

David Scott KASTAN: Shakespeare and the  
Shapes of Time  
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While some of years ago Ricardo Quionones wrote about The Renaissance Discovery of Time, David Scott Kastan's book Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time suggests that we should speak of the Renaissance "explorations" of time, a changing awareness, rather than "discovery".

In the Middle Ages time was understood as historia sacra, as the stage of providential history, as the theatre of God's beneficent action. In the Renaissance it "increasingly becomes the source of anxiety. The bells that tolled the canonical hours and attested to the way to mechanical clocks that mark the moment by moment annihilation of the present".  
/p.5/

Kastan's whose approach is grounded in his unique and appealing genre-theory and he argues that Shakespeare's dramas are "not merely literary conventions but ethical categories" /p.171/. His greatly original insight is that with Shakespeare "the individual genre stands for a complete though hypothetical model of the world" /p.173/. And "genre becomes a way of imagining time as it shapes and is shaped by humankind" /p.179/.

E.D. Hirsch Jr. has demonstrated that genre is a crucial category in understanding the "meaning" of a work of art. Kastan is right when he argues that Shakespeare's plays are not simply "reflections of reality" but "each genre is a provisional and explanatory version of reality... a rich, resonant metaphor of what might be true" /p.33/.

The critic, who maintains that "Shakespeare's encounter with time is dramatic and not discursive" /p.6/ attempts a purely literary analysis and successfully avoids the danger of imposing alien criteria of value which are inherent in his subject-matter. He briefly sketches the two models of historical time: the providential-linear-directional-developmental model of the patristic tradition and the exemplary-cyclical-repetative views of the humanistic heritage. He thereby illustrates how Shakespeare had affinity with both traditions. His whole approach, however, remains embedded in his structural genre-theory. Similarly to Northrop Frye he finds "that fictions representing reality in one age are usually inadequate in another" /p.7/.

Kastan then sets out to distinguish three shapes of time in the plays and finds that the first shape is linear and open corresponding to the history plays "That emphasizes the contingency of human action and the artificiality of the dramatic field of vision" /p.23/. The second shape is that of the tragedies that are linear and terrifyingly closed. "The gaze of the tragedies is not set on the ineluctable process of history but is contracted to focus upon the fate of the individual as he tests or tested by the limits of his humanity" /p.26/. The third shape that corresponds to the romances is again linear and open-ended, "but in their luminous ending... signal the way to the perfect revelation of the meaning of time that will come at the Final Judgement" /p.32/. Kastan rejects the often upheld view that there is a cyclical progress of time in the romances. He finds that the circularity is rather renewal than recurrence, "it must be understood axiological rather than structural".

I think that the structural distinctions between the histories and the tragedies are not flexible enough.

The elements of the tragedies are already present in the history plays and the tragedies are likewise touched by the historical atmosphere. Shakespeare's shift to tragedies seems to witness the process how the time-scale of events have immediately shrunk and what was acted out as an epic flow in the panorama of history is now contracted and condensed upon a single character or situation. Instead of labelling both structures "linear" I would suggest to introduce the technical terms "horizontal" and "vertical". I find that the histories obey the rhythm of a horizontal flux-time while a vertical pattern can be observed in the tragedies. Kastan is also aware of Susan Langer's remark that "tragedy is cadential form" /p.27/. Tragedy has been described since Chaucer /or even since the days of Lucifer!/ as a fall from prosperity into misery. And it would appear that the Elizabethan sense of tragedy has much inherited from the medieval ideas of the edless movement of the blind wheel of fortune. Thus I see that the shape of tragedy has more affinity with the cyclic view of time.

When discussing the shapes of histories Kastan says that the Corpus Christi miracles are the real sources of the history plays and not the moralities. The origins of Tudor providentialism may be discovered in the pattern of salvation-history, particularly in the eschatological tone of Bale's King Johan. Kastan reports that after Tillyard's book /1944/ the idea of the providentialism of Tudor historiography as represented by Hall, Holinshed has too often imposed on Shakespeare's dramas. Recent critics tried to challenge Tillyard's providentialism. Kastan, however, does not reject that the idea of providence is present in the history-plays but he argues that it is "held up for critical examination" /p.17/.

The chapter Tragic Closure and Tragic Disclosure is a penetrating and exhaustive meditation upon the essence of tragic time. Tragic time is existential and personal, it is experienced by the individual when "time is at his period". "Tragedy finds a shape and significance in the temporality of the individual life rather than in the continuous flow of history" /p.80/. With the death of the hero the tragic structure closes. It contradicts the morality structure and contradicts the Christian view of time where death and the mystery of human suffering are transcended. In the tragedy there is no restorative process, "death has its sting, the grave its victory".

Macbeth seems apparently to be an exception, because at the end of the drama we read that "time is free", the evil-infected world seems to be purged from the destructive power. However, argues Kastan, the position of the hero who feels like being "tied to a stake" is both heroic and tragic. "At the heart of the tragedy is the realization that death and destruction are inescapable, an immanent, not merely imminent reality" /p.101/.

Some critics have argued that in King Lear the inherent morality structure and the redemptive aspect transcends "the image of that horror". Kastan acknowledges that there is a tone in the play suggesting that truth and justice will eventually prevail in the sense of the traditional emblem Veritas Filia Temporis. Yet, we should not neglect the device of irony in the play in the way Elton had demonstrated it. After the emblematic relief of Act IV the inevitable human suffering is re-affirmed in Act V. There is no redemption in this world, there is no cosmic optimism, "Lear cannot be saved by /or in/ time, he can only be saved from it" /p.126/. For all that, however, we cannot deny

that authentic human existence is born out of the tragic depth.

The romance structure is open again but it involves and at the same time transcends the tragic experience.

The end is a real restoration and redemption. The example of Cymbeline shows how it is a "reworking of King Lear in a different mode" /p.159/.

The closing chapter compares Hotspur and Brutus as "the fools of time" because "they never properly understand the risks and gains of living in time" /p.169/.

On the whole the problems Kastan tackles in his book are vivid and relevant not only for a Shakespeare-scholar but for every human being who has been concerned with the vexed questions and ultimate significance of human existence. Indeed, this is a genuine and marvellous book on Shakespeare subtly suggesting how artistic form and shape can respond to what philosophy or discursive thinking have failed to exhaustively answer.

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