

## Some Remarks on Tragedy and on Vélez as a Tragedian (A Response to Professor Whitby)

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Tragedy is an open, perpetually debatable concept. It is both a mode and a genre; that is, a prose or verse narrative may be fully as tragic as a play. Chaucer and other writers of his day knew this well enough. We are concerned here only with the genre, however, and we face quite enough problems as it is, without broadening the scope of the inquiry into questions of mode, or whether there is such a phenomenon as a tragic sense of life, or whether tragedy can be extraliterary.

According to one of Dante's commentators, tragedy, or "goat-song," derives its name from being, like a goat, prosperously shaggy before and miserably bald behind. Tragedies do not, as a rule, end well. Although the concept of tragedy encompassed all serious plays in the Classical Greek view of such things, since the Middle Ages the term has enjoyed the more limited acceptance of a literary work that ends in death or in noteworthy physical or psychic suffering.

As part of a minimal, working definition, we might venture that tragedy can never be accidental. It has to be the ineluctable consequence of an inexorable pattern of behavior. It debases both language and the concept of tragedy to take for tragic those incidents that are only lamentable. Further, one finds that an identity pattern is established early in any tragedy. Ultimately, the necessary suffering will ensue from the central character's being true to an established and recognizable pattern of behavior. It matters not a whit whether this pattern is one that would receive our blessing. It does not serve the ends of criticism to impose our limited and limiting notions of morality on the patterns under discussion. Eric Bentley is surely on the right track in suggesting that the experience of tragedy should be aesthetic and psychological, not moral and philosophical.<sup>1</sup>

The focus on the dialectic of tragedy developed by Hegel—his view that authentic tragedy arises not from a conflict between good and evil, but from a tension between two goods—constitutes one of the significant statements on

this central question. Hegel's contribution is valuable principally for the nonmoralistic orientation it advocates. Friedrich Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian distinction is likewise one of those central insights into critical theory that we must sooner or later come to terms with, as Northrop Frye quite rightly maintains in his illuminating study of Shakespearean tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

In discussions of Spanish Golden Age tragedy, there is frequently a tendency to confuse values with moralizing. The search for value has too often become a search for the moralistic intent of the dramatist or, indeed, of the genre as a whole. While I would agree that one cannot separate values from literature and hope to retain much that will be worth the salvaging, it seems to me essential that we do make every effort to separate moralizing from criticism and that we strive to avoid the sort of reductive interpretation that results from the wholesale application of the principle of poetic justice. The question is whether a nonmoralistic approach is viable in the case of the *comedia*, a family of drama that has traditionally been treated as the product of a rather unique set of circumstances.

Now I will readily grant that Counter-Reformation literature is characteristically tinged with didacticism, but I would also ask whether it is necessary to expend the time and energy that have been devoted to demonstrating this conspicuous fact in play after play. There is perhaps no need to belabor the obvious.

What I should advocate is, first of all, an orientation grounded in the baroque aesthetic ideal of *admiratio* and, second, one that emphasizes the more positive aspects of *virtus*, or *areté*, rather than the somewhat negative, moralistic concept of *hamartia*. I would attempt to combine historical criticism with literary criticism, pointing again toward the kind of synthesis of these two basic approaches that I have been urging for some time.

To begin with the historical dimension, let me suggest that the desire to achieve *admiratio*, or *admiración*, is fully as developed a drive in the baroque artist as is the desire to instruct. The Horatian ideal of combining the useful with the sweet (*utile et dulce*) continues to thrive throughout the baroque in Spain. Tirso's *deleitar aprovechando* translates in practice into a clear emphasis on didacticism, on the one hand, and a corresponding emphasis on the aesthetic dimension of *admiratio* on the other. Whether we choose to emphasize the one or the other is largely attributable to individual temperament. Here is where the subjective enters criticism, in the choice of materials and in the method and emphasis, and we deceive ourselves if we presume to Olympian objectivity in these matters. The most that can be hoped for in this regard is an enlightened and disciplined subjectivity.

Another facet of the historical dimension is that the shade of Aristotle loomed even larger in the time of Vélez than it does now. The *Poetics* is a description that became a prescription, and a millstone around the neck of tragedy, because, as F. L. Lucas points out, "the Greek philosopher was not

studied in the Greek spirit of sceptical inquiry, but rather as if he had been a Hebrew prophet verbally inspired."<sup>3</sup>

Aristotle stipulated that the characters of tragedy must be as "good" or as fine in character as the plot permits (but not perfect), that they must be true to type, and that they must be "consistent" or true to themselves (*Poetics* XV.1-5). Such unheroic characters as Don Juan Tenorio or the Antichrist are, one might argue, as fine in character as those particular plots will permit. We remember that another of Aristotle's principles is that art can make a fine picture even of a toad. It should also be borne in mind that the pagan ideal of virtue demanded strength and intensity of character rather than purity of soul. Greek ethics, F. L. Lucas observes, had a larger element of aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

Peter Alexander maintains that catharsis is the central concept of the *Poetics*, since this notion is basic to Aristotle's refutation of Plato's negative view of certain kinds of imitation, and that *hamartia* is merely a form of hypothesis put forward to account for this phenomenon. To focus on *hamartia* as the primary concept is to put the cart before the horse, says Alexander.<sup>5</sup>

The two emotions to be indulged in the achievement of catharsis are pity and fear, the former synonymous with sympathy or involvement, the latter more conducive to alienation or distancing. Seen thus, pity and fear are transmuted into aesthetic concepts reflecting the equilibrium between involvement and distancing that is characteristic of most serious art.

*Hamartia* has been defined as an error in judgement (Bywater), missing the mark (Kitto), a false step taken in blindness (Lucas), an unforeseen failure (Brereton), or the misidentification of a person (Else). Lattimore's empirical evidence shows that *hamartia* in the extant Greek tragedies refers to an act, not a trait: ". . . the word . . . cannot signify a permanent characteristic in a person, pride, quickness to anger, etc., but must refer to a mistaken or wrong act or to a mistake that has been made."<sup>6</sup>

Peter Alexander has suggested that tragedy takes its character and significance not from faults but from "virtue," that is, *virtus* (*areté* in the Greek), amoral strength of character, all the qualities that make an individual formidable, as Machiavelli put it. It is the tendency of the protagonist to identify his whole being with some interest, object, passion, or habit of mind that is, as A. C. Bradley once wrote, the "fatal gift which carries with it a touch of greatness."<sup>7</sup>

From the studies of Lucas and Lattimore of the plot structures of ancient Greek tragedies, it is apparent that Aristotle has derived the *hamartia* doctrine not from the works themselves but from his own moral views. Roger L. Cox points to this fact and goes on to give what I find to be the most sensible definition of the term: "The doctrine of *hamartia* is simply an attempt to take into account the obvious fact that the protagonist is partly though not entirely responsible for the suffering which is essential to tragedy."<sup>8</sup>

We come now to more practical considerations. Begging Professor MacCurdy's indulgence, I will assume, with Professor Whitby, that Vélez's *La serrana de la*

*Vera*, *Reinar después de morir*, and *Los celos hasta los cielos y desdichada Estefanía* are, all three, tragedies.

*La serrana de la Vera* illustrates a variation on A. A. Parker's thesis concerning *santos y bandoleros*. Act III gives us the inversion of the remarkable traits and feats of courage and strength illustrated in Acts I and II. Gila's pattern of behavior, her tenacious individualism, indeed rebelliousness, has merely been magnified—and, of course, perverted—in Act III; but there is more continuity than change. She remains true to herself, at one with her self-image of *La serrana de la Vera*. The crisis at the end of Act II merely serves to channel her boundless energy in a different direction. She remains a larger-than-life character throughout, one who responds perfectly to the aesthetic demand for the arousal of *turbación* and *admiración*. We would diminish Vélez's achievement in delineating this remarkable creature were we to give any weight at all to considerations of crime and punishment. Gila's fall results, needless to say, from actions for which she is at least in part responsible. The inevitability of her fall issues from her character. She is, to use Nietzsche's terms, a Dionysian force at odds with an Apollonian world. In Hegelian terms, her highly personal need for revenge on all representatives of the gender that has repressed and abused her comes into conflict with society's need for law and order.

*Reinar después de morir* is a very different play. If *La serrana de la Vera* is, symbolically, the tragedy of the killing of the father (i.e., the dominant male figure), *Reinar después de morir* is the tragedy of the sacrifice of the son (i.e., the innocent victim). I concur with Professor Whitby in his insight that *Reinar después de morir* follows the model of *Antigone* in presenting a character who is forced to choose between two imperatives: personal obligations, on the one hand, and the demands of the state, on the other. Don Pedro's unswerving allegiance to Inés de Castro is exemplary, but it leads inexorably to tragic suffering. Such is the irony of tragedy. The murder of Inés is lamentable, but it is not tragic. It is Pedro's response to her death, and the dignity that he confers upon it and with which he meets it, that afford the tragic dimension. He is the central character, the one on whom the greater part of the action hinges, and it is his behavior pattern of indecisiveness that culminates in death for Inés and psychic suffering for him. Better than either of the other two plays we are considering, *Reinar después de morir* exemplifies Hegel's view of the tragedy of two conflicting "goods," here political versus individual, resulting in the unavoidable waste of human excellence (Inés) and the mental anguish (Pedro) that accompanies such a loss.

*Los celos hasta los cielos y desdichada Estefanía* is an Oedipus-type tragedy or, in terms of Christianity, a tragedy of the isolation of the spirit.<sup>9</sup> Like Oedipus, Fernán Ruiz is driven to know the truth about certain matters which, because of the way they are brought to light, lead to spiritual isolation and remorse for him, and death for Estefanía. This is a terribly ironic play, for the

truth that Fernando thinks he has uncovered is only an illusion. Not until he has murdered Estefanía are the facts revealed to him. His *hamartia*, his "false step taken in blindness," is the killing of his wife. The inevitability of the step issues from his character, conditioned as it is by certain social imperatives. The final calamity contrasts here, as in the other two plays, with an earlier glory and happiness. As in the case of *Reinar después de morir*, there is an innocent female victim, but it is the male lead who is seen to suffer; although Inés and Estefanía perish, neither is shown to experience the sort of suffering that is essential to tragedy. Nor do we see a final *anagnorisis* or transcendence in either.

Vélez offers us three types of tragedy in as many plays. From this simple fact, a valid inference might be that it is a risky proposition to speak of "Calderonian" or "Alarconian" or "Lopean" tragedy as though these complex major figures presented a unified, monolithic view of the matter, when a dramatist such as Vélez de Guevara offers such complexity. And it would seem to be foolhardy indeed to propose a monolithic view of the tragedy of the entire Spanish baroque.

In commenting upon Vélez's tragedies, it is not necessary to indulge in evaluation. It is sufficient to say that each play is different. Evaluation is the least useful, and the most suspect, of all critical procedures. There are certain significant commonalities in these plays, of course: innocent victims die in all three; in no case is the protagonist an innocent victim; the principle of poetic justice is irrelevant to all three; *hamartia*, if conceived in moralistic terms, is equally irrelevant; and there is a clear affirmation of human dignity—a transcendence, if you will—in the way each central character accepts the final circumstances of the action.

F. L. Lucas asserts that ". . . there is no . . . rule about the character of tragic characters except that they must have character," adding that ". . . not wickedness, but weakness, remains the hardest of all human qualities to make dramatic."<sup>10</sup> It is no small achievement, therefore, to have succeeded in making a weak character such as Don Pedro of *Reinar después de morir* central to the plot of that story. Don Pedro is, in a sense, a "modern" tragic figure, precisely because of his irresoluteness. We would not be going too far astray to think of him as the Willy Loman of princes.

To paraphrase L. L. Schücking's view of Shakespearean drama, Golden Age tragedies need not be read as moral *exempla*, helping to check the passions, nor as real-life imitations, inviting the purgation of them. The great energy, plenitude of power, exuberance, and heightened contrasts of the baroque lead to the creation of sensational and impressive figures, such as Gila of *La serrana de la Vera*, who outstrip real-life representation in their intensity, eccentricities, extravagances, and self-exaltation.<sup>11</sup> F. L. Lucas expresses it well when he observes that "provided a person has *some* redeeming quality—courage, intellect, beauty, wit, passionate devotion; provided they show

some sort of magnificence—then it is astonishing how much their fellow-men can sometimes forgive them.”<sup>12</sup> Eric Bentley cites a story to the effect that Racine wrote *Phèdre* to demonstrate that a good poet could inspire sympathy even with evil characters. Vélez de Guevara achieves much the same effect with Act III of *La serrana de la Vera*.

The gamut of possible endings illustrated in the three plays briefly discussed here shows remarkable versatility and imagination on the part of Vélez and, by extrapolation, suggests that certain sweeping generalizations that have been advanced regarding other playwrights and the *comedia* as a whole may need to be reexamined. I have found Northrop Frye’s typology useful in approaching Vélez, but no doubt different foci may yield equal or greater insight into other dramatists. With due respect to the system-builders, there can be no one best approach to the *comedia*, to tragic drama, or to the work of a single author. All approaches have some validity, and overviews of the genre, the period, and of the complete work of the various authors are all useful, but in the final analysis each play is sufficiently unique to merit an exploration of its own peculiar dynamic. Contexts are extremely important; it is perilous to disregard those that are pertinent, but the text itself must always have first claim to our attention. General tendencies and patterns should invariably yield to specificity.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London, 1965), p. 293.

<sup>2</sup> *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto, 1967), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1961), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas, p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> *Hamlet: Father and Son* (Oxford, 1955), p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> Richmond A. Lattimore, *Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1964), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York, 1949), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> “Tragedy and the Gospel Narratives,” *The Yale Review*, 58 (1968), p. 557.

<sup>9</sup> The typology for the three plays under discussion is borrowed from Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time*.

10 Lucas, p. 128.

11 Levin Ludwig Schücking, *The Baroque Character of the Elizabethan Tragic Hero* (London, 1938), p. 28.

12 Lucas, p. 129.