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FINAL SCENES IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the final scenes in Shakespeare's tragedies with the following questions in mind: Is there a repeated pattern in the design of Shakespeare's tragic endings? What is the function of the final scenes in the structure of the plays? How do the final scenes contribute to the total effect, i.e. what is their function from the point of view of audience response?

The plays taken into consideration will be those published in the First Folio under the heading of *Tragedies* — excluding *Cymbeline*, nowadays generally grouped with the late romances — as well as two historical plays, *Richard II* and *Richard III*, which can be regarded as both history plays and tragedies. The author's conclusions will be based on the evidence to be found in all of these plays — twelve altogether — as discussed in a general introductory section. Following this section will be a more detailed analysis of three plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*, the final scenes of which offer a particularly graphic illustration of the thesis. Special attention will be paid to that part of the final scene which follows the death of the protagonist, henceforth to be referred to as the "concluding section".

With respect to the question of a repeated pattern, it becomes evident after careful analysis that the final scenes of all of Shakespeare's tragedies have certain characteristics in common. In all of them the final catastrophe brings the death of the protagonist — or the dual protagonist, as in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra* — and usually the death of several other characters implicated in his fate. The hero dies on stage (with the exception only of Timon), either killed sword in hand (*Richard III*, *Titus*, *Richard II*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*), or taking his own life (*Romeo*, *Juliet*, *Brutus*, *Othello*, *Antony*, *Cleopatra*). Only Timon and Lear die in different circumstances. The protagonist is as

a rule given enough time before his death for a final address to the world¹. The "farewell speech" usually sums up the protagonist's attitude towards life and expresses his concept of himself. The dominant tone is that of pride; the hero often emphasizes the fact of his moral superiority and shows concern for his "honour", the reputation that will survive him. Thus, for example, Brutus asserts:

I shall have glory by this losing day,
More than Octavius and Mark Antony
By this vile conquest shall attain unto².

Coriolanus recalls the days of his triumphs, when

[...] like an eagle in a dove-cote I
Fluttered your Volcians in Corioles,

and Antony asks Cleopatra not to lament, but to think of

[...] those my former fortunes
Wherein I lived, the greatest prince o'th'world,
The noblest...

The death of the hero never ends the play, but is always followed by a concluding section, whose length varies, the average being about forty lines. All the characters involved in the main conflict of the drama are brought onto the stage, plus a number of extras, representing soldiers, courtiers, Roman citizens *etc.*³ A tribute is paid to the memory of the dead protagonist by one of his friends or, in some cases, by his victorious opponent (*Richard III* and *Macbeth* are the obvious exceptions to this rule).

"This was the noblest Roman of them all", admits Octavius over the body of Brutus; "As full of valour as of royal blood", reflects Exton, Richard's murderer; "he was great of heart", remarks Cassio, forgetting all the wrongs he has suffered from Othello; "Dead is the noble Timon", announces Alcibiades; "Let him be regarded / As the most noble corpse that ever herald / Did follow to his urn", declares one of the conspirators after the death of Coriolanus. Finally, all the tragedies end with a formal

¹ Titus and Lear are the only exceptions to this rule. In the case of *Timon of Athens* the protagonist's epitaph, expressing his bitterness and hate of mankind, might be regarded as his final address to the world.

² This and succeeding quotations from Shakespeare's tragedies are taken from: W. Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. Ch. J. Sisson, London 1964.

³ The actual number of actors on stage will obviously vary depending on the production. A crowded stage is suggested by the stage directions in the First Folio (e.g. "Enter Caesar and all his trains, marching"; "Enter with Drumme and Colours, Malcolm, Seyward, Rosse, Thanes and Soldiers"), or by the text itself (e.g. Lucius addressing Roman citizens at the end of *Titus Andronicus*).

speech delivered by the highest ranking individual, who acts as a representative of the state (the Prince in *Romeo and Juliet*, Lodovico in *Othello*), or by the person who will succeed the dead ruler (e.g. Richmond, Lucius, Bolingbroke, Octavius, Fortinbras, Malcolm). This concluding speech contains as a rule the promise of a ceremonial burial (as in *Julius Caesar*: "According to his virtue let us use him / With all respect, and rites of burial", or in *Antony and Cleopatra*: "Our army shall / In solemn show attend this funeral..."); it also expresses the general hope that justice will be done, villains and traitors appropriately punished, and law and order restored⁴.

The endings of Shakespeare's tragedies have elements of ritual and pageantry. There is an atmosphere of solemn ceremony as the representatives of the state and of the whole community gather around the body of the dead hero. The speeches are very formal and deliberate; there is often a display of royal and military pageantry, with flags, drums, and funeral music⁵.

In relation to the over-all structure of Shakespeare's tragedies the final scenes have a very important function. Practically all of the tragedies present a state of temporary disturbance caused by some evil acts, sometimes committed before the action begins. At the end of the plays we always witness the resolution of the conflict and the restoration of order.

The concern with order as opposed to chaos and anarchy is related to another characteristic feature of Shakespeare's tragedies. In all of them the protagonist's fate is closely connected with the life of the whole community, and often, especially when he is a king, his conduct affects the welfare of the whole nation⁶. The fact that the tragic protagonist does not act in a void, but in a concrete human context, is being impressed upon us throughout the play, and this impression is reinforced by the introduction of numerous secondary characters and sub-plots. In her discussion of tragedy Susanne Langer points to the existence of "comic substructure" in tragedy, that is, the flow of everyday life which forms the background for the protagonist's tragic destiny⁷. In great tragedies,

⁴ It should be noted that in his tragedies Shakespeare never makes use of the convention of Epilogue, whose function is partly taken over by the concluding section of the final scene.

⁵ Cf. F. W. Sternfeld, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy*, London 1963, p. 18.

⁶ The Tudor concept of monarchy, according to which the king was "the primum mobile or controlling sphere, within whose compass any other motion must be contained" (E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, New York 1944, p. 83), influenced greatly Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies. See also *Hamlet*, Act III, sc. 3, v. 12-24.

⁷ Cf. S. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, New York 1953.

and nowhere more than in Shakespeare, we are continually made aware of the fact that "even while each individual fulfils the tragic pattern [i.e. of growth, maturity, decline] it participates also in the comic continuity"⁸. The death of the hero completes the tragic rhythm of the action, but never ends the play. In the concluding section of the last scene the main plot (the protagonist's tragic destiny) is once more related to the "comic substructure" (on-going life).

Finally, the last scenes of the tragedies bring as a rule the resolution of the conflicts introduced in the course of the play, tying together all the threads so that no "loose ends" remain. From the structural point of view the endings often balance the opening scenes, thus providing a frame for the whole play.

In shaping our over-all response to the plays, the last scenes in Shakespeare's tragedies are of vital importance. Critics of the most divergent views agree that the final effect of great tragedies is not a feeling of dismay or sheer horror, but a sense of elation or even exultation. A possible explanation of this phenomenon is the assumption that watching a play is primarily an aesthetic experience, and our reaction is "the response kindled in the reader by the transmutation of experience into mimesis, of life into art, of routine into play"⁹. One aspect of the "aesthetic pleasure" we experience, is the satisfaction derived from watching a form being fulfilled. In his interesting article on the nature of dramatic illusion, Charles Morgan remarks: "Illusion, as I conceive it, is form in suspense [...] A play's performance occupies two or three hours. Until the end its form is latent in it"¹⁰. It is only after the last words have been spoken that the total design can be fully perceived. Thus the end of the play brings a release of the "formal suspense" and the long awaited fulfilment.

Apart from aesthetic considerations, a discussion of the impact of great tragedies has to take into account the philosophical content of the plays and its relevance to our view of life. Generalizations about a play's philosophy and its "message" are always questionable, and especially so in the case of Shakespeare's tragedies, which contain a number of sometimes contradictory statements on human life and man's position in the universe. Nevertheless, certain general conclusions can be ventured, for which supporting evidence is to be found in the last scenes of the tragedies.

The final catastrophe in Shakespeare's tragedies always leaves us with

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 363.

⁹ N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, N. Y. 1957, p. 93.

¹⁰ Ch. Morgan, *The Nature of Dramatic Illusion*, [in:] *The Context and Craft of Drama*, ed. R. W. Corrigan and J. L. Rosenberg, San Francisco 1964, p. 132—133.

a sense of great and irrevocable loss. A. C. Bradley observed that this impression of tragic waste is inseparably connected with the greatness of the tragic hero¹¹. Bradley's assumption has been since questioned by some critics, yet it cannot be denied that Shakespearean heroes, though never perfect beings, are always men above the average. It is in the last scenes that their uncommon qualities are fully brought to light. In the course of the play our attitude to the main protagonist is likely to change and we may occasionally be antagonized by his conduct. The end brings the full realization of the character's potentialities. The heroic death of the protagonist, the dignity of his last words and the homage paid to him by both his friends and opponents convince us of his spiritual greatness and call forth our sympathy and moral approval. This happens also when the protagonist dies by committing suicide. It is interesting to note, that though Shakespeare apparently regarded suicide as a transgression of God's "canon against self-slaughter", nevertheless in the endings of his tragedies it is always presented as an act of ultimate courage, performed in a "high Roman fashion", and it sometimes takes on the quality of expiation, of self-punishment (cf. *Othello*). Only in two tragedies — *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, is the last scene meant to strengthen our moral condemnation of the character and elicit our satisfaction in his just punishment. Yet even in these plays the valiant behaviour of these "tragic villains" as they defy fate and prepare to fight to the very last, reveals the potential for greatness in them and makes us regret their moral decline.

Shakespeare's tragedies — as has already been mentioned — always end with the restoration of order. In most plays, and especially in those whose main conflict is the struggle for political power, this means first of all the end of civil strife and of political anarchy — a frequent motif in the plays of the period which needed above all political stability¹². At the same time, however, the endings of all the tragedies bring the vindication of a moral order, of a natural law which binds all human beings¹³. It has often been observed that the principle of poetic justice does not operate in the conclusions of Shakespeare's tragedies, as the innocent suffer just as much as, and sometimes even more than the guilty. Nonetheless, the forces of evil are always defeated and the evil-doers appropriately punished. Evil is presented in Shakespeare as an

¹¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, London 1956, p. 22—23.

¹² Cf. N. Frye's remark: "The central theme of Elizabethan history is the unifying of the nation and binding of the audience into the myth as the inheritors of that unity, set over against the disasters of civil war and weak leadership" (*Specific Forms of Drama*, [in:] *The Context and Craft of Drama*, p. 216).

¹³ On the Elizabethan concept of order see Tillyard, *op. cit.*, p. 7—14.

aberration, a violation of the cosmic moral order; its triumph is short-lived and the villains usually become agents of their own destruction (cf. Iago, Richard III, Claudius, Macbeth and others)¹⁴.

Thus the endings of Shakespeare's tragedies could be called "optimistic tragic endings", as they bring the re-affirmation of man's potentialities and the vindication of certain fundamental moral values. Death is never the final chord in these plays and in the "concluding sections" we are, as a rule, taken beyond the tragic conclusion into some vision of a brighter future¹⁵.

Relevant to the discussion of audience response is the question of the function of the "concluding sections" as a transitional phase between the spectator's absorption in the world of the play and the return to reality. A full discussion of this problem is outside the scope of the present paper as it would have to take into consideration the complex question of "psychical distance" or the "aesthetic attitude" towards a work of art¹⁶. It seems undeniable, however, that the majority of spectators — especially the less sophisticated ones — tend to identify themselves with the tragic protagonist and become emotionally involved in the development of dramatic action. In the last scenes of Shakespeare's tragedies there is usually a quick succession of dramatic events and a steady raising of tension, culminating in the death of the protagonist. In the "concluding sections" the pace of the action slows down, the emotions subside, the tension is gradually relaxed; it is now possible to "step back" and to look at the whole play from a more detached viewpoint, as the emotional involvement gives way to reflection and final judgment.

Of the three plays chosen for a closer analysis, *Romeo and Juliet* and

¹⁴ Also in this respect Shakespeare follows the dramatic tradition of his times. On the theme of the inevitable defeat of evil in the so-called homiletic tragedies and in the contemporary vice comedies see D. M. Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlowe*, Harvard University Press, 1962, pp. 162 and 177. Cf. also the concluding lines of Gorbuduc, expressing most explicitly the belief which informs many Elizabethan tragedies:

For right will always live, and rise at length
But wrong can never take deep root to last.

The theme of evil destroying itself, as the villains fall in their own traps, was fully exploited in Elizabethan revenge tragedies (cf. H. Gardner, *The Historical Approach: Hamlet*, [in:] W. Shakespeare, *The Tragedies*, ed. A. Harbage, Englewood Cliffs, N. Y. 1964, p. 64—65).

¹⁵ The announcement of the restoration of order and of better times to come is best illustrated by the final words of Lucius in *Titus Andronicus*: "Then afterwards, to order well the state, / That such events may ne'er it ruin".

¹⁶ See S. Langer, *The Dramatic Illusion*, [in:] *The Context and Craft of Drama*, p. 18—19.

Hamlet conform to the basic pattern of Shakespeare's tragic endings and in *King Lear* this pattern is greatly modified.

The last scene of *Romeo and Juliet* has most of the characteristic elements of the pattern. The suicides of the lovers are presented as heroic acts, the ultimate affirmation of their greatness of soul and of the intensity of their passion. Both lovers deliver farewell speeches expressing their defiance of the "inauspicious stars" which caused their separation. Their death is followed by the arrival of the representatives of the two hostile families and of the Prince who represents the state. The existence of the cosmic law of retribution is affirmed as the Prince points to the just, though severe, verdicts of heaven:

[...] Capulet, Montague,
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.

The lives of Romeo and Juliet are the price paid for the restoration of law and order disturbed so long by the enmity of the two families. A solemn funeral is not directly announced, but Montague promises to raise a golden statue of "true and faithful Juliet", and Capulet an equally rich one of Romeo. The Prince delivers the final speech in which he assures that justice will be meted out ("Some shall be pardoned, and some punished"), and so a "glooming peace" is established.

The "concluding section" of the final scene of *Romeo and Juliet* is exceptionally long — 138 lines — and has little dramatic action; nevertheless, it forms an integral part of the total design (though, perhaps, it could be a little shorter). The structure of *Romeo and Juliet* can be compared to the sonata form, in which the main themes are introduced in the Exposition, undergo different transformations in the course of the Development, and reappear in the Recapitulation to be finally resolved in the Coda. In the opening scene of *Romeo and Juliet* the two main themes — that of hatred and that of love — are introduced. At the beginning of the play we witness a fight between the representatives of the two hostile families and the Prince's efforts to restore order; as the Montagues and the Capulets with their followers leave the stage, Romeo enters, talking about love, his love for Rosaline. The elaborate and artificial rhetoric of his complaint convinces us that his is still a very immature passion, an assumed pose rather than a genuine feeling. Nevertheless, the sentiment which will later dominate the play is already there, and the phrase: "o brawling love, o loving hate", used by Romeo in his lament, foreshadows the coming events. As the play develops, the theme of love is fully worked out; it undergoes various transformations until we finally see Romeo and Juliet united for ever in their "triumph-

ant grave". The theme of hatred is given a parallel development culminating in the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt. In the concluding section of the final scene the discord between love and hate is resolved into harmony as the Montagues and the Capulets express mutual forgiveness over the bodies of their children. Thus the closing scene balances the opening one and completes the structure of the play.

The ending of *Romeo and Juliet* takes us beyond the fact of individual death and allows us to see the story of the lovers in a wider perspective. Throughout the play the lovers are shown as acting in a specific social context as the passionate intensity of their love is set against the matrix of everyday reality, represented by such characters as the nurse, the servants, citizens of Verona and others. At the end of the play almost all the characters involved directly or indirectly in the main conflict are brought onto the stage — some alive and some dead — and are finally re-united. Thus love ultimately triumphs over hatred. Romeo and Juliet are dead but life goes on and the values they have died for are carried over into the lives of other people.

The "concluding section" in *Romeo and Juliet* facilitates the shift from an emotional involvement in the world of the play to a more detached attitude. Drama like this tends to evoke a highly emotional response as the spectators become absorbed in the misfortunes of the lovers, sharing in their passions, hopes and frustrations. The final scene is particularly charged with emotion; the pace of the action increases rapidly and the tension rises steadily from the moment Romeo enters the tomb until the death of the lovers. In the "concluding section" the lengthy accounts of the Friar, of the servants, and of the Prince provide a commentary on the tragic events just witnessed; at the same time the audience is given ample time to recover from the shock of the lovers' death and to reflect on the play from a position of greater distance.

Hamlet is a very different play from *Romeo and Juliet*, but a close analysis of its ending reveals a similar pattern. Hamlet's death is the price paid for his attempt to vindicate the moral order violated by the "foul and most unnatural murder" committed by Claudius. Hamlet dies heroically, "sword in hand". In his farewell speech he shows concern for his reputation:

[...] what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me

and for the future of Denmark:

But I do prophesy th' election lights
On Fortinbras, he has my dying voice.

The eulogy of the dead hero is divided between Horatio ("Now cracks a noble heart") and Fortinbras ("For he was likely, had he been put on / To have proved most royal"). In the closing scene the stage is crowded and there is a display of pageantry (cf. the First Folio stage directions: "Enter Fortinbras and English Ambassador, with Drumme, Colours, and Attendants"). Hamlet is promised a ceremonial burial:

[...] and for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him,

and as his body is borne off the stage "a Peale of Ordenance are shot off".

The sudden arrival of Fortinbras may seem unjustified, a *deus ex machina*; the Fortinbras scene, however, has a very important function in the structure of the whole drama. As in *Romeo and Juliet* it is possible to relate the closing scene to the opening one. In the first scene of the play we see soldiers guarding Elsinore Castle and we learn about the threat of Fortinbras to recover by force the territories lost by Norway in combat with the old Hamlet. We realize that Fortinbras is a menace not only to the person of the King, but also to the whole state of Denmark. Thus the political dimension of the play becomes apparent from the very beginning. In the course of the play we hear several times about this young, valiant and energetic prince, warring with Polacks and waiting for an opportunity to settle his old accounts with the Danes. Such an opportunity unexpectedly presents itself, as all the candidates to the Danish throne murder one another, and Fortinbras is there just in time to claim his rights. However, at this particular moment he appears no longer as a menace to the welfare of the state, but as a hope for strong and efficient rule which will restore peace and order in the unhappy kingdom of Denmark. Just as the death of Hamlet is the fulfilment of his individual destiny, so the coming of Fortinbras brings the resolution of the conflict in its political dimension. Thus at the end of the play we are once more reminded of the fact that what we have watched was not a domestic drama, but the tragedy of a prince, involving the fate of the whole community.

The final scene in *Hamlet* is the most influential in shaping our over-all response to the protagonist. In the course of the play the audience might have been momentarily put off by Hamlet's cruel treatment of Ophelia or his lack of scruple in sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death; in the final scene, however, he wins back our sympathy and admiration. All his best qualities are demonstrated once more: his intellectual brilliance and sense of humour (in the scene with Osric), his

finally-achieved maturity ("the readiness is all"), his generosity and kindness shown in his conduct towards Laertes, and, finally, his capacity for quick and decisive action. The manner of his death, the poetry of his last words and of Horatio's farewell, the tribute paid to him by Fortinbras — all these contribute to the final impression of the essential nobility and spiritual greatness of Hamlet.

Finally, the "concluding section" of the last scene of *Hamlet* permits us to look back at the dramatic events we have witnessed and to take in fully their significance. From the beginning of Act V, sc. 2, dramatic events follow with a bewildering speed. The duel with Laertes, the disclosure of the King's treacherous plot, the deaths of Laertes and of the Queen, Hamlet's final act of revenge — it is as if a swift avalanche has swept over the stage, destroying the plotters and the intended victims alike. The death of Hamlet is the final chord in this violent scene; from that moment the pace of the action slows down, the tension is gradually relaxed. Horatio's concise summing up of events serves a function similar to that of the long and detailed account of the Friar in *Romeo and Juliet*. The play becomes present to our mind as a whole as we listen to Horatio promising Fortinbras to tell him

Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And in this upshot, of purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

King Lear is one of the most controversial of Shakespeare's plays and its ending has perplexed and shocked many critics and spectators. For the purpose of analysis, the final scene can be divided into two parts, the dividing point being the entrance of Lear with Cordelia's body in his arms. Up to that moment all the events seem to be leading to a happy ending¹⁷. Evil proves once more to be self-destructive as Regan dies poisoned by her sister and Goneril commits suicide. Edmund is mortally wounded in a duel with Edgar and so the forces of good are finally triumphant. We seem to be watching the cosmic law of retribution in operation, and, in Albany's words:

This judgement of heavens, that makes us tremble
Touches us not with pity.

¹⁷ For the Elizabethan audience, the tragic ending of *King Lear* must have been particularly surprising and disappointing, as the story of Lear had been dramatized before Shakespeare and the play entitled *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters, Gonorill, Ragan and Cordella*, ended happily with Cordella's army victorious and the old king restored to his throne. See also W. Ostrowski, "Historia prawdziwa" Reja i "Król Lear" Szekspira, [in:] *Romans i dramat*, Warszawa 1970.

The entrance of Lear, carrying Cordelia's body, is a shock which destroys all hope of a happy solution and breaks the decorum of a ceremonial ending. Lear's almost incoherent moans and imprecations are in marked contrast to Albany's formal and deliberate utterances. Albany begins to deliver the conventional "distribution-of-justice-and-restoration-of-order" speech in which he promises to restore the old king to power and asserts that

[...] All friends shall taste
The wages of their virtue, and all foes
The cup of their deservings.

However, the wild despair of Lear makes Albany break his speech in bewilderment. Finally, Lear dies. His is not a heroic death, but the passing away of a man who has gone beyond the limits of human endurance. He is given no time for the final address to the world, the final message. The scene which follows the death of the protagonist is exceptionally short (18 lines). Instead of the usual tribute paid to the hero's greatness and nobility, we have Kent's comment, expressing his amazement at the old king's capacity for endurance ("The wonder is, he hath endured so long"). There is no hint of the "solemn show" of burial rites, as Albany gives the blunt command: "Bear them from hence". Albany addresses Edgar and Kent and asks them to "rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain". Kent, however, refuses any responsibilities; he is weary of life and wishes to follow his master. There is no final "back-to-order" speech, no announcement of a better future, and the play closes on Edgar's enigmatic words:

The weight of this sad time we must obey.
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long¹⁸.

An analysis of the function of the final scene in relation to the over-all structure of *King Lear* must involve the question of the play's central theme and its meaning. According to some critics, the central theme of this tragedy is a painful search for truth, in which all illusions and false appearances are gradually being discarded. In the light of this interpretation, the closing scene of the play can be seen as forming a deliberate contrast to the opening one. *King Lear* begins with the holding of court, and critics have pointed to the ritualistic elements of this scene, its pomp and balanced ceremony¹⁹. From the start Lear betrays a weak-

¹⁸ These lines are given to Albany by Quarto — Albany being the person of highest rank left alive, but to Edgar by Folio.

¹⁹ Cf. W. Frost, *Shakespeare's Rituals and the Opening Scene of "King Lear"*, [in:] W. Shakespeare, *Tragedies*, ed. L. Lerner, London 1964, p. 161—168.

ness for ceremony and all its trappings, and an inability to distinguish between the appearance and the inner reality. At the end of the play there is a striking absence of form and ceremony, all "outward show" is done away with and the characters "speak what they feel, not what they ought to say".

Many critics see in *King Lear* an expression of a deeply pessimistic view of life, the product of a "period of gloom" in the author's life, and they find supporting evidence for their interpretation in the last scene of the play. Indeed, the only consolation at the end of *King Lear* seems to be the hope that "we that are young, shall never see so much, nor live so long". Even *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare's most bitter play, ends on a more optimistic note, as Alcibiades promises to use the olive with his sword and to "make war breed peace". For Jan Kott, the central theme of *King Lear* is "the decay and fall of the world" which is not healed again at the end of the play²⁰. On the other hand, the play has been also interpreted as a drama of redemption, presenting the triumph of Christian values in a pagan world²¹.

An exhaustive discussion of various, often widely divergent critical opinions on *King Lear* is outside the scope of the present paper. It can only be stated here that in the final scene of this play Shakespeare departs from the recurrent pattern of his tragic endings. It might be argued that in a certain sense the conclusion of *King Lear* is an "optimistic tragic ending", as it brings the defeat of the forces of evil and the affirmation of the potential for good in man. However, the usual announcement of the coming of better times is absent from the ending of *King Lear* and there is no attempt to take us beyond the fact of individual death into a vision of some brighter future. In the "concluding section" the audience is given practically no time to recover from the shock of the horrors witnessed, and the final note of the play is one of unrelieved sadness and weariness with life.

The reasons which induced Shakespeare to depart from the pattern of "optimistic tragic endings", accepted in his other tragedies, can be the subject of various conjectures. His decision may be interpreted as the result of the author's deepening pessimism and his belief that lasting peace, harmony and order can never be attained in this world. It could

²⁰ J. Kott (*Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, London 1965, p. 123) draws a parallel between *King Lear* and Beckett's *Endgame*, and finds in *King Lear* — and especially in its final scene — an illustration of the absurdity of human existence in a world incomprehensible and cruel.

²¹ See C. J. Sisson, *Shakespeare's Tragic Justice*, London 1964. For this critic "the end of the play is surely the triumph of love, of positive goodness" (p. 96).

also be connected with the fact that in his later plays Shakespeare becomes increasingly preoccupied with the growth and change of character, rather than with history and politics. This shift of emphasis is particularly evident in two of his tragedies, namely in *King Lear* and in *Othello*. It is surely not accidental that in both of these plays the "concluding section" is much shorter than in other tragedies (18 lines in *King Lear*, 13 in *Othello*). In *King Lear*, though the play also deals with the struggle for political power, it is not politics, but Lear's purgatorial journey and his spiritual regeneration that are in the foreground; in *Othello*, the political problems, such as the war with the Turks and the defence of Cyprus, are kept in the background and our whole attention is directed towards the effects of Iago's satanic plot on the protagonist's mind and soul. Thus the resolution of the conflict in its political dimension is of little interest in these plays and there is less emphasis on the on-going life of the community; what matters most is the "tragic rhythm" of the protagonist's life, the fulfilment of his individual destiny.

To conclude, it should be emphasized that the main purpose of the present article has been to point to the recurrence of a basic pattern in the endings of Shakespeare's tragedies and to examine the function of the final scenes, and in particular of their "concluding sections" in relation to audience response. Some aspects of the function of the final scenes in relation to the over-all structure of the plays have also been touched upon. Underlying the discussion of audience response was the assumption that in spite of the tragic catastrophe the endings of Shakespeare's tragedies are in some way optimistic and uplifting. It has been suggested that the departure from the pattern in the final scene of *King Lear* is to a great extent responsible for the general feeling that this play is more pessimistic and depressing than Shakespeare's other tragedies (perhaps with the exception of *Othello*, where the pattern is also — though less drastically — modified). Finally, it should be stressed that a detailed historical analysis of Shakespeare's tragedies in the context of the whole of Elizabethan drama has not been the main objective of the author, though Shakespeare's indebtedness to the dramatic conventions of his times has occasionally been indicated.

KOŃCOWE SCENY SZEKSPIROWSKICH TRAGEDII

STRESZCZENIE

Zasadniczym celem pracy jest zwrócenie uwagi na podstawowy schemat struktury końcowych scen Szekspirowskich tragedii. Schemat ten pojawia się w różnych wariantach, w zasadzie jednak obejmuje następujące człony: gwałtowna śmierć

protagonisty, jego ostatnia przedśmiertna wypowiedź, hołd złożony jego pamięci, zapowiedź uroczystego pogrzebu, mowa końcowa przedstawiciela władzy państwowej zapowiadająca przywrócenie ładu i ukaranie winnych jego zakłócenia. Zakończenia Szekspirowskich tragedii zawierają także pewne stałe elementy rytualistyczne i widowiskowe. Omawiając ostatnie sceny poszczególnych tragedii autorka wskazuje na modyfikacje, jakie Szekspir wprowadza do wspomnianego schematu, i twierdzi, że są one logicznie i artystycznie umotywowane; bardziej szczegółowo ilustruje to na przykładzie trzech wybranych dramatów — *Romea i Julii*, *Hamleta*, *Króla Lira* — zastanawiając się m. in. nad przyczynami i konsekwencjami wyraźnego odejścia od schematu w zakończeniu *Króla Lira*.

Analizując funkcje ostatnich scen, autorka podkreśla ich znaczenie dla wywołania zamierzonej reakcji emocjonalnej u widzów, a także ich decydujący wpływ na formowanie się ostatecznej oceny moralnej postępowania głównego bohatera. Zakończenia większości tragedii zawierają akcenty optymistyczne. Śmierć protagonisty nie jest nigdy momentem kończącym sztukę, a w zakończeniu tragedia jednolitości zostaje ukazana w szerszej perspektywie (życie bohatera ceną za przywrócenie porządku społecznego i moralnego). Ponadto zadaniem scen zamykających tragedie ("concluding sections of the final scenes") jest rozładowanie napięcia wywołanego gwałtownym rozwojem dramatycznych wypadków prowadzących do śmierci protagonisty. W scenach tych następuje wyraźne zwolnienie, a czasem wręcz zatrzymanie akcji, dzięki czemu widz ma czas ochłonąć i spojrzeć na świat scenicznych wydarzeń z większego dystansu. Współdziałanie powyższych elementów w zakończeniach szekspirowskich tragedii pełni istotną funkcję estetyczną, a także psychologiczną i ułatwia widzowi przejście z „rzeczywistości teatralnej” do rzeczywistości go otaczającej.

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