Tragedy in Transition
Tragedy in Transition

Edited by
Sarah Annes Brown and
Catherine Silverstone
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Notes on Contributors

Sarah Annes Brown is Chair of the Department of English, Communication, Film, and Media at Anglia Ruskin University. In addition to numerous short pieces on various aspects of classical reception, her publications include *The Metamorphosis of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes* (1999), *Ovid: Myth and Metamorphosis* (2005), and an edition of Nicholas Rowe’s translation of *Lucan’s Pharsalia* (1997, with Charles Martindale). She is currently writing a book about transhistoricism.


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Peter Hollindale was Reader in English and Educational Studies at the University of York, where he taught one of the earliest undergraduate courses on children’s literature, and also specialized in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Among his publications are two editions of Peter Pan, one of the prose texts and the other of Peter Pan and Other Plays (1995), and a study of critical terminology for children’s literature, Signs of Childness in Children’s Books (1997). He is currently retired.

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Rowland Wymer is Chair and Head of English, Communication, Film, and Media at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. His publications include Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama (1986), Webster and Ford (1995), and Derek Jarman (2005), as well as a number of coedited collections of essays, including Neo-Historicism (2000) and The Accession of James I: Historical and Cultural Consequences (2006). He is currently working on a book titled Science, Religion, and Science Fiction.

Preface

This volume was inspired by the experience of teaching and examining the compulsory Tragedy paper at the University of Cambridge. Over the space of three hours students are required to show substantial knowledge of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, but are also encouraged to explore tragedies from any other period, as well as to investigate the possibilities for tragedy in nonliterary mediums such as music, film, and sculpture.

Preparing students for this paper made me reflect on what I think is a growing gulf between the ways in which academics and students experience the study of English literature. Over the course of their degree, students at Cambridge and elsewhere have to demonstrate a good understanding of all periods of English literature. However, if they progress to graduate study they are swiftly required to specialize, almost always focusing on a topic which is confined to a particular historical period. Indeed, this periodization is reflected in nearly every aspect of the subject’s organization: undergraduate modules, MA programmes, conferences, and job vacancies. Although historiographically grounded research of this nature has a clear value, it is, I think, a pity that institutional structures and related cultural pressures have discouraged transhistorical work in English studies. In fact, transhistorical research is encouraged far less than interdisciplinary research. Although literary scholars are encouraged to (try to) come to terms with science, art, theology, and philosophy we are made to feel anxious about attempting to engage with the literature of different centuries simultaneously.

Thus the prospect of teaching Cambridge’s Tragedy paper fills some academics with alarm, as its brief is explicitly transhistorical. However, for
others it represents a liberation from the confines of period boundaries and a chance to extend one’s own knowledge. When giving lectures on the Tragedy paper I would encourage the students not to compartmentalize different periods, answering one question on Euripides, one on Shakespeare, and one on Ibsen, say. Instead, I suggested, they would probably produce better work if they explored parallels and contrasts between different eras within each individual question: for example, compare Euripides’ Hippolytus not with the Bacchae or Medea but with Seneca’s Phaedra and Sarah Kane’s Phaedra’s Love.

The same rule can be applied to the work of established academics, and this wish to encourage transhistorical research (and support transhistorical teaching) influenced the way this volume’s essays were commissioned. As well as approaching scholars with an established reputation in the field of classical reception, such as Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, we targeted writers with a strong association with a particular literary period, but encouraged them to leave their comfort zone and incorporate their reading and teaching interests into their chapters. Thus Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, whose previous published work has focused on Victorian literature, here writes on the theme of tragedy and disgust in Aeschylus and Shakespeare as well as in Dickens and Hardy. And Ewan Fernie, who is strongly associated with Shakespeare, extends his reach back to Sophocles and forwards to Cormac McCarthy.

It would have been easier to commission a collection of essays which covered ostensibly similar ground but within a simpler, chronological progression, offering discrete pieces on Greek, Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance tragedy, and so on. But that approach would almost certainly not have pushed the boundaries of our understanding of tragedy in the same way Tragedy in Transition does. As well as foregrounding the transhistorical, the organization of this volume has been designed to open up new territory as well as to shed new light on established debates within tragedy. We are prepared to read about exile (Wallace) and the gods (Hall) when we open a book about tragedy but probably won’t expect chapters on childhood (Hollindale), homosexuality (Hennegan) and, particularly, science fiction (Wymer).

In her Afterword Catherine Silverstone draws attention to the similarities between tragedy itself and the criticism it elicits. Just as tragedy tests and expands its own and society’s boundaries, so we hope that this volume extends the ways literary criticism and cultural theory can illuminate this most powerful and pervasive form.

S. B.
April 2007
Introduction: Tragedy in Transition

Sarah Annes Brown

The persistence of tragedy may in part be ascribed to its capacity to be adapted and transformed across periods and cultures, indeed to be enriched by such displacement. This robustness perhaps signals a particular bond between the workings of tragedy and the dynamic of transition. Tragedy seems to have been most potent at moments of cultural or political upheaval, reflecting and anticipating change. As Robert Douglas-Fairhurst puts it, “tragedy and transition are natural soulmates” (76). One of the most famous Greek tragedies, The Eumenides, for example, explicitly dramatizes a paradigm shift from a pre-Hellenic world of savage instinct to an apparently more civilized world whose tutelary deity is Apollo. Seen through a Hegelian lens, tragedy represents a process of cultural evolution through dialectic and, ultimately, synthesis.

In other ways, too, tragedy may be associated with a dynamic of transition. As well as being mimetic of cultural change, tragedy presses and probes less tangible boundaries within a culture. Some of these are explored in depth in this volume – the boundary separating human and non-human, for example, or the uneasily shifting line which demarcates disgust from desire. One of Greek tragedy’s most potent emblems is the pharmakon, ambiguously pivoting between poison and cure.¹ And at its Greek inception tragedy’s form instantiated this engagement with transition through the use of the Chorus, a group which (at least some of the time) seems to inhabit a liminal space between stage and real worlds. This sense of metatheater is still present in modern tragedy but is more usually produced by other means – particularly, as we shall see, through obtrusive intertextual interventions.
It is ironic or at least reflexive that tragedy, a genre so concerned with testing, threatening, and proving different kinds of boundaries, has itself been subjected to so much analysis in an attempt to define its own parameters. How many boxes – fatal flaw, noble hero, serious tone, unhappy ending – need to be ticked in order for us to reach a diagnosis of tragedy? Some indication of the problematic nature of this process is given if we remember that the *Oresteia* actually has a happy ending, and my own preference is for a liberally inclusive definition of tragedy – if we are asking the question of a text “is this a tragedy?” then my view is that the answer is probably “yes.”

Perhaps because of its preoccupation with the transitional in various manifestations, tragedy operates with special charge when it is dislocated or changed – in other words, when it is actually in transition. Peter Burian well describes the effect created by works inhabiting a genre which is so embedded in its own traditions, which is “forever repeating but never the same”:

> The particular shape and emphases of a tragic plot, as the product of variation in the shape and emphases both of known legendary material and of familiar formal constituents, can forcefully direct or dislocate spectators’ attention, confirm, modify, or even overturn their expectations. . . . Seen in this light, a tragic plot inheres not simply in a poetic text, but also in the dialectic between that text in performance and the responses of an informed audience to the performance as repetition and innovation.²

Because so many later tragedies are adaptations or responses to earlier examples, a kind of palimpsest effect may be created whereby the audience – and in some cases the *dramatis personae* – is aware of the precursor text and imports it into the new drama. Thus in Herbert Weir Smyth’s translation of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (published in 1926 by the Loeb Classical Library) a Shakespearean contamination occurs. Anticipating the murder of Agamemnon, the Chorus says: “Why ever thus persistently doth this terror hover at the portals of my prophetic soul?” (Aeschylus 1963: 83). The phrase “prophetic soul” is memorably used by Hamlet when he learns that his father, like Agamemnon, has been treacherously slain: “O my prophetic soul” (1.5.41), he exclaims to the ghost, apparently because he had already suspected the truth. Smyth’s echo is reinforced by the description of terror hovering at the soul’s portals, personifying the emotion as a malignant presence. In Act 3 of *Hamlet* the prince sees his father’s ghost when he is closeted
with Gertrude and calls: “Look where he goes, even now out at the portal” (3.4.127). As well as flagging an affinity between the Greek and the English revenge plays, Smyth creates a moment of uncanny charge because the echo occurs at a moment of prophecy, and (through the phrase “thus persistently”) suggests a repeated cycle. Within the terms of the Oresteia the Chorus, when it asks “Why doth my song, unbidden and unfed, chant strains of augury” (83), is foretelling the imminent death of Agamemnon. But for the reader of Smyth’s translation the Chorus’s foresight reaches a full two thousand years into the future. Their lines enact as well as describe the act of prophecy, foretelling the tragic repetition of the pattern established by Aeschylus in another tale of a wronged father and a vengeful son.

Thus we can observe that one effect of tragedy in a state of transition, when its narrative traditions attract a patina through repeated receptions, or an “aura,” to use Walter Benjamin’s term, is to invite any sense of tragic determinism to become disassociated from the gods or fate, and become instead a function of intertextual or metatheatrical self-consciousness. This is particularly evident in Seneca’s Medea, a play which then (and now) was overshadowed by its more famous Euripidean source. A sense of belatedness is created by the Romanized atmosphere which pervades the play, as when the Chorus (Seneca 2002: 113) alludes to Fescennina carmina, a specifically Italian reference to a kind of fleering verse named after Fescennia, a small city on the Tiber. The metatheatricality is heightened by a persistent ambiguity in the play’s many references to the past. These might either evoke Medea’s personal past, her earlier life and particularly her horrific murder of her brother, or else her literary life as a tragic antiheroine. For example, when she thus exhorts herself: “scelera te hortentur tua/et cuncta redeant”, “Your own crimes must urge you on, every one of them must return” (129) we may think of her former deeds in Colchis or her earlier manifestation in Euripides. Similarly her exit line “coniugem agnoscis tuam?/sic fugere soleo,” “Do you recognize your wife? This is how I always escape?” (1021–2) reads like a knowing nod to Euripides. Increasingly the heroine herself seems weighed down by a sense of déjá lu, of acting a part written down for her and which she cannot escape. “Medea nunc sum,” “now I am Medea” (910), she exclaims at the crisis, as though conscious of the role she must inhabit and aware of her own notoriety, almost as though for her, as for us, Medea was already a legend. We can identify a very similar moment in another text derived from Euripides, Ted Hughes’s translation of Racine’s Phèdre. Hippolytus, when he articulates his fastidious virtue and recoils from Phaedra’s desire, asserts not simply that
“C’est par là [his aversion to sinful lust] qu’Hippolyte est connu dans la Grèce” (1109) but that “my aversion to it is a legend” (Hughes 1998: 54, my emphasis).

Most of today’s readers of Seneca’s Medea will already have read Euripides’ earlier play. But we will probably be less alert to the similarly secondary qualities of Hamlet. However, it too was based on a well-known story which had been adapted into a successful tragedy (now lost) shortly before Shakespeare wrote his own version. Like Medea, Hamlet at times seems haunted by a sense of his own fictionality. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1919: 162) observes that Seneca’s Medea seems to have read Euripides’ Medea, and we might equally say that Shakespeare’s playgoing prince seems to have watched the Ur–Hamlet. Hamlet at times seems on the verge of puncturing the membrane between the stage world and reality, most obtrusively when he links personal with literary memory by apparently alluding to the Globe Theatre (although the world and his head are the more immediately obvious referents):

Remember thee?
Ay thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe.

(1.5.95–7)

His frustrations, his feelings of being overlooked, of being “th’observed of all observers” (3.1.148), almost implicate the audience as well as Elsinore’s courtiers and, like the protagonist of The Truman Show, we sense him grasping toward consciousness of his own constructedness. Ophelia tells him that he is “as good as a chorus” (3.2.222) and he does indeed seem to share the choric quality of liminality, of being in transit between stage and audience, a quality most hauntingly apparent in his dying words:

You that look pale, and tremble at this chance,
That are but mutes or audience to this act,
Had I but time, as this fell sergeant death
Is strict in his arrest, oh I could tell you –
But let it be.

(5.2.313–17)

Here Hamlet appears to address the “real” as well as the inset audience. Whereas most dramatic characters know less than their audiences Hamlet actually gives the impression of knowing more, of being privy to secrets which must remain tantalizingly hidden not just from Horatio but from us.
as well. His apparent transformation at the end of the play, his passive acceptance of his fate, might be attributed to a knowledge that Act 5 has been reached as much as to any special change of heart. In his melodramatic assertion, “This is I, Hamlet the Dane” (5.1.224–5), we hear an echo of Medea’s similar articulation of a role fulfilled.

Whereas Seneca’s Medea and Shakespeare’s Hamlet seem weighed down by an unexplained intuition of their own textuality, the transition from fate to literary tradition is suggested still more forcibly when the author is inserted into the text as a surrogate divinity. A particularly striking example of this process can be seen in Akira Kurosawa’s 1957 film adaptation of *Macbeth, Throne of Blood*. Here the three witches are replaced by a single numinous figure who is encountered spinning in the forest by Washizu (Macbeth). Although she can be seen as a traditional “minister of fate,” her wheel uncannily suggests a film projector and reminds us that the real arbiter of Washizu’s destiny is the filmmaker and the literary tradition he inherited. Fortuitously, the physical characteristics shared by the spinning wheel and projector pick up on a rather similar but more established (and crosscultural) pattern of linguistic connection between spinning and writing. Thus in a very different production, Catullus’ *Carmen 64*, we can see a parallel connection between the gods, or fate, on the one hand and the creating artist on the other. (In Latin, as in Greek and indeed English, there are striking links between the vocabulary of weaving or spinning and of literary composition. *Textum*, for example, can mean woven but, more metaphorically, can also be used of literary style.) This long poem presents an ostensibly happy occasion, the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, but it is attended by the spinning Fates and overshadowed by the Trojan War in which the couple’s unborn son Achilles, will play a pivotal role. The long central section of the poem consists of an elaborate *ecphrasis*, a compelling account of a coverlet on which Ariadne, deserted on Naxos by Theseus, is depicted. She is paradoxically more lifelike and more vocal than the “real” guests at the wedding, and the plaint of this woven heroine is suffused by a discourse of weaving and spinning in various contexts, encouraging us to make links with the Fates spinning their threads of destiny. We are reminded that the lives of Peleus and Thetis are as woven and determined as that of the more “fictional” Ariadne, and also that the ultimate controlling artist here is really Catullus, who has woven the two strands of this complex poem together so memorably, creating a subtle (from the Latin *subtilis*, meaning finely woven) web through the implicit thematic links between the frame and inset narratives. In a sense these hints at authorial presence in both Kurosawa and Catullus replace the essentially theatrical
role of the Chorus, fulfilling a similar function through their edgy, ludic manipulation of the boundary between art and reality.

But recycling tragedy is more than a matter of spinning an ever more reflexive vortex “about it and about it.” It could be argued that the obtrusive textuality of the examples discussed above dilutes their tragic impact. Johnson said of tragedy: “If we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more” (Johnson 1960: 9). But insistent reminders of a tragedy’s fictionality are at least as likely to compromise tragedy. Yet the textual layers within the tragic tradition need not necessarily weaken or distract from a text’s tragic impact. Indeed, in various ways the repetition or adaptation of a tragic narrative can allow a still more intense engagement with the conflicts and predicaments which characterize the genre to emerge. If we think, for example, about Hegel’s conception of tragedy (a powerful if not a totalizing model), whereby tragedy represents the collision of different perspectives and irreconcilable pressures, we can see how this intratextual dynamic can be replayed and intensified at an intertextual level. Not all tragedies can be mapped equally neatly onto a Hegelian binary. But if we think about two which do conform broadly to such a model, Prometheus Bound and the Bacchae, we can see how their central conflicts are enriched through the processes of reception.

Prometheus Bound stages a conflict between the Titan Prometheus, who might be said to represent subversion and the quest for knowledge, and Zeus, upholder of law, order, and the status quo. But any such account inevitably flattens the drama, for the two protagonists (like Antigone and Creon) have more in common than they might want to acknowledge. The play has proved conducive to sharply contrasting readings, both critical and creative, and the battle between the forces of rebellion and divine authority, in particular, elicits very varied responses. Thus Marlowe’s Prometheus figure, Dr. Faustus, is the product of a Christian culture which privileges divinity in a way which is alien to Greek tragedy – whose gods are far from perfect and who, in any case, do not always agree with one another. Aeschylus’ equivocal presentation of Prometheus has apparently given way to outright condemnation, for Faustus’s parallel search for knowledge leads to his damnation. But just as Zeus and Prometheus in Aeschylus are not simple opposites, so Marlowe’s work can be seen less as a palinode to Aeschylus than as a reformulation of the same problems. Although on the surface Faustus seems condemned by the play, many audiences and readers have found him as deserving of sympathy as Prometheus and have seen the harshness of his fate as a reflection of the rigidity of this version of God rather than of Faustus’s unforgivable evil.
The same pattern can be seen in a work which, by contrast, on the face of things reacts against the supposed conservatism of Aeschylus. Shelley’s palinode *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) allows the rebel to emerge triumphant. At the end of the play, because Prometheus (contrary to myth) fails to reveal that Thetis’ son will be greater than his father, Zeus is destroyed by his son Demogorgon. This championing of Prometheus implies a link between Shelley’s powerful precursors, the Greek tragedians, and the Olympian gods. Shelley, like Prometheus, wants to throw off the shackles of the tyrannous past. Yet various factors complicate this apparent identification. As a Titan, Prometheus belonged to the race which had predated the Olympians and been dethroned by them, and it is thus Jove, in a sense, who represents rebellious youth. Also, as Shelley himself acknowledged in his Preface to the play, in altering Aeschylus so radically he was only following the example of Greek writers themselves, who freely adapted their own sources (Shelley 1959: 119). And in any case, Aeschylus’ treatment of Prometheus is already enmeshed in a dialectic too complex to be simply reversed. Even if the Titan does seem obstinate and vengeful by the end of the original play, Aeschylus was surely, to some degree, himself of Prometheus’ party. Although he gives the impression of being antagonistic to Aeschylus, Shelley engages very directly with his source, clearly maintaining the structure and conventions of Greek tragedy. In this he resembles Prometheus who, in articulating resistance to Jupiter, adopts Jupiter’s language in order to express his hostility. To sum up, the complex patterns of the relationship between Aeschylus and his two followers, Marlowe and Shelley, illuminate suggestively the similarly uncertain relationship between Zeus and Prometheus.

A dynamic of reversal overlaying and in a sense compromising the play’s central *agon* is even stronger in the *Bacchae*. Here the figure of the outsider is particularly prominent. However, over the course of the play this role, first filled by the exotic Dionysus, is taken over by the hapless Pentheus, who refuses to join in the new god’s worship and is killed by his own mother. This is an extraordinarily unsettling and powerful drama which manipulates and confuses its audience’s judgment and sympathies. It is so shifting, so tricky, as to defeat attempts to react against or reverse it by later writers. In *Christus Patiens*, a twelfth-century Byzantine drama about the Passion, we find an apparently bizarre, even perverse, reconfiguration of Euripides whereby Christ (through near-quotation from the *Bacchae*) emerges as a hybrid of god and sacrificial victim, two roles originally split between Dionysus and Pentheus. But because the oppositions of the *Bacchae* are so fluid, its
boundaries seeming to invite transgression, any such reconfiguration of its core elements seems rather to fulfill than disrupt the original play.

If the movement between texts can tellingly reinforce the complex loci of conflict dramatized by so many individual tragedies, such movement is even more effective at communicating and commenting on a still more central quality of tragedy, the genre’s near universal enactment of loss, decline, and destruction. The process of transition between texts can itself produce a tragic dynamic, reinforcing or even contradicting the resonances of either text read in isolation.

Although *King Lear* is (even by tragic standards) a remarkably bleak play, its afterlife outdoes it, as though rising to the challenge implicit in Edgar’s words: “The worst is not / so long as we can say ‘this is the worst’” (4.1.27–8). Dr. Johnson found the death of Cordelia unbearable, but the intertextual, moral decline from Shakespeare’s heroine to Edward Bond’s tyrant (in the 1971 play *Lear*) is arguably more unsettling. By the end of the play the main representative of something like sanity or virtue is the ghost of a murdered boy. Eventually, and inexplicably, the ghost himself is “killed.” The effect is similar to that generated by Lucan’s bleakly apocalyptic description of Troy: “etiam periere ruinæ,” “the very ruins have been destroyed” (*Pharsalia* 9.969). In another response to *King Lear*, *Endgame* (1958), Beckett seems to identify in Shakespeare’s play a kind of aesthetic pleasure or comfort which is refused us in his own work:

> If he could have his child with him… [Pause.] It was the moment I was waiting for. [Pause.] You don’t want to abandon him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million last moments? [Pause.] He doesn’t realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what the earth is like, nowadays.

*(Beckett 1964: 52)*

Beckett uses the play’s many allusive moments to heighten the sense of repetition within the drama, drawing attention to an overall sense of doom which is both cyclical and entropic.

This kind of intensification of bleakness and horror is most conspicuous within the revenge tradition. Revenge is characterized by its capacity for disproportionate escalation, and this dynamic can operate over a sequence of related texts as well as within individual ones. A particularly explicit example of intertextual revenge is played out in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. Here
the mutilation of Lavinia is unambiguously modeled on Ovid’s account of Tereus’ similarly horrific treatment of Philomela. The act of imitation is not only Shakespeare’s but the rapists’ themselves who (for Gothic thugs) are remarkably well up on their Latin, and even learn from Tereus’ mistakes by cutting off their victim’s hands as well as her tongue, thus ensuring that she cannot copy Philomela’s stratagem and reveal her rapists’ identity in a tapestry. This process of upping the ante is taken still further by Sarah Kane in Cleansed (1998). Like a furious Jacobean avenger, or perhaps Kill Bill’s Beatrix Kiddo, she overtops both Ovid and Titus when Carl’s feet as well as his hands and tongue are amputated. This process of continuing, escalating dismemberment is reflected in the texture of the play, pared down and brutalized as it is.

A rather different kind of tragic intensification is dramatized in the gap between the classical and neoclassical versions of Phaedra’s fall and Sarah Kane’s Phaedra’s Love (1996). Although, as might be expected from the author of Blasted and Cleansed, she exaggerates the violence of the earlier versions in horrific fashion, in some ways the most striking characteristic of the play is the way Hippolytus’ death is transformed. Rather than being a tragic fall it becomes a curiously positive move, offering the opportunity for a strange kind of personal growth. In working up to tragedy rather than down Kane underlines the worse-than-tragic emptiness of Hippolytus’ banal existence. The virtuous prince has been reinvented as a kind of Athenian Psycho, sated by commodity culture, relentless TV violence, and compulsive but joyless sex.

This curious transformation of a poignant tragedy into a happy solution points to another characteristic of tragedy in transition. For if an intensification of tragedy’s horror and violence can be seen to produce a kind of intertextual tragic fall, the loss of tragedy can also become, more paradoxically, a source of tragedy. Generally we think of tragedy as a movement down, a fall or loss. But is there such a thing as “upward tragedy”? Can rising, in other words, be tragic? In The Waste Land the faceless mass of the apathetic from the first circle of the Inferno are reincarnated as the living Londoners who swarm over London Bridge:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many,
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled . . .

(Eliot 1971: ll.60–4)
Although in one sense this vision is manifestly less hopeless than that offered at the beginning of the *Inferno*, in another sense it represents a diminution. A vision of infinite, divinely planned bathos acquires a kind of perverse sublimity. The same *peri bathous* problematizes and enriches Pope’s own tribute to mediocrity, the *Dunciad*:

She comes! the Cloud-compelling Pow’r, behold!
With Night Primaeval, and with Chaos old!
Lo! the great Anarch’s ancient reign restor’d
Light dies before her uncreating word:
As one by one, at dread Medaea’s strain,
The sick’ning stars fade off th’aethereal plain;
As Argus’ eyes by Hermes’ wand opprest,
Clos’d one by one to everlasting rest:
Thus at her felt approach, and secret might,
Art after Art goes out, and all is Night.


But, by contrast with these lines or with Dante’s own stately description of the Futile,

and there the folk forlorn

Rushed after it, in such an endless train,
It never would have entered in my head
There were so many men whom death had slain.

(Dante 1971: *Inferno* 3.54–7)

the random movements of suburban traffic described by Eliot, although they may be allowed some glimmerings of pleasure or variety absent from Dante, remain more intrinsically banal.

A different kind of tragic decline can be located in Dante’s *Commedia* itself. Many different texts and writers make their presence felt in Dante’s poem and, despite the work’s title, and the positive trajectory from the *Inferno* to *Paradise* traced by the narrative, there are unsettling moments of tragic affect for the narrator, most memorably when he is forbidden from expressing sympathy for the engaging adulteress Francesca. Here we can perhaps locate tragedy in the shift, or “rise,” from a Classical to a Christian paradigm. Although we can identify Francesca’s sad story as in some way “tragic,” perhaps the real tragedy here lies in knowing that we are not allowed to sympathize with her and that to do so is in a sense heretical.
because she has been damned by God. As Virgil (Dante’s guide through the 
Inferno) epigrammatically observes later in the poem: “Qui vive la pietà 
quand’ è ben morta” (Inferno 20.28). One aspect of pietà (piety) must destroy 
the other (pity). 9

Here pity or here piety must die
If the other lives; who’s wickeder than one
That’s agonized by God’s high equity.

(20.28–30)

Here it is implied that those who sympathize with the agonies of the 
damned are implicated in their own wickedness. But Virgil almost seems to undermine himself when he prefaces this declaration with the irritated: “Why!/And art thou too like all the other fools?” (20.26–7), thus implying the very normality of Dante’s softheartedness. For there is something inhuman about such perfection as Virgil seems to require. We shrink from it or, in the case of “Dante,” faint. Dante’s pity is only human after all and his poem’s readers may find the wrenching of pietà from itself as unnatural and painful as Marsyas’ flaying, as described by Ovid. “Quid me mihi detrahis,” “why do you tear me from myself” (Ovid 1984: Metamorphoses 6.385), he cries. It is hard to recognize or like a version of humanity, no matter how divinely approved, which has sloughed off pity. We sense a decline from human to bestial as having an obvious and unproblematic tragic potential. But the prospect or reality of the reverse movement, toward perfection, can create a surprisingly similar sense of tragic loss. Two very different examples of such a humanly perverse response can be found in Tennyson’s In Memoriam (1850) and Arthur C. Clarke’s Childhood’s End (1953).

In poem 47 of In Memoriam Tennyson betrays his equivocal attitude toward unindividuated bliss, an attitude which is never completely canceled out by the more piously optimistic but less compelling poems which conclude the volume. He views his projected elevation to Heaven with poignant regret because he and his friend Hallam will lose their individuality and thus their relationship:

And we shall sit at endless feast,
Enjoying each the other’s good:
What vaster dream can hit the mood
Of Love on earth? He seeks at least
Upon the last and sharpest height,
Before the spirits fade away,
Some landing-place, to clasp and say,
“Farewell! We lose ourselves in light.”
(Tennyson 1971)

The “endless feast,” and even the “light,” of Heaven fill the narrator with a barely concealed horror, and the phrase “last and sharpest height” evokes a vision of some cataclysmic flood rising inexorably to drown even those who have escaped to the highest mountains.

Loss of human individuality is also the theme of Arthur C. Clarke’s Childhood’s End. The benevolent alien “overlords” who arrive to nurture and protect earth know that humanity is about to take an evolutionary step forward, losing their individuality but gaining transcendence. It is a source of sorrow to the overlords that they cannot follow the same path – indeed the overlord Karellan, who guides humanity to a higher stage of existence to which he can never himself aspire, might be compared to Dante’s Virgil who, as a virtuous pagan, can never go to Heaven. However, to the old-style humans their children’s transition from human to posthuman is itself reason for grief rather than rejoicing. In an unexpected twist it is revealed that the novel’s “overlords” resemble devils. This fact is ascribed to a kind of reverse morphic resonance – humanity, in a sense, foretold its own “destruction”:

For that memory was not of the past, but of the future – of those closing years when your race knew that everything was finished. . . . It was as if a distorted echo had reverberated round the closed circle of time, from the future to the past. Call it not a memory, but a premonition.

(Clark 1990: 190)

It is curious that the novel’s transcendence, which is really closer to Heaven than to Hell, should be anticipated by the collective consciousness of humanity with such horror.

Thus once again it would seem that tragedy can be located in a movement up as well as a movement down. The contradictory status of such transcendence as a focus of both longing and despair typifies the many irresolvable dilemmas at the heart of tragedies across the ages, the paradoxically duplex pharmakon, for example, or such permeable oppositions as eros and thanatos, fecundity and decay, past and future – even tragedy and comedy. Another instance, discussed in more detail in Peter Hollindale’s essay, is suggested by
the title of Clarke’s novel. Childhood is an ambiguous good. Never to grow up – either through death or, in the case of Peter Pan, though an apparent supernatural intervention – might be seen as a tragic destiny, but growing up is a motive for equally poignant regret. In this matter too science fiction lays bare such human contradictions with particular power. In Dan Simmons’s loosely linked story collection Hyperion (1989) one of the most effective narratives focuses on the tragic predicament of Sol Weintraub, whose daughter Rachel is exposed to the mysterious “Time Tombs” and begins to live her life backwards. Every day she gets younger and younger, forgetting her earlier (but older) self, and needing to learn all over again what has happened to her until she becomes too young to be exposed to the truth. Parents may think back nostalgically to their children’s lost childhood but, for Rachel’s parents, the second childhood of their daughter, with its unsettling effect of juvenile dementia, is a source of tragic despair.

A similar tragic contradiction lies at the heart of David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas (2004). Its extended time frame, ranging from the early nineteenth century to the far future, allows humanity itself to emerge as the tragic hero of this fragmented narrative. The novel’s first narrator, Adam Ewing, poses a vital question when he “questioned if such an ill as ‘too much civilization’ existed or no” (10), a question which the novel goes on to answer in the affirmative by demonstrating that the same impulses which guide humanity toward progress ensure its eventual destruction. The same drive which opens the novel on a note of exploration and creativity propels the earth’s ecological and cultural decline, and humanity’s apparent entropy, if not destruction. The novel’s succession of protagonists, though separated in time, is linked by a shared comet birthmark, apparently indicating reincarnation. The comet can be seen as a sign of the pharmakon, impressive in its bright splendor, but also transitory and traditionally seen as a harbinger of bad luck. As Zachry, the narrator of the central (and chronologically final) section observes: “human hunger birthed the Civ’lize, but human hunger killed it too” (286). This tension can be traced back to Empedoclean philosophy, which presents conflict as simultaneously destructive and generative.10

The novel’s telos may seem to emphasize the more destructive aspects of civilization. However, there are just hints that the novel is not so bleak after all. Zachry has a vision that a long dead corpse speaks and tells him that “We Old ’uns was sick with Smart and the Fall was our cure” (293). The corpse’s words may allude to the idea of the felix culpa, or fortunate fall, the doctrine that man’s expulsion from Eden was happy because it enabled Christ’s incarnation and mankind’s ultimate salvation. (The internal
contradictions within the phrase differ subtly from those which inhere within the word *pharmakon*. Felix qualifies and subsumes *culpa* whereas the negative and positive meanings of *pharmakon* are enmeshed together.) The reader may thus hope for a happy fate for Zachry’s descendants.

Another clue to the earth’s future is perhaps to be found in the novel’s two citations of one of Virgil’s most famous lines. When Aeneas beholds the fall of Troy depicted on the walls of Juno’s temple he cries out, weeping: “*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt,*” “here, too, are tears for misfortune and human sorrows pierce the heart” (Virgil 1999: *Aeneid* 1.462). Mitchell’s first allusion to this line is located in the novel’s chronologically penultimate section, dealing with a dystopian future Korea. “THESE ARE THE TEARS OF THINGS” (354) is used as a code message by the resistance. The second allusion comes later in the novel, though earlier in the story. Immediately before his suicide in 1931 the troubled young composer, Robert Frobisher, concludes his final letter to his friend Sixsmith with the phrase “*sunt lacrimae rerum*” (490). Because *Cloud Atlas* is a fragmented novel containing discrete narratives separated by time it is able to replicate intratextually some of the intertextual tragic effects described earlier in this chapter. If we may suspect that there is a kind of conversation going on between Weir Smyth’s *Agamemnon* and *Hamlet* we can be sure that the Virgilian echo in *Cloud Atlas* is a planned effect. But how to map it onto the different possible trajectories which may be traced by tragedy in a state of transition? Does such an obtrusive repetition draw attention to the novel’s status as a highly patterned fictional construct whose characters’ destinies are determined not by fate or the gods but by David Mitchell? Is the tragedy, in other words, diluted and trivialized by the artful repetition? Alternatively, does the repetition of Virgil’s words enact and reinforce a tragic decline from the comparatively civilized environment in which Frobisher lives to the dystopic brutality of the science-fictional future? Does the gulf between the tragic situation of one individual and the tragic fall of the whole of humanity become itself an intratextual tragic fall? Another more comforting reading of the Virgilian repetition is possible, one which sees it neither as a purely self-conscious metanarrative marker nor as a symbol of civilization’s tragic decline. In its original context the line is spoken by Aeneas when he beholds a representation of the fall of Troy. And yet by the end of the poem Aeneas has founded a new and greater empire, that of Rome. Perhaps even Mitchell’s post-apocalyptic future earth will eventually be renewed. In demonstrating the persistence of tragedy Mitchell in a sense ensures the persistence of hope, at least if we accept Kierkegaard’s assertion that ”when
the age loses the tragic, it gains despair” (Kierkegaard 1944: vol. 1, 118). Within the context of Mitchell’s novel Kierkegaard’s comment resonates with Zachry’s sense of cultural loss and his capacity to communicate and articulate that loss. “The worst is not/so long as we can say ‘this is the worst’” (King Lear 4.1.27–8).

The transhistorical sweep of Mitchell’s novel allows it to stand as a kind of emblem for the tragic tradition more generally. The sections of Cloud Atlas are individually satisfying but the crosscurrents between them ensure that the novel is greater than the sum of its parts. Similarly, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, the tragic traditions of different eras may be mutually illuminating. The complex, sometimes disjunctive, trajectories traced by key narratives such as those of Prometheus or Oedipus over time reflect those disruptive yet energizing transitions within and between cultures which are themselves so often the stuff of tragedy.

Notes

1 The ambiguity of this term is discussed at length by Jacques Derrida in his 1968 essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” (Derrida 1993: 63–171).
3 On the metatheatricality of the play see Boyle 1997: 122–33.
5 See Vanda Zajko’s Chapter 8 in this volume for an extended discussion of the play’s ambiguities.
6 For a fuller analysis of the relationship between Aeschylus and Shelley see Wallace 1996: 166.
7 Metamorphoses 6.401–674.
8 Kill Bill, Quentin Tarantino, 2003–4.
9 A similar tension is produced in Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” especially in stanza 20 which describes the decay of the nymphs and dryads.
Chapter 1
Trojan Suffering, Tragic Gods, and Transhistorical Metaphysics

Edith Hall

The Greek, decisive confrontation with the daemonic world-order gives to tragic poetry its historico-philosophical signature.

(Benjamin 1980: vol. 1.3, 879)

The Reasons for Suffering

When Philip Sidney defended theater in the first substantial example of literary criticism in the English language, his Defence of Poetry (1581), he used a story from ancient Greece to illustrate tragedy’s emotive power:

Plutarch yielded a notable testimony of the abominable tyrant Alexander Pheraeus; from whose eyes a tragedy, well made and represented, drew abundance of tears, who without all pity had murdered infinite numbers, and some of his own blood; so as he that was not ashamed to make matters for tragedies, yet could not resist the sweet violence of a tragedy. And if it wrought no farther good in him, it was that he, in despite of himself, withdrew himself from hearkening to that which might mollify his hardened heart.

(Sidney 1973: 96–7)

Sidney was struck that Alexander of Pherae, a wicked Greek tyrant of the fourth century BCE, was induced to weep by “the sweet violence of a