use of puns, a device certainly enjoyed by the classical tradition since the days of Homer, and used to powerful effect, for example, in the puns on Helen’s name in Aeschylus’ Agamemnon. Weimann compares the two following passages (pp. 242-43). The first is from a play in the Dodsley collection:

Lust. My lady is amorous, and full of favour.
Inclination. (aside) I may say to you she hath an ill-favoured savour.
Lust. What sayest thou?
Inclination. I say she is loving and of gentle behaviour.

The second is from Richard III:

Gloucester. (Aside) So wise so young, they say, do never live long.
Prince. What say you, uncle?
Gloucester. I say, without characters, fame lives long.
(Aside) Thus, like the formal vice, Iniquity, I moralize two meanings in one word.

(III. 1. 79-83)

It is possible to add to Weimann a scene from A. F. Grazzini’s comedy La Strega, from about 1550. The hero Taddeo, a modern version of the miles gloriosus, has entered in a home-made uniform. His helmet in particular is slyly mocked by his valet Farfanicchio:
Taddeo: You’re a rascal. Why do you say the plume of a jennet? Perhaps I ought to be a horse?
Far.: (aside) All you need to do is to eat straw [la paglia].
Taddeo: What are you saying?
Far.: I say that you are truly a man of battle [da battaglia].

This technique may be traced back to a scene in Aristophanes’ Frogs (645 ff.), where Dionysus and Xanthias are both being flogged. The one who feels no pain will be the real god. Naturally, in the comedy, both characters react with shouts and protests to the blows they receive but, anxious not to betray their identities, they keep interpreting their cries as quite the opposite of what they appear to be. This illustrates the profound comic level from which this kind of word-play comes.

The Door in Macbeth and Tolstoy’s War and Peace
One of the most obvious links which connects comedy and tragedy in Shakespeare is the porter-scene from Macbeth (Act II, scene 3). Ancient comedy in particular normally took place in the street, before a couple of house doors. But ancient tragedy made use of an odd device called the ekkykleno, whereby a revolving platform could show to the audience what had just been going on inside the house, as when Clytemnestra appears at the end of the Agamemnon with the dead bodies of her husband and his mistress, Cassandra. This phenomenon of showing and concealing, a feature of the most primitive art forms, most familiar perhaps from the continual popping up and disappearing of the puppets in a Punch and Judy show, has been investigated by O. M. Freudenberg.

The banging at the door therefore by Macduff and Lennox in Macbeth, and the accompanying protestations of the porter, are both comic, finding a parallel in the play of Aristophanes just mentioned, when Dionysus and Xanthias arrive at the door of Heracles and then at that of Hades, and tragic, since what enters through those doors is Death. Tolstoy makes powerful use of the age-old image:

He dreamt that he was lying in the room he really was in, but that

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28 Poetika Syuzheta i Zhanra (Leningrad 1936), passim.
29 Which is “comic” and “tragic” ultimately of course because it springs from an as yet undifferentiated consciousness. Here the original ambivalence is resolved in different ways because Aristophanes is concerned with the comic theme of resurrection, while Tolstoy is removing Prince Andrei from the warm and exciting world of the living. Shakespeare maintains the primitive ambiguity.
he was quite well and unwounded. Many various indifferent and insignificant people appeared before him. . . . Gradually, unnoticed, all these persons began to disappear and a single question, that of the closed door, superseded all else. He rose and went to the door to bolt and lock it. . . . He was seized by an agonizing fear. And that fear was the fear of death. It stood behind the closed door. . . .

After a fearful struggle by Prince Andrei to keep the door closed:

Once again it pushed from outside. His last superhuman efforts were vain and both halves of the door noiselessly opened. It entered, and it was death, and Prince Andrei died.30

In the play, Macduff says to the comic Porter:

Is thy master stirring?

And answers his own question:

Our knocking has awaked him; here he comes.

Macbeth then leads Macduff to another door, behind which lies the murdered corpse of Duncan. After a moment, Macduff enters with the news that the king is dead. His language is that of "breaking and entering":

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!
Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence
The life o' the building!

Three doors have been entered, that of the castle, that of the bedchamber, that of the king's own wounded body. By this, private space has been made public. The climactic sequence is religiously evocative, and a Roman Catholic would say that it ends with the discovery that the Blessed Sacrament is missing from its Tabernacle.

Aristotle would have said that Shakespeare was μετασωφορικός, able to see similarity in difference. He would not have been surprised that Shakespeare should draw his images from the deepest wells of folk-memory, since Greek tragedy, notably in Aeschylus, but also in the archaising Euripides, had done the same.

The Leap into Another Dimension

Aristotle, we noted, was oriented towards biology, and it is from a biological work of his that we may derive another principle which

elucidates both the classical poetic and Shakespeare. In the *De Generatione Animalium* (768 a 27-28) Aristotle speaks of έκστασις είς τάντικέίμενα, "organic change into opposites," which he sees as a universal rule of life. The reader will recall the many changes (μεταβολαί) which he says tragedy had to undergo before it attained its own nature (*Poetics* 1449 a 14), and this in the passage where he has been speaking of tragedy's popular origins. Significantly, Weimann comes31 to the same conclusion about Shakespeare. Starting from an analysis of Shakespeare's characteristic use of anachronism, which forces the spectator to live in two contradictory worlds at once, as when the Porter in Macbeth's castle in Inverness is simultaneously abreast both of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and the bumper harvest of 1606, he generalizes this observation into a principle governing the poet's entire method of composition. So character is set against character, and each against tendencies within him or herself: reality and appearance contrast, truth and falsehood. Already Thomas Dekker had demanded now tears and now smiles from his spectators. It is an old principle, inherited from sources as diverse as the Morality play and even the agonistic style of forensic oratory with its arguments pro and con, going right back to the Greek Sophistic movement (Antipho). The *agon* is already found in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. It recurs in the debates of which Euripides is so fond, and of course forms a notable part of the Greek comic tradition, for example in Epicharmus' *Land and Sea* and *Male and Female Logic*, as well as in Aristophanes' *Clouds* and *Frogs*. At another level, Corinna wrote a poem about two contending mountains.32

But this polar technique is also inherited from the most classical period of Greek art, as we are informed by the Elder Pliny. In his famous chapters on the history of Greek painting and sculpture, Pliny describes a portrait by Parrhasius33 of the Athenian *demos*, "fickle, passionate, unjust, changeable, yet exorable, compassionate and pitiful, boastful, proud and humble, bold and cowardly, in a word, everything at once." Need we look further than Euripides' Medea to find a feminine and tragic counterpart to this painting? Contrast is indeed a basic feature of what has been called the "pathetic" or emotional style. Who does not remember from the *Iliad* (VI. 399 ff.) the parting of Hector and Andromache, where the counterpoint of

32 Page, PMG 654.
life and death, war and peace, feminine and masculine, adult and baby, evokes from Andromache "laughter and tears" (v. 484), exactly what Dekker wanted from his audience?

These contrasts are also Aristotelian, since what else are pity and terror, the prime effects of tragedy according to the famous definition given by the Poetics (1449 b 27), except contradictory emotions? Pity makes us feel for the other, and terror for ourselves. They are not of course exploited by the tragic writer for their own sake, since it is from their ultimate fusion that a larger comprehension and growth emerges. In its oldest form, this fusion may be triggered by the unexpected intrusion of the deus ex machina, here akin both to Punch and to Christ in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, as the Disciples were debating the story of his Resurrection. It is this which resolves the conflict in so many tragedies of Euripides (it is another proof of his archaizing tendency), the sudden lifting of the actors' conflicts into a new dimension of religious and prophetic explanation. Shakespeare normally ends with some sort of resolution, as when Fortinbras arrives from a more normal world at the end of Hamlet. Life goes on, a line is drawn under the past, provision is made for the future. But even in a smaller way this principle may be seen at work in individual touches in the plays.

Timanthes' Sacrifice of Iphigenia

Here, another analogy may be drawn with classical Greek painting. One of the most famous masterpieces of the late fifth or early fourth century was the Sacrifice of Iphigenia by Timanthes. The daughter of Agamemnon\(^{34}\) was shown before the altar at which she was to be sacrificed to placate the anger of Artemis. Among the onlookers was Calchas, the priest, perhaps reflecting that this was the will of the gods, and not therefore concerned in a direct and personal way. Ulysses was there, himself a reluctant warrior, more humanly involved. Menelaus watched. Was this not his niece, and was he not showing himself willing to sacrifice innocence for the sake of recovering an adulterous wife? There was evidently a crescendo of emotion, ranging from the regretfulness of the priest to the mixed emotions of the uncle. Last of all among the bystanders was Agamemnon, Iphigenia's own father, commander-in-chief of the assembled Greek forces. With what agony could he give the nod for the butchery to commence? How could the painter adequately crown his rising scale of involvement and sympathy? Timanthes solved his problem by a masterstroke, which made his painting celebrated throughout antiquity. His Aga-

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\(^{34}\) Pliny, Nat. Hist. XXXV. 73: Cicero, Orator 22. 74.
memnon had turned away, and muffled his face in grief. Every spectator could supply the missing features to his own specification, and every spectator was therefore satisfied.

_Et tu, Brute_

This leap into a new dimension, which suddenly releases a tension constructed by the artist, explains why in Shakespeare's _Julius Caesar_, for example, at the moment of his death, Caesar speaks in Latin: _et tu, Brute_. One of the lessons of the play is that history is larger than people. At the human level, Brutus can kill the individual Caesar. But at the level of destiny, "Caesar" as a symbol of an inevitable evolution in the government of Rome cannot be killed, which is what Brutus finds out when the ghost of Caesar promises to meet him at Philippi. The last words of the play are to be spoken by another Caesar, Octavian. When Caesar the politician dies therefore, Caesar the historical symbol of Rome as it had been known for centuries takes over, and Shakespeare indicates this by making his character leap into Latin. Suddenly, even in the moment of his triumph, we are aware of the hopelessness of Brutus' cause. Timanthes would have saluted the brilliant simplicity of the artistic means which secured this end.35

_The Fool's Triumph: Antony and Cleopatra_

Something similar may be observed in _Antony and Cleopatra_. At the opening of the play, Philo notes with contempt that Antony has become a clown, enslaved to a gipsy: "The triple pillar of the world transform'd / Into a strumpet's fool." Antony for his part, as he makes his first appearance, is only too willing to accept this diagnosis of his condition. "Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / of the ranged empire fall." After the defeat, this is the state of affairs which Cleopatra most dreads:

_Saucy lictors_
Will catch at us like _strumpets_ and scald rimmers
Ballad us out of tune: the quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels; Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness

35 The analysis is developed by Eisenstein, _op. cit._, III, p. 63. It is a good illustration of what may be called "vertical time," time which is superimposed on the present rather than awaited in a linear development.
I'the posture of a whore.  

Her way out is to commit suicide (i.e. to test the verdict of time, which in the earlier play seemed to have decided in favor of Julius Caesar). Shakespeare makes her receive the asp which is to poison her from "a clown," who engages with the queen in the most ancient of comic banter about death and womankind before he sets down his basket. Cleopatra now dresses in her royal finery for the last time. Her pathetic pretence suddenly acquires nobility, for now she is assuming her role with full awareness of what its mythologem entails. It is Caesar, puritanically hostile to the comedy inherent in imperial pretensions, who is now to be fooled, metamorphosed into the typically carnival animal of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> . . . poor venomous fool  
> Be angry and despatch. O couldst thou speak,  
> That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass  
> Unpolicied!

And the comment of the guard who discovers the death is: "Caesar's beguil'd."

Shakespeare has used the imagery of the topsy-turvy world of the fool and the clown to throw doubt upon the solemn realities of coolly calculated power. The entry of the clown with the basket of figs and the serpent — both potent and popular symbols of sexuality and death — suddenly shows Cleopatra how to outfool Octavius Caesar after all. Weimann had already pointed out the verbal reminiscence:

> . . . for his biting is immortal; those that do die of it do seldom or never recover.

> Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have  
> *Immortal* longings in me...  

The great speech picks up the clown's word. The clown's remarks in fact are the only piece of prose we have in the whole fifth act of the play, and the only prose since act III, when Eros told Enobarbus that, with the arrest of Lepidus, conflict between Caesar and Antony was now inevitable. This is the leap into a new dimension, aided by the use of the common dialect, which Aristotle's *Rhetoric* detected in Euripides, and which Shakespeare shares therefore with classical technique. A mediocre imagination might have sought to let Cleopatra die with dignity by muting or repudiating her chequered past. Shakespeare gives her clowning fresh status, a mythical aura of heroic

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martyrdom and exaltation which exploits to the full all the tragi-comedy of what it means to be a queen.

T. S. Eliot has pointed out\(^{38}\) that every work of genius modifies the tradition to which it is added. There has been a failure on the part of classical scholarship to see the truth of this argument. An orthodoxy has filled the histories of Latin and Greek literature which passes for received and obvious, when in reality it is based on all sorts of uncritically made assumptions about what literature is or should be. The height of absurdity has been reached when, on the basis of this unscientific and unexamined orthodoxy, approval has been denied to authors whose classical credentials were in fact impeccable. An amusing corollary of this has been demonstrated in recent years. As archaeology throws up texts such as those of Menander's *Dyscolus* or the new fragment of the elegies of Virgil's friend, Gallus, the accepted attitude has become a sneer or a yawn. Menander's reputation has allegedly suffered by the rediscovery of his play; Gallus turns out to have been no great loss. The explanation is that the existing canon of classics has been accepted as great only by force of tradition. When something comes along which demands a re-assessment of the tradition, it is met, because we misunderstand that tradition, with incomprehension and rejection. But of course if Ovid had been lost and just now rediscovered, he too would be an author whose brilliant reputation was belied by his emerging achievements.

The remedy for this situation is dialogue. Shakespeare read the classics he knew with the heart, mind and intuition of transcendent genius. In this sense the poets are the best interpreters of their predecessors, something which Alexandria, with its ideal of the scholar / poet, knew well enough. And the poets who implicitly in their works make these interpretations continue an unbroken tradition, which is still worthy of being called "classical." Shakespeare is not a carbon-copy of any Greco-Roman author, any more than any Greco-Roman author is a carbon-copy of another. But as the master of dramatic form, of contrast, metaphor, of the serio-comic, of the resources of plain language, he could have found an appreciative audience in antiquity.

When Aristotle walked with his pupil Alexander in the royal palace at Pella, the mold of European history was being set in their conversations for the next thousand and more than thousand years, for

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Scipio, for Caesar, for Constantine, for Charlemagne, for the Christian Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and his pupil, Dante. This is ultimately what the classical tradition is about, and from this company, from that royal palace, shall we exclude Shakespeare?

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