

## Hotchpotch

**Shakespeare and Tragedy**, by John Bayley, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981. 228 pp. \$25.00 (paper \$10.95).

THE GROSS OUTPUT of the Shakespeare Industry standing between the contemporary reader and the time (say) of A. C. Bradley must confront any reviewer approaching a book on Shakespeare's plays. Indeed, John Bayley, Thomas Wharton Professor of English Literature at Oxford University, in his latest book inevitably is conscious of this very problem, for he is not a critic who can create original terms of reference through either his ideas or the authority and character of his critical language. To his credit, neither is he the type of academic who can openly offer a set of marginal modifications to "the major critical heritage" without embarrassment; he feels that any addition in the field needs justification. This awareness does not (alas) produce happy results.

His introductory section lays claim to a systematic approach to Shakespearean tragedy informed by a knowledge of "up-to-date critical methods" including the tenets of structuralism and semiotics. Bayley manages to convey a respect for "reading the text as a multiple code" (and allied desiccated intellectualizing) while seemingly judiciously dissociating himself from the metallic coils of this system. To be fair, this introduction turns out in part to be window-dressing aimed at the modish reader, to jazz up the approach and provide what is in fact an illusion of comprehensiveness of reference. In the body of the study, however, we are left with the paradox that two incompatibles, the "art as artefact" mechanics of structuralism and an insistently emotional interpretation, can be apparently combined.

The title of the opening chapter, "The King's Ship," is in itself a typical piece of cleverness; many have written on the theme of Kingship in Shakespeare, but this use of Ariel's speech from *The Tempest*

(1.ii 196-201) "I boarded the King's ship . . ." is knowingly different. These lines along with the Dover cliff scene between Edgar and Gloucester in *King Lear* are made to exemplify what are seen as "angelic moments" where the artist, through his conjuring with poetry of intense description, can arouse the audience's response and "do what he wants" with his material with complete anonymity. Bayley calls this process a freedom affecting not only the artist and the audience but also the tragic characters of the plays:

The art of Shakespeare draws our attention to how free we are from its own material and manipulation. Dover cliff gives us a special awareness of such freedom; and it seems the same kind of awareness that tantalises the consciousness of Lear and Macbeth, Hamlet and Othello. To be aware of it, and yet to be deprived of it, is for them the most absolute part of tragedy.

He goes on to refer to the "mystery" of Shakespeare's art (that functions in this way) by connecting it with the famous anthology passage about the salmon-fishers from Marvell's *On Appleton House*:

These fishermen, not mice-like figures on a beach, are employing an ingenuity in transporting their craft which Marvell's metaphysical wit is well able to take advantage of. The scene, though, makes the same kind of exuberant statement. The dark hemisphere becomes one with the actors and the scene is closed. An angel looking from Dover cliff, or from where Marvell is standing, might in his nature see things as this poetry describes them for us; but only such art gives us the momentary trick of angelic apprehension. From it we turn back into nature, to live and die.

This is all most confusing; art is seen as a trick but yet gives us an awareness that is beyond device or artifice; but one's main sense must be of an approach to literature throughout the book which seems designed to enable the critic to manipulate whatever

material chosen so that an ingeniously elaborate thesis can be extracted. One thinks rather of the self-conscious conceits during an Oxford tragedy lecture calculated to arouse the admiration of the undergraduate audience than of the responsible tone of a serious critic. The closing allusion to death neatly anticipates the theme of the second chapter, "The Natures of Death," which in terms of a general discourse on the function of death in tragedy outlines the emphasis Bayley places on the dramatic role of death in Shakespeare's tragedies. This interest leads to analyses of the behavior and psychology of the tragic heroes taken up in the later chapters, which are concerned with the formulation that Shakespeare's tragic art hinges round the dramatization in various ways of the miscast hero, the protagonist who has a fundamental incompatibility with the situation of the play he is in.

Behind all this, besides the structuralistically-influenced view of approaching Shakespeare's art rather as a sociologist would a puppet-show, is most obviously a concept of tragedy that points to classical drama. As early as the introduction it is said of Shakespeare's tragedies that they "add nothing to a traditional tragic formula but produce a different result. The tragic characters avoid their roles by performing them in their own way." And the book abounds in phrases such as "the proper effects," "tragic specifications," and "the forms of tragedy." Perhaps the writer's unexpected admiration of Shakespeare for breaking free from "the classical construction" goes hand-in-hand with his constant invoking of the classical yardstick, but I prefer to see it as another unresolved "paradox," and one not conducive to a sympathetic reading of Shakespeare. A distinction is made between *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, "in which the function of incompatibility is to bring us as far as possible into the world of consciousness, that of the protagonist expanding into our own, and that of the play as a whole," and *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*, "in which incompatibility declares itself as something

from which a moral can be drawn, a case can be sketched." Finally, of the main tragedies *Troilus and Cressida* and *King Lear*, which receives a quite perverse reading, are special cases which fall outside this classification.

One's comment on the concrete results of these theoretical trappings as seen in the chapter-studies of the individual plays must be that little in fact is very arresting, which is not surprising for in effect the basic classifications of the tragedies are also hardly revolutionary. Bayley's readings of *Timon of Athens* in Chapter 3 ("The Big Idea") and of *Troilus and Cressida* (whimsically entitled "Longings and Homesickness") are really straightforward traditional interpretations whose only claim to originality comes from over-emphasis or a kind of excited juggling. *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, too, despite the periodic extreme distortions of emphasis, receive what boil down to be conventional accounts. The last chapter, a longer one on the author's key grouping, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, does not seem more than a dabbling in protracted character-study in supercharged variants of the eighteenth century plus Bradley formulas.

What do the seven chapters of the book add up to? At every turn one encounters (structuralism apart) well-trodden paths that are at times camouflaged by pyrotechnical sophistry. There is no substantial center to these chapters, and even internal schematic unity is lacking in some, as the several episodic and oddly-titled subsections ("The Inappropriate World" and "The Man and the Fate," etc.) demonstrate. The bulk of the book is made up of the writer's choice of purple passages and favorite scenes from the plays tricked out with an illusion of exegesis and weighted down by a ballast of name-dropping: Barthes, Beckett, Brecht, Conrad (*The Heart of Darkness*, of course), Dickens, Günter Grass, Keats, Pinter, Pirandello (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*), Sterne, Velasquez, Whitman, Virginia Woolf, and several more.

However, the writer raises expectations

from his first chapter that he is going to present an approach that is in keeping with his time, that is most up-to-date contemporary, while including a distillation of the most significant observations that have been expressed in the past. This is his conscious justification, and it is an implicit one. This accounts for the hotchpotch spirit of the work, where the silliest whimsy such as, "In this tragedy, death is, as it were, on the side of Othello, who does not really seem to have killed anybody, even the turbaned Turk, even himself," can be yoked without apparent violence to the most sentimental modern social earnestness (whether or not derived from Bradley)

as seen in an emotional emphasis on the glimpse of the world of everyday living in the minor characters of the tragedies and in such utterances as " 'trifling with despair' is routine practice to anyone trying to look after the old" (on Edgar's treatment of his father) and "It is obvious enough that a man as sensitive and imaginative as Macbeth is not well suited to the tasks he sets himself . . ." or "All minds contain an Othello and Iago. . . ."

If the spirit of our time is a hotchpotch, then this book has indeed encapsulated it.

Reviewed by L. R. LEAVIS