

## From Orestes to Hamlet

Iván Nyusztay, *Myth, Telos, Identity: The Tragic Schema in Greek and Shakespearean Drama* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002)

In the large body of scholarship devoted to the study of Shakespeare's classical sources, a relatively small but distinguished segment deals with the direct or indirect influence of Attic tragedy on Shakespeare's dramatic art. In spite of or even in accordance with the firmly established and widely accepted tenet of Senecan influence, scholars never cease to surprise us with new theories and findings about possible parallels between the tragedies of Shakespeare and those of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides. The scope of such research may range from a philologically oriented critical reevaluation of Shakespeare's reading to theoretical surveys of structural similarities, often within one and the same study as even a brief look into Emrys Jones's magisterial *The Origins of Shakespeare* will demonstrate. Given the curious neglect of Attic drama in Elizabethan (and, in general, early modern English) literature (e.g. no English translation of Aeschylus was published before 1777), the prevalence of this critical trend might at first seem strange. Yet there are several reasons why the questions and doubts raised by such studies should

persist, and one of these – if not the chief one – may be found in the discrepancy between the evaluation of tragedy in general, and that of Shakespearean tragedy in particular, in the early modern critical treatises. Puttenham, Sidney, and others all assign high status and significant moral value to the genre in the traditional hierarchy of kinds only to point out that the contemporary, i.e. the English practice of tragedy is far from satisfactory – a dual tendency that will eventually reach its climax in Milton's preface to *Samson Agonistes* where the poet follows the "three tragic poets unequalled yet by any" and at the same time attempts to "vindicate tragedy from the small esteem, or rather infamy, which in the account of many it undergoes at this day." Both the attribution of a moral end to tragedy, and the "small esteem" of contemporary tragic practice are age-old critical commonplaces dating from late antiquity, but while different variations of the former have continued to crop up in literary criticism even up to this day, with the obvious advantage of hindsight, today's critics would not readily subscribe to the wholesale condemnation of late 16th and 17th century tragedies. Already in Jonson's famous commendatory poem "thund'ring Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles" are called to life again together with the Roman tragedians "to hear thy [Shakespeare's] buskin tread / And shake a

stage." Vindicating Shakespearean tragedy from the small esteem that was originally allotted to common "Play-makers" (Sidney) is thus present in the reception history at a very early stage; moreover, in the quoted case it is precisely by reference to the great Attic tragedians that this vindication is performed. Jonson's poem is only one example of the relatively early elevation of the Bard to the rank of the ancient classics: such contemporary responses had certainly laid a solid foundation for later scholarly endeavours drawing parallels between, or comparing, Shakespearean and Greek tragedy; besides that, they may also have accelerated the rehabilitation of other Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights.

Iván Nyusztay's *Myth, Telos, Identity* is one of the most recent contributions to the tradition initiated by Jonson: the neatly designed paperback volume was published in 2002 in Rodopi's "Studies in comparative literature" series (No. 39). The coordination of the three (rather "marked") words in the title may at first seem enigmatic; however, one possible context for their interpretation is provided in the book's subtitle, *The Tragic Schema in Greek and Shakespearean Drama*. Indeed, it is Nyusztay's objective to expose with the help of these concepts the "metahistorical prevalence of the tragic" (13), that is, the fundamental similarity of the tragic experience in the two great ep-

ochs of drama. Lest the elaboration on the different tragic *schemata* should remind us of traditional genre theories (and structuralist enterprises), Nyusztay is careful to point out several times that he would like to avoid the fallacy of generalization (or totalization) so characteristic of these branches of literary criticism. The author's purpose is rather the refinement of the existing conception of tragedy, and with his adopted method, the so-called architectonic survey of Greek and Shakespearean texts he sets out to draw a significant distinction between "pure tragedy" and "melodrama." It is Nyusztay's contention, furthermore, that this distinction is substantiated by the revision of those traditional approaches to the genre that, from Aristotle to the present day, have promoted interpretations of tragedy inextricably linked to some system of ethics. The argument of *Myth, Telos, Identity*, therefore, is at least as much concerned with the interpretation of concrete instances of the tragic in the dramas of the Greek tragedians and Shakespeare as with a general critique of mainstream theories of tragedy. Both tasks are arduous: the Shakespearean corpus is large and diverse, while all that remained from the Greek dramatists is extremely difficult, not to mention the bewildering variety of moral philosophy and literary criticism (often muddled together in one and the same work as, e.g. in the case of

so many early modern critics) the conscientious researcher has to wade through. Such projects usually take long years, and, as Nyusztay hinted in the "Acknowledgements" section, this book, too, was in the making for quite some time. So much the better for the readers, one might add, since the choices the author had to make, the inevitable compromises he was compelled to effect on the available material are the result of a long gestation period: one is confronted, in short, with the close scrutiny of a careful selection of plays and theories.

The book contains seven chapters, preceded by an introduction explaining the author's purpose and outlining the theoretical background, and followed by an epilogue summarizing the main argument, and a short appendix on *Richard III*. Whereas in the initial two chapters ("Modes of the Tragic in Greek Drama," "Modes of the Tragic in Shakespearean Drama") Nyusztay deals with Greek and Shakespearean tragedy separately, from Chapter III ("Character and Identity") on he adopts a perspective that accommodates both variants of the genre. It is in these comparative discussions that some of the most important concepts of traditional drama criticism are investigated in the logical sequence of the argumentation. The concepts which, according to Nyusztay, underlie the structural similarity of Greek and Shakespearean

tragedies, i.e. myth, fate, *telos*, etc., are thus problematized on a higher level in the further sections making Nyusztay's line of reasoning more philosophical than literary-critical, and proceeding from a systematic critique of character criticism to more complex problems of dramatic action. The narrative is rather thickly woven, Nyusztay's style is strict, but his constant anticipations and frequent recapitulations of the argument facilitate the reading of this otherwise difficult book. *Myth, Telos, Identity* is not for the common reader. The sometimes painstakingly meticulous commentary of the actual plays and the often contentious reflections on the works of several thinkers from Aristotle to Derrida presuppose an audience at least moderately versed in Greek and English literature, and deeply interested in philosophy.

Within the confined scope of this review it is not possible to give a full account of all the aspects and possible applications of the book's wide-ranging argumentation; however, a concise summary of some of the main points may be attempted. Thus, already at the very beginning of the book Nyusztay insists that "[t]he rootedness of tragedy in myth renders attempts at the moralization of the analysed modes [of the tragic] questionable" (6). He then proceeds to amplify this claim in the first two chapters by a close reading of a handful of dramas inquiring into the

function of myth in the formation of the tragic experience. Whether it be the mythological system of the Greeks or Christian theology, myth, according to Nyusztay, is the backdrop against which tragic experience is formed; it is in the context of myth that a differentiated teleology, i.e. a distinction between the orientation of the hero, and the mechanistic workings of fate (which may or may not coincide with divine will), a subjective and an objective *telos*, may be conceived of. It is also myth that renders the hero's ethical course futile; in the author's own words: "[t]he schizophrenic state of the tragic hero is the consequence of being confronted with evil in myth and being endowed with the ability to reflect on it in the ethical schema" (22). Thus, the tragic schema is the "reflected schema of myth," and in a purely tragic schema the hero's reflection entails the acknowledgment of necessary failure, whereas in melodrama a premature reconciliation of subjective and objective *telos* renders such an acknowledgment unnecessary (23). Pure tragedy, therefore, is characterized by "reciprocated evil," or "indelible defilement," or "tragic error," or "unyielding pride" (42), concepts that are also present (in modified form) in Shakespearean tragedies, and generally defy moralized interpretation.

Having clarified the most important tragic schemata in Greek and Shake-

spearean tragedies, and having pointed out that in both "the modes of the tragic are intrinsically bound to the representatives of fate" (62) Nyusztay proceeds in Chapter III ("Character and Identity") to a systematic critique of character. Arguing against theories binding character with fate (e.g. Hegel's or Schelling's views) the author introduces the notion of "dividedness" in character (65–67), and offers the categories of "nature" and "role" to account for it (70). These concepts help Nyusztay prove that "the identity of a character in a tragedy is not a given preformed, constant quality" (76); the acquisition of identity is "[t]he recognition of the hero's real nature through the intermediation of role-play" (74). Then in Chapter IV ("On the Threshold of the Tragic: The Teleological Foundations of Greek and Shakespearean Tragedy") follows a detailed reflection on the originally Aristotelian concept of *telos*, and the special differential teleology according to presence or absence of which the plots of pure tragedies or melodramas may be fashioned, respectively. The generic differentiation of pure tragedy and melodrama is continued from yet another perspective in Chapter V ("From Character to Self") where Nyusztay defines "tragic identity" through the reading of Ricoeur's and McIntyre's formulation of "narrative identity" and Tengelyi's concept of "spontaneous sense formations." The

account of the acquisition of tragic identity is here about the movement from character to self with the intermediate reflective stage of recognition. “Whenever the initial self is not discarded as in *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *King Lear*, but on the contrary, asserted in its ‘uninterrupted continuity’ . . . as in the case of Orestes in the *Eumenides* or of Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, we feel the generic irreconcilability of the two forms of recognition” (128) – in short, we are dealing with melodrama.

As it has probably become clear by now, Nyusztay’s project of disentangling ethics from drama criticism is not simply a historical critique of poetics and philosophy, but is also based on the close observation of the dramatic texts themselves. Indeed, *Myth, Telos, Identity* does not shortsightedly discard moralized interpretations altogether, the ethical schema is always present as one possible – if sometimes ineffective – problem solving strategy. The futility of an ethical orientation (on the part of the dramatic characters as well as the readers) is further exemplified in the last two chapters where Nyusztay at first provides a catalogue of certain important forms and configurations of tragic (and, occasionally, comic) action, with special emphasis on how it is sometimes problematized by the lack or the counterfeit of action (Chapter VI, “Forms of Action and Passivity”), only to be followed by the reflection on a

peculiar mode of compensating for inaction, that of speech acts (Chapter VII, “Forms of Inaction: Speech Acts”). Unsurprisingly enough, it is Hamlet whose actions are thematized in this final chapter – whether they be “physical” or “speech” acts –, and the analysis of the tragedy’s two important scenes shows that the key concepts of Nyusztay’s analysis (fate, identity, ethos) are represented in probably the most complex form in this Shakespearean tragedy. The book, therefore, ends on a “homecoming” to Shakespeare, more precisely, to Hamlet, the hero whose “internal form of alterity” so characteristic of tragic selfhood, and so “inaccessible to ethics” (172) is possibly the most intriguing among all such representations.

The foregoing summary was but a short and partial outline of Nyusztay’s main argument, but even from such a sketchy account it becomes apparent that *Myth, Telos, Identity* is the register of a serious attempt to occupy a critical position from which two radically different dramatic practices may be safely compared. It derives from the complexity of the author’s approach that the book’s conclusions are manifold, and address relevant issues in different disciplines from philology through literary criticism to philosophy. For the present reviewer the subtle investigations of the “ethical fallacy” were the most enjoyable parts, while Nyusztay’s

handling of the received traditions seemed sometimes problematic. A little bit more “background” and “context” would certainly have proved useful (if only to indicate what will be disregarded) especially concerning the complex interaction of tragedies with other “nobler genres” both in 5th century B.C. Athens and the London of the early 1600s. It is of course perfectly possible to interpret the Greek tragedians without reference to Pindar, or to read Shakespeare without consideration of the Spenserians, but this should not discourage the scholar from trying to contextualize the sometimes highly traditional material. In a like manner, at certain points of the discussion reference to early-modern poetical treatises may have proved rewarding, as these works tend to raise issues that may easily be related to Nyusztay’s concerns. On a different note, one could point out that in view of the meticulous, and often original interpretations of actual dramas, a separate chapter devoted to the famous heroines (Phaedra, Medea, Lady Macbeth, etc) would have been most welcome. It is only regrettable, furthermore, that there is much inconsistency in the Greek transliterations, and that this is also characteristic of the Greek references (i.e. all quotations are taken from the Loeb editions, except for Homer; in the definition of the Greek words the standard Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon is not referred to;

in quoting Aristotle’s *Poetics* traditional chapter numbers are initially used to be replaced later by the more handy Bekker numbers, etc). It should have been the work of a careful copy editor to prevent these minor, but sometimes disturbing errors from appearing in print.

With these minor reservations *Myth, Telos, Identity* is a highly recommendable book for those who wish to look beyond traditional literary-critical narratives of “classical origins.” It is especially welcome that Nyusztay’s interpretations are based on direct knowledge of the Greek sources, and that his critical and philosophical remarks are based on a historical interpretation of his sources. While such an approach cannot be said to attract wide audiences, the relevant questions and problems raised in *Myth, Telos, Identity* remind us that it should not be dismissed all too easily.

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