The Fortunes of Tragedy

David Aers and Sarah Beckwith
Duke University

The initial stimulation for this special issue was a recent book by the distinguished Anglican theologian and literary critic Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (2016). This is an immensely ambitious, confident book with many suggestive directions and provocations, but we were particularly struck by two central strands. First: the production of a grand narrative concerning a literary form designated "the tragic imagination," which can be traced from the culture of ancient Greece to the theater of modern Britain. Second: the conviction that "the tragic imagination" is as compatible with Christianity as it is with the religion of Sophocles or with contemporary modes of atheism.

The first strand raises some issues that any grand narrative must address. How can a story be told that spans many centuries involving profound social, cultural, and economic transformations, a story involving profound changes in the conception of what it is to be a human person, while attending to the minute particulars that constitute divergent and varying histories? Some of the problems encountered by grand narratives were recently addressed in the special issue produced in *JMEMS* responding to Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (2012).[1] Is Williams, in his work, sufficiently attentive to the particularities of tragic form? For example, if one wants to talk about Milton and tragedy one may decide, as Williams does, to give a few pages to *Samson Agonistes*.[2] But Williams's discussion of Milton's extraordinary work is so lacking in attention to specificities that even the identity of speakers is ignored in the service of assimilating this awkward text into the critic's analytical plot. So it is no surprise that such a version of *Samson Agonistes* and tragedy is cut off from the text with which Milton chose to publish it, *Paradise Regained*. If one wants to make claims about Christianity and tragedy, it should seem odd to ignore Milton's juxtaposition of these two

Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies 49:1, January 2019
DOI 10.1215/10829636-7279600 © 2019 by Duke University Press

works, and just as odd to ignore Milton's fascinating and critical discourse on pagan tragedy in *Paradise Lost*. And can one discuss Milton's work in the contexts that concern Williams without attending to Milton's own political and theological contexts and commitments? We think not. But such are the hazards of any grand narrative.

The second strand of Williams's book that concerns us—the compatibility of the tragic imagination with Christianity—seems one a Christian theologian would want to treat with careful conceptual and textual specificity. To this end, the medieval centuries that are never discussed by Williams would have provided an illuminating test for his views of tragedy in both classical antiquity and Western modernity. This missing middle of the story raises many questions. If medieval culture did not produce tragic drama but rather the Corpus Christi plays and the diverse forms known as morality plays, why is that so? What did Chaucer mean by calling his great poem *Troilus and Criseyde* a "tragedy"? How does this work, in its totality, explore relations between pagan and Christian "tragedy"? How did Chaucer and other medieval writers read Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, or did they decide that tragedy is a form that cannot be philosophically consoled? What did Chaucer do with tragedy in the *Canterbury Tales*? Did Langland or De Guileville know anything about Williams's transhistorical "tragic imagination"? Did Dante?

Reflecting on these two strands of Williams's book, we decided that it would be valuable for *JMEMS* to produce a special issue exploring the fortunes of tragedy as a genre, in which the missing middle of Williams's book was brought into the conversation. We hoped such an issue of *JMEMS* would also seek to illuminate aspects of the divide between medieval and early modern studies that continues to be intrinsic to departments of the humanities despite increasing acknowledgment of the distortions of cultural histories created by such institutionalization. At no point did we conceive of the volume as a direct response to Williams's *Tragic Imagination*, although we did invite contributors to read it and reflect on it if that seemed relevant to their own concerns. We are pleased that the resulting collection of essays does indeed begin to remedy the occlusion of medieval culture in Williams's book and that the essays initiate some surprising explorations of relations between medieval Christianity and the Reformation, including neo-Latin writing in the Reformation.

Eleanor Johnson starts off the collection with a fresh look at Chaucer's working-through of tragedy in the "Monk's Tale." She argues that this much-unloved Canterbury tale, rather than being a failure or misfire on

Chaucer's part, actually constitutes a high-water mark of the bold and experimental literary theory that characterizes much of Chaucer's later career. In this case, the Monk proves himself to be not only an able and fluent reader and interpreter of tragic theory and tragic practice, but also a savvy critic of the very idea of tragedy—a critic whose final commitment is more to Christian revelation than to any classical notion of tragic experience. The Monk's massive and somewhat unrewarding concatenation of "tragedies" proves a kind of *mise-en-abyme* meditation on the idea of tragedy itself. For the Monk, "tragedy" is a category in which to think critically, not a category to reify.

Giles Waller traces the dynamic of tragic recognition and conversion through one of the most explicit attempts to consider the central narrative of the Gospels in a tragic mode, Hugo Grotius's 1608 *Christus Patiens* (translated into English by George Sandys in 1640). Converting the Passion narrative into neoclassical drama, *Christus Patiens* raises troubling dramaturgical, ethical, and theological questions about the nature of Christian tragedy and its relation to atonement and conversion. Waller closely observes the complex ways that this drama elicits judgments of guilt and innocence from (and within) its audience and how these judgments connect to the desire to witness and be moved by the spectacle of tragic suffering.

The next three essays focus on Shakespeare's tragic practice. In his last exchange with Cordelia, a failing and ecstatic Lear promises that they together will "take upon's the mystery of things / As if we were God's spies" (5.3.16–17). *Take upon us*: what are the implications of this language? The mystery of things here beckons God's spies not toward acts of apprehension but rather toward an act of assumption. Jason Crawford seeks to make sense of Shakespeare's language of assumption by examining a cluster of terms—"take on," "take up," "bear," "bear with"—all complexly associated, in late medieval and early modern discourses, with the incarnation of Christ and with the ritual taking of Christ's body in the Eucharist. They are also associated with narrative representations of the assumption of Mary, in which the son she has borne and taken into herself now takes her up and bears her to heaven. Crawford shows how, in *King Lear*, these narratives and practices of assumption inform tragic action and suffering. He sets Shakespeare's play against the backdrop of ritual practice across the divide of the English Reformation, reflecting on how early modern cultural change matters to this tragic play's own ritual and cultural work.

Patrick Gray is concerned with how efforts to describe Shakespeare's tragedies and place them within the history of the genre have been long misled by dubious assumptions about Shakespeare's secularism dating back to the influence of German Romanticism. The use of concepts drawn from Aristotle's *Poetics* has been compromised, as well, by patterns of misinterpretation, reflecting the influence of Renaissance Protestants such as Melanchthon, who sought to reconcile classical tragedy with Christianity. As Aristotle uses the terms, *hamartia* does not mean sin; *anagnorisis* does not mean repentance. Gray argues that using these terms as euphemisms for these Christian concepts has allowed critics to avoid recognizing Shakespeare's indebtedness to the moral vision of Christianity. As in medieval biblical drama, tragedy for Shakespeare is the failure of a sinner to repent. Shakespeare represents repentance as a process that requires engagement with other people: an intersubjective transformation that Stanley Cavell calls "acknowledgment."

Shakespeare's career moves from an explicit concern with theatrical drama to an increasing concern with ethics that, Paul A. Kottman argues, led Shakespeare to stop writing tragedies. Shakespeare's late plays point to the pastness of tragedy—the pastness of the hope that formal embodiments of ethical traumas can be directed at a beholding audience in the hope of rectifying them. That is, Shakespeare thought that the formal representation of social and ethical crisis before an audience—the work of tragedy—could no longer, as such, hope to ameliorate it. Shakespeare understood, Kottman contends, that tragedy was not historically immune to the social-ethical crises it presented, and *this* recognition led to Shakespeare's more radical presentation of the *pastness* of art in his late plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

In the last article of the collection, Russ Leo takes up a neo-Latin tragedy by Daniel Heinsius, *Herodes Infanticida* (1632), which proved surprisingly controversial due to its depiction of Herod's dream in act 4, where the tyrant's late wife, Mariamne, and the three Furies (Tisiphone, Alecto, and Megaera) haunt him from a distinctly classical underworld. The contemporary French critic Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac censured Heinsius on two accounts: first, for mingling sacred and profane figures in a tragedy based on scripture; and second, for expecting audiences to understand the historical complexity of his depiction of Herod's dream. Balzac and Heinsius fundamentally disagree on the province of tragedy. Heinsius, in response, defended the historical and philological accuracy of his tragedy, claiming that Herod's affects are represented to him in the dream as aspects of familiar mythoi, pagan *and* Hebrew, not as allegories but as mental *personae* or noetic characters appropriate to the figure and period. For Heinsius, moreover, tragedy is a precise philosophical resource, enabling him to investigate aspects of agency and affect that exceed the resources of history and philology; tragedy allows audiences to understand the terms of representation as well as the historicity of affects and actions represented. If philology and history train our attention to languages and events, respectively, tragedy hones our attention to affect and probability, or *vraisemblance*.

◆

Notes

Some of the articles in this special issue are revised versions of presentations made at the conference "Tragedy, Recognition, Conversion" held at Duke University in October 2017, which was generously supported by the Duke Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, the Franklin Humanities Institute, and the McGill University Early Modern Conversions Project.

1 See the special issue "Unintended Reformations," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 46, no. 3 (2016).

2 See Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 127–29, 131, 133.