

**How Tragic are the Tragedies?**

**Coriolanus**

**and**

**Macbeth**

**A paper prepared for the  
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by John Robinson  
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## INTRODUCTION

Back some years ago, when this common suburban preacher was a student at Meadville Theological School, the powers that were decided to infect the students with an appreciation for the arts. Accordingly we were taken one evening to the studio of an artist on the north side of Chicago. His name, as best I can recall, was Packard. Among his works was a painting that quite fascinated me. It was a rendering of a slum building wall. The adjoining building had been torn down but the plaster walls of the now missing building, and the outlines of staircases and walls were left. The effect of the pastel plaster walls, the geometric shapes made where the walls and stairs had been, was quite beautiful. In fact since viewing that painting I have found that the walls of similar buildings in festering slums often have a similar beauty, quite unexpected. This beauty when discovered in the wilds (of the slums), is properly called "found art." In any case, I have been grateful to Mr. Packard ever since for having opened me to beauty in unexpected places.

In the course of conversation, Mr. Packard explained that this particular painting had been sold to wealthy patrons on several occasions, but each time after being hung in some lavish home it had returned to him. As an explanation he suggested closer examination of the painting. The accuracy of the painting was remarkable, for there, scrawled on the walls, were tiny words which in those early sixties would appear in print only as s--t or f--k or motherf-----. The obscene graffiti was precisely to scale, and seen only as the painting was studied. Its realism became too clear to the patrons and it was returned to the artist. He had by then decided to keep it as his own.

There is, I think, a parallel between Mr. Packard's art and William Shakespeare's tragedies. In Mr. Packard's art there is intertwined with the stench of the slum and the destruction of urban renewal, a beauty; yet that beauty is

not pristine for it is interwoven with obscenities scrawled across its face. In William Shakespeare's tragedies we find good and evil, beauty and ugliness, light and dark, inextricably interwoven through the fabric of life, escapable perhaps only by chance, by luck, or by grace. Shakespeare sees tragedy in the complexity of life, not in injustice alone, or in the triumph of evil, but because reason is inadequate to understand the complexity of existence. Says Shakespeare, "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together; our virtues would be proud, if our faults whipt them not; and our crimes would despair, if they were not cherish'd by our virtues." (Allswell IV iii 83)

#### TWO TRAGEDIES

This parson has been accused of a "derivative ministry" - a clip and save ministry. I use no quote not obtained from some other's newsletter. I have examined my files and discovered that Unitarian Universalist ministers write very little on Shakespeare (Clarke Wells excepted). Therefore, left to my own resources, I have settled on two Shakespearean tragedies as the road to considering the tragedy of tragedies: to wit, Macbeth and Coriolanus. Macbeth was chosen because most of us read it in some English class and I hope it is familiar to you all; Coriolanus because it is my favorite.

The outlines of the two stories are simple enough; they are recalled here without a bit of the magnificent complexity and ambiguity with which Shakespeare makes them works of art. Macbeth is the story of a valiant general in the Scottish army who assassinates his king, usurps the throne, and is eventually defeated at the hands of Scotland's nobles, with the aid of the English king, and the crown is restored to the legitimate heir. Coriolanus is the story of a valiant and noble Roman warrior, who, having exhibited great heroism and daring in battle, stands for Consul of Rome. Baited into a temper, he tells the plebeians what he thinks of them and their tribunes (which is not much) and as a

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result is banished from Rome. He joins with his old enemy, the Volscian Aufidius, and leads an assault on Rome. But at the last moment, responding to pleas from his wife, son, and mother, he spares Rome from being sacked. He is in the end slain by his old enemy and new ally, Aufidius, because Aufidius is jealous of Coriolanus' power and popularity with the Volscians.

These outlines are deceptively simple. As Harold Goddard holds, "Shakespeare is like life. There are almost as many ways of taking him as there are ways of living..." (5 pg. 1) Goddard says later:

"He who thinks that to find over- and undermeanings in Shakespeare's plays is to take unwarranted liberties with them is like a man who holds that the word "spring" must refer only to a particular period of the year and could not possibly mean birth, or youth, or hope. He is a man who has never associated anything with anything else. He is a man without metaphors. And such a man is no man at all, let alone a poet." (5 pg. 67)

It is in the over- and undermeanings that the rich complexity of Shakespeare emerges. To these I now turn.

Macbeth and Coriolanus are two quite dissimilar dramas, so much so that it seems appropriate to delineate some of the more important dissimilarities. Macbeth is a play of darkness and shadow; almost all the action, except the death of Macbeth, occurs in the night, in the time of sleep. Coriolanus, on the other hand, is a drama of broad daylight. Macbeth is full of suggestions of an unseen world, while Coriolanus presents only this world. In Macbeth the line between reality (murder) and illusion (Lady Macbeth: "The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?") (Mac. V i 42-3) is indistinct. Coriolanus, on the other hand, is void of illusion. Macbeth the person deceives and calculates plots; Coriolanus the person tells the truth always, is never calculating. In Macbeth, there are witches and ghosts. In Coriolanus there are only politicians and, as anyone knows, the three witches and ghosts are far preferable. They just scare you, while politicians, hungry for power, try to destroy you. Macbeth presents us with a deep psychological drama about what is going on inside a man, while Coriolanus uses no soliloquies and shows no hidden struggle within the man. Macbeth, in killing Duncan,

the king, kills the father figure, so we have the first part of Oedipus. Coriolanus struggles to free himself from the controlling love of his mother, so we have the other part of Oedipus. Macbeth is full of self-doubt about what he does; Coriolanus acts with a sureness in his right. Perhaps most important, Macbeth is a somber, moral tragedy, for Macbeth because of his acts, is punished. In contrast, Coriolanus is a tragic satire in which Coriolanus pays for being too honest and heroic while the state rolls on unchanged in its false ways and the villains never suffer.

The two dramas do, however, share important parallels. Not the least among these is the suggestion in each that outcomes are ambivalent and inconclusive in the human arena. Both dramas open in such a way as to state this as the theme. Macbeth opens with a report to King Duncan about the battle Macbeth and Banquo are fighting with the rebel Macdonald and the King of Norway. Duncan (and the audience) is kept in continual suspense as to the outcome for over fifty lines, from the line, "Doubtful it stood," to, "and to conclude the victory fell on us." Duncan ends the scene saying, "No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive our bosom interest," and proceeds to make Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor. (Mac. Iii 7-65) As they say, the rest is history, but it is a history which is open-ended and we are never positive it is over.

Coriolanus begins with a scene of rabble rioting after corn and considering whether to kill Coriolanus. They argue among themselves as to whether he is bad. Then arrives Menenius, a Roman senator, who calms the rabble and almost has them convinced not to riot when Coriolanus arrives and proceeds to get them in a lather again by his blunt talk. Not only does this set the tone of rising conflict of expectations, but it builds the foundation for ambivalent response throughout the drama and for the ending in which nothing is really resolved, but still is open-ended.

A second possible parallel between the two plays suggests itself, though not as clearly: Both Macbeth and Coriolanus are like Adam tempted to his fall by Eve, tempted to their falls by their wives. Macbeth is taunted by Lady Macbeth into killing the king. Coriolanus gives in to his wife's entreaties to lay aside his resolve and save Rome. This leads to his death. The weakness of this argument is first, Macbeth, by his letter to Lady Macbeth, has clearly already been thinking of the murder. It is not certain that the idea does not originate with Macbeth. Second, it is a point of argument as to whether it is Coriolanus' mother or his wife who tempts him. Further, Aufidius would have found a means to excuse killing Coriolanus anyway. In both dramas though, there is the potential for interpreting the protagonists as Adam. But let me turn to the two multi-faceted dramas individually.

#### MACBETH

Macbeth is Shakespeare's most intense, tightest, and most terrifying work. It is short, some speculate, because King James, who was in the audience, liked short plays. (9 pg. 1308) In any case, the shortness emphasizes the speed of Macbeth's fall. It is the story of a man enmeshed in evil. Perhaps Macbeth represents all men; perhaps he is ourselves as we wrestle with temptation. Macbeth's nobility can be sensed at the same time he falls into the depths of human evil - a descent into hell. Though we may keep it from consciousness and deny it, deep in ourselves is the knowledge of our own temptation, of the division within our own souls. Also clear is the truth of that hell which Macbeth learns in his murder of Duncan (and his reign of terror as well as his murder of Banquo). "Better be with the dead, whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, than on torture of the mind to lie in restless ecstasy." (Mac. III ii 19-22) Or as Lady Macbeth says, "Tis safer to be that which we destroy than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy." (Mac. III ii 6 7)

The reasons for Macbeth's fall seem at once apparent and at the same time not clear at all. Many have suggested (see page 5) that it is Lady Macbeth who is at fault, but, as was seen, this is not necessarily the case. Some have argued that it is Macbeth's ambition that leads him astray, that this is his fatal flaw. But Macbeth is notably lacking in ambition, and not once enjoys his rise to king. (8 pg. 101-103)

Through the witches, the spectral dagger, and Banquo's ghost, Shakespeare suggests yet another alternative: that there is another world behind our seen world, this world of senses we inhabit; that events in that world influence or determine events in this one; that there is no single definable, rational universe. We never know who the Weird Sisters are or what they really represent. They are pictured as both spectral and real. Yet the witches do not control; they cannot force fate, for the third witch complains that a sailor's wife refuses her some chestnuts. Although unable to compel the wife, the witch will punish her husband the sailor, "Though his bark cannot be lost, yet it shall be tempest toss'd." (Mac. I iii 24-25) Thus the unseen world may not overrule humans, but it affects them and, when humans falter, pulls them down.

Or is it so? Macbeth's crime is one of opportunity, an opportunity that comes immediately upon the Weird Sisters' prediction. He starts at their prediction. Is it the will of some dark power that does control? Macbeth acts to bring the prediction (or temptation) about. Yet Banquo does not act to bring about the prediction concerning his heirs, yet it also comes to pass. Who is in control here? Says Lady Macbeth of the opportunity to kill Duncan presented them, time and place "have made themselves" adhere. (Mac. I vii 3)

Macbeth might complain as does the young man in a story, Just My Luck, by Warner Learner. On release from Soledad Prison, this young man follows the straight and narrow path and completes his probation. Then, finding a lost credit card placed in his way, he determines that God was rewarding him for



being good, and so lives it up on the credit card. After his subsequent arrest, he laments,

"On the way down to the police station, I did some heavy thinking about God. Maybe He'd meant for me to return the credit card and get in good with William L. Wilson, who was an eccentric multimillionaire with a beautiful daughter who would fall for me. Or maybe it was just that some stupe was fouling up my vegetable beds down at Soledad and I was badly needed there.

I do wish that God could be a little clearer about what he wants from me. While I'm not a profound thinker, I personally believe that His failure to communicate with the average person is the main reason so few people go to church these days and so many end up in the clanger."

In Macbeth Shakespeare seems to suggest a deep power in life with the capacity to reverse surface indications. As Stephen Booth asserts, ordinary cause and effect do not work in Macbeth (1 pg. 94) We are told that Cawdor died "as one that had been studied in his death, to throw away the dearest thing he ow'd, as 'twere a careless trifle." (Mac. I iv 8-11) Macbeth indeed does throw away his life as he cries, "Lay on Macduff, and damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'" (Mac. V viii 33-34) but it is the first traitor Cawdor, Macdonald, not Macbeth who is spoken of in the first quote. When it is uttered, Macbeth's treason has not yet occurred. This suggests a deep power works at purposes contrary to appearances. The same dramatic irony is found as Duncan declares that one can tell what a person thinks by the expression on his face, just before Macbeth enters, presumably already having written Lady Macbeth of the witches' prediction and the assassination plot. (Mac. I iv 12-15) Again the same sort of "coincidence" occurs when, just as Macbeth finishes lamenting he has no spur to action, Lady Macbeth enters to be his spur. (Mac. I vii 25-83)

Shakespeare gives us in Macbeth a drama in which we are confronted with events which are contrary to our expectations. We are inclined to suppose that Macbeth's soliloquy at the end of the play, "(Life) is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," (Mac. V v 26-28) is the result of all that has happened to him in the course of the drama. However, we find him already saying in Act II, Scene 3, just after Duncan's death is known, "...there is nothing serious in

mortality: All is but toys; reknown and grace is dead, the wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees is left the vault to brag of." (91-95) At this moment we would suppose that Macbeth is merely being deceptive to hide his guilt, yet the words he speaks are by the end of the drama his deepest conviction. In the second scene of the play, we have been warned by the Sergeant that when the returning sun brings hope, shipwrecking storms and awful thunderstorms also come, "so from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come discomfort swells," (Mac. I ii 25-28)

In the counterindications, the causes that may not be causes, in all these possibilities offered and not offered, we encounter much equivocation. As the Porter says of drink we might say of the drama: "Lechery, sir, (drink) provokes, and unprovokes: it provokes the desire, but takes away the performance. Therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with Lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on and it takes him off; it persuades him and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him." (Mac. II iii 29-36)

Macbeth is a study of evil through the study of murder. It is also a study in equivocation. On the one hand, the audience must be repelled by the act of murder and yet be drawn to Macbeth. It is as though we see a man possessing the capacity to become a god who becomes a devil. The tragedy occurs within the audience because Shakespeare succeeds in convincing the audience that there is something admirable in the man Macbeth, that he matters. Shakespeare makes us become Macbeth; we are forced to participate with Macbeth. Stephen Booth points out that Shakespeare succeeds in doing this subtly. He causes the scenes which feature the virtuous adversaries and victims of Macbeth to drag, while those with Macbeth move with deliberate speed. Audiences like speed. (1 pg. 113) Further, it is hard to like the "good" Malcolm, who runs off and leaves his wife and children exposed to death by Macbeth's villainy. More directly, Shakespeare leads us to pity and to sympathize with Macbeth by emphasizing over and over his ambivalence about his

crimes. He puts us inside Macbeth, in his warring conscience and in his remorse and constant horror at his own actions. All the scenes of murder are followed immediately by scenes of Macbeth's suffering and self-torture. Though none in the audience may have committed murder, this self-doubt and torment is familiar to every human being.

Herein is the greatest equivocation of all in Macbeth. Few in the audience can condone murder, yet Shakespeare succeeds in getting the audience to set aside the categories of morality dictated by their own consciences. The audience cannot retain their moral priorities and keep their sympathy with Macbeth. As Stephen Booth says, we are induced to lay our morality aside in order to care about what happens to him - or at least to let both co-exist. (1 pg. 114)

For the length of Macbeth the audience is able to lose its sense of moral order. The charm-like quality, the invocation of a spirit world, keeps the audience unsteadied. There are no sure landmarks of the "real world" for reference. Because the audience can at once be moral and yet identify with the evil, they transcend normal human bonds while the play goes on, comfortable for a moment with infinite possibilities, with truth beyond the limits of categories. (1 pg. 115-117 - 3 pg. 299)

Traversi holds that Macbeth sets out to kill what Macbeth above all recognizes as "the source of all the benefits which flow from his person to those around him." (8 pg. 107) As Norman Rabkin says, "The true horror of Macbeth is the suggestion that the nihilistic criminality...may stem ultimately...from the very hatred of that which has given us life." (8 pg. 108) The audience is forced to recognize such irrational nihilism, the sin of the desire to kill God, within themselves, under their morality. The result of that act is that the ultimate victim is the perpetrator, as it always must be; for we cannot kill that which gives us life without killing ourselves.

The price Macbeth pays is the recognition that he commits acts that are reprehensible even to himself; and nothing has been gained, "for Banquo's issue --- the gracious Duncan have I murther'd, put rancors in the vessel of my peace only for them..." (Mac. III i 64-67) In the end those around Macbeth conclude, "he is mad; others that lesser hate him call it valiant fury; but for certain he cannot buckle his distemper'd cause within the belt of rule." (Mac. V ii 13-16) He has become a total tyrant, no king; a man devoid of the fusion of grace, legitimacy and power that Shakespeare believed was necessary for a healthy rule. (8 pg. 103-4) Macbeth has none of the "king becoming graces" that Malcolm speaks of: "justice, verity, temp'rance, stableness, bounty, perserverance, mercy, lowliness, devotion, patience, courage, fortitude..." (Mac. IV iii 92-94) And so, as Angus says of this sham king Macbeth, "Now does he feel his title hang loose about him like a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief." (Mac. V ii 20-3) He is indeed now unmanned. He is a man deprived of knowledge of Grace.

Macbeth in the final moment girds himself up for one last bloody act. He possessed perhaps of bravery but no other kingly grace. Determined not to be a fool (and die on his own sword) he realizes he is one. He learns that the witches' promise of his invincibility to one born of woman is a final deception. So he is slain.

The play quickly concludes with Malcolm resolving to begin his rule by the "grace of Grace." (Mac. V ix 38) It is as though he recognizes in all that which has happened a world beyond human control; that finally for his reign to be good, he must depend upon the blessings of Grace for it. Shakespeare ends his play with evil defeated at a bloody price; the world restored to its fragile shape, Goodness once more in place, but held in place by the "grace of Grace."

CORIOLANUS

We turn from the dark night of Macbeth's nightmare world to the hard daylight of Coriolanus' world of everyday reality. From Macbeth, for whom deeds are opiates for his fears (6 pg. 110), to Coriolanus, for whom deeds, actions, are all that matter; from Macbeth, who ensnares us in his evil by baring his inner turmoil to us, to Coriolanus, who neither lies nor deceives, but does what he believes the truth and does not so readily evoke our empathy; from Macbeth, who after only reports of his greatness, stumbles down a road of crime and evil, to Coriolanus, who shows greatness.

This minister to the middle class finds in Coriolanus a deeply disturbing tragedy. I take it that one of the most painful dilemmas of the ministry is whether and when to tell the truth in all its harshness, or to honey-coat it until it is perhaps not the truth anymore. How often do we who gather here hold our tongues, back off from a truth that cannot be told; how often does the success of our ministry, the desire to keep the affection of members, or the wish for tranquility in our churches, cause us to say less than we believe? I suspect that each minister reading this paper shares with me some edge of guilt, some sense of failure in this matter. Mind you, this is not to chastise, for I fear that this is ever the dilemma that faces the ministry; perhaps one necessary to the success of our profession. Through this soft place in this minister's sense of self-esteem Coriolanus enters with accusation and warning.

Coriolanus is a man who is as straight with his words as he is with his sword. He has a boy's honesty, ingenuousness, and even an innocence about the world. He is a blunt man of action, and of sterling truth. Never in the play does he lie: "Must I with my base tongue give to my noble heart a lie that it must bear?" (Cor. III ii 99-100) Tempted to lie, he tries but cannot do it. He cannot even flatter. Says Menenius of Coriolanus, "His nature is too noble for the world; He would not even flatter Neptune for his trident or Jove for's power to thunder. His heart's his mouth..." (Cor. III i 255-6) His mother

urges him to speak "(Not) by the matter which your heart prompts you, but with such words that are but rooted in your tongue, though but bastards, and syllables of no allowance, to your bosom's truth," (Cor. III ii 54-57) but he cannot finally do it. Shakespeare has created another character whose name, like Cordelia's, is rooted in the word, "heart." He is perhaps too honest for the world, incapable of living in a society where the truth cannot be told straight out. Even like Christ he will not be a sycophant to survive.

What is certain is that no one else in the drama can be trusted to tell the truth. Volumnia, his mother, talks of honor, but then falls back on lies and urges Coriolanus to these. The rest of the nobles are a hypocritical lot who will not speak the truth, nor do they protect Coriolanus (though they secretly agree with him). Aufidius, the enemy general who is Coriolanus' counterpart in battle (but not quite as valiant) turns to deception and lying to destroy Coriolanus, whose power and popularity he is jealous of. Even old Menenius, who is, next to Coriolanus, the most honest man, equivocates, hedges his words, fails to speak the truth when it is dangerous. The tribunes, who are ostensive representatives of the citizens, lie, connive, plot, and, in the end, make exiling Coriolanus only a demonstration of their own power. (Cor. IV ii 3) These are callous politicians who cover their own vulnerabilities. Having persuaded the people that they were wrong in giving assent to Coriolanus becoming a <sup>Council</sup>~~tribune~~, they tell the people to tell the Senate that they, the people, voted for him because the tribunes had told them to! (Cor. II iii 228-34) Thus they make themselves appear to be on Coriolanus' side. Even the people lie about their part in Coriolanus' banishment, claiming they did not want it. (Cor. IV iv 139-45)

Many critics do not like Coriolanus because of his blazing contempt for the common people, the plebeians. This leads some to think of Coriolanus as honest without brotherly love. Some blame Shakespeare's monarchist political opinions for Coriolanus. Some have insisted that Coriolanus is primarily a political tale. Others have criticized Shakespeare for being more concerned with the fickleness of the mob, their demands, and their cowardice, than with what the critic calls the

needs and the legitimate protest of starving people. (9 pg. 1393)

For many critics the legitimacy of the claims of the plebeians is not questioned. Nevertheless, Shakespeare, whatever his personal political views, is very clear that in this case the people are cowardly and easily swayed. Not a word outside of that of the tribunes and the mob, who show themselves not to be trusted, is said to confirm that they are in need. Coriolanus opposes free distribution of grain because the people are cowardly and do not go to war. Indeed, Shakespeare shows us that the citizens who at one moment are ready to revolt, ready to kill Coriolanus in civil strife to get free grain, are at the next moment, when called on to fight to protect their city from the enemy and collect as well the enemies' grain as tribute, ready only to "steal away." (Cor. I i 251 stage instructions) Those who do go to war are shown as greedy plunderers. (Cor. I v 1-5) The citizens are willing to call this noble warrior a "worthier man." if only he would "stoop," kowtow, to the people. (Cor. II iii 38) At yet another point Shakespeare suggests that some leaders flatter the people but do not love them, and that the people do not understand this; that the people love and hate leaders (politicians) without knowing why. This sounds like a recent election. Therefore, Shakespeare implies that Coriolanus is right not to be concerned whether the people love him (Cor. II ii 6-15) Menenius asserts that Coriolanus loves the people (Cor. II ii 64), but Coriolanus says he only loves them as they are worthy. (Cor. II ii 74)

Coriolanus' confrontations with "the people" are always with the mob, and the mob, which he tells off directly, is not a pretty thing. Indeed as Harold Goddard points out, no less a defender of the people than Eugene Debs said:

"My experience has been entirely with mobs that were on my side. They were awful...I was safe of course, but I was afraid. I was afraid as of a beast, for those men...all looked alike, they all stared in the same direction, and their eyes were not eyes of men, but of animals. They smelt like a beast, too. That odor of hate, the smell of animal ferocity! No, I never want to meet that again."  
(6 pg. 236)

Perhaps Shakespeare's point is like that made by the poet John Ciardi, who wrote, "Beware the calculations of the meek, who gambled nothing, gave nothing, and could never receive enough."

I remind this gathering of the words of our colleague, Dr. James Madison Barr, who in years past at these meetings warned us about "the people." "The people," he said, will "get" the gays, nuclear freezers, the pacifists, the women's liberationists, the integrationists, the liberals first, a fact which has not escaped politicians in this most recent election.

Whatever others may have to say about politics, for Shakespeare this is not a play about class warfare, or politics; it is about the man Coriolanus. It raises the question of whether the honest man who does not speak half-truths can survive among society and the politicians.

Often in this drama Coriolanus is attacked because he is too proud, and critics have picked this charge up as though it were Shakespeare's charge against Coriolanus. This is a great error. At each turn Shakespeare shows Coriolanus as a man who has no vanity. He mocks his own wounds. (Cor. III iii 50) He rejects pomp-filled ceremony. (Cor. II i 167) He will not accept extra spoils for his bravery. (Cor. I i 2) He does not like the praise and flattery of his mother and others. (Cor. I ix) He only makes an effort to become Consul because it is expected of him, but his own enthusiasm is not great. He despises false positions (10 pg 99) and boasting (6 pg 213). Coriolanus is even accused of being too modest. (Cor. I xi 53) He will not himself flatter (Cor. II i 167-8) nor does he like to be flattered. To be sure, Coriolanus takes an honest pride in his acts, but he is also modest about them. Shakespeare's point is, I think, that those dishonest people who accuse him of pride are in fact prideful and jealous of him. (Cor. II i 205) Menenius says to the tribunes, "You talk of pride: O that you could turn your eyes toward the napes of your necks and make but an interior survey of your good selves!" (Cor. II i 38-40)



In Coriolanus we see as we did in Macbeth much equivocation, things made and unmade, contradicted, surface appearances different from reality. The tribunes claim that Coriolanus plots against the people. But it is the tribunes who plot against Coriolanus. Menenius tells the citizens, in describing the body politic, that the Senate is like the stomach of Rome, distributing food to the people, the extremities. (Cor. I i 96-141) The obvious thought is, "no, the Senate is the mind," but in fact, a contrary contrary, it is the citizens (or the tribunes) that are the mind and make the unwise decision to exile Coriolanus. The Senate is as impotent to counter the decision as is the stomach. Again Menenius says the people are the wolves and Coriolanus the lamb. (Cor. II i 1-15) How could the great warrior be a lamb? We conclude that Menenius must be a senile old man, but no, to the contrary he is right. The tribune Brutus declares that Coriolanus is too proud to be valiant (Cor. I i 259), just before Coriolanus fights the most valiant battle of his life, as if to point up how wrong this Brutus is. Although the tribunes talk continually of themselves as representing the people, they quickly and shamelessly manipulate them (Cor. III iii 15), and the people in the end turn on their tribunes. (Cor. V iv 35) Coriolanus, in an uncommon move of sympathy, asks that a man who has been kind to him be spared, but then Coriolanus cannot remember the man's name and quickly forgets saving him as well! (Cor. I ix 82-95) The tribunes are gloatingly confident of what they have achieved and in the next moment learn that Coriolanus has joined the enemy and at that moment imperils the city. (Cor. IV vi)

The most important equivocation in the drama centers around the word, Traitor. Twice Coriolanus is accused of being a traitor. Each time his explosive reaction to the charge accelerates his doom. The tribunes call him traitor the first time. His vitriolic reaction leads directly to his banishment. (Cor. III iii 70) He has not been a traitor to truth, but, like a prophecy, his banishment leads him to become one to Rome. He reminds his mother in the very next scene that "... extremities was the trier of the spirits." (Cor. III i 4) The "extremities" drive

Coriolanus to join the enemy, failing the test. Having marched to the gates of Rome with the Volscian Army, Coriolanus is persuaded by the pleadings of his mother, wife and son to spare Rome. He says to the Volscian General Aufidius, "though I cannot make true wars I'll frame a convenient peace." (Cor. V iii 189-90) He goes on to ask Aufidius if he would not do the same. Aufidius appears to agree, but plots to use this to undo Coriolanus. When Coriolanus reports to the Volscian Lords the peace plan, Aufidius calls Coriolanus "traitor". (Cor. V vi 84) For a second time he is accused. Coriolanus flashes into a rage and is killed.

But who is the traitor, Coriolanus, who is accused, or Aufidius, who plotted to kill Coriolanus long before Coriolanus agreed to the treaty? (Cor. IV vii 57) Is Coriolanus the traitor, or the tribunes who plot to have him banished to show their own power? Is Coriolanus the traitor, or the "people" who are cowards and unwilling to fight for their country but are perfectly willing to put Coriolanus to death so that they can intimidate the senate into giving them grain? Is Coriolanus who is the noble warrior, the traitor or are the nobles who do not stand up to "the people" the traitors? Is Coriolanus who is true to truth the traitor, or are all those who lie, deceive and plot the traitors? Are the tribunes who drive Coriolanus from the city he protects, traitors to both Rome and the people? In all these paradoxes Shakespeare does not answer the questions but rather leaves us to grapple with them. Even at the end of the drama, when the world is in the hands of the connivers, Aufidius, in all hypocrisy, calls Coriolanus "a noble memory." (Cor. V vi 153) Is it true? We are left to wonder.

Why, one is led to ask, is Coriolanus unable to speak <sup>politically</sup> ~~politically~~? At the opening of the play one of the citizens suggests that it is pride that drives him. (Cor. I i 33) I have already said why this is not an adequate explanation. The citizen also suggests that Coriolanus is motivated to please his mother. (Cor. I i 38) However, Coriolanus is unlike his mother who is a consummate inveigler (he does not imitate what he sees), and further he finds himself unable to inveigle even to please his mother. Again Aufidius considers what gets Cori-

olanus in trouble. (Cor. V i 39-50) He too suggests pride. He submits the possibility that Coriolanus has a defect of judgement. He tenders the opinion that perhaps Coriolanus would be as autocratic in peace as he was in war. There is no compelling evidence for these speculations.


Coriolanus is undone by the vehement propensity he has to tell the truth.

He seems to lack the capacity (common decency) to lie or evade the truth that perhaps the body politic demands. Coriolanus simply seems unable to separate truth from action; in him they are a unity. One is reminded of the lines from Mark Twain, "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them." (Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar). But even in this matter Shakespeare leaves us with ambiguity, for while the people of Rome have trouble appreciating and loving Coriolanus, the Volscian people seem to have no such hesitancy. "And patient fools whose children he hath slain (the Volscians) their base throats tear with giving him glory." (Cor. V iv 51-53) Perhaps the fault is only on the part of the citizens of Rome. Or is Aufidius right when in his jealousy he claims to explain why the Volscians adulate Coriolanus, "He bow'd his nature, never known before but to be rough, unswayable, and free"? (Cor. V vi 24-25)

On the other question, not why Coriolanus is so disposed, but whether he can change, Shakespeare is again ambiguous. Most often the answer seems to be no. Yet, Aufidius, as quoted above, suggests he can. More important, we see Coriolanus save Rome once by war and then a second time by peace, once in battle, once out, once by the power of his own valor, once by denial of it. Commentators note that this last act is at the cost of Coriolanus' own life, as he is aware (Cor. V iii 187-189), but Shakespeare shows earlier by Aufidius' plotting that no matter what Coriolanus does, Aufidius intends to have him killed. We are left with no ground for simple moralizing.

In the end, neither Rome nor Corioli are better; both cities still are full of hypocrisy; things have not improved for all that has occurred. Coriolanus' life and death have not changed human affairs. Shakespeare has designed "his play to depict Coriolanus' moral superiority as simultaneous and identical with his mortifying limitations." (8 pg. 113) As Harold S. Wilson notes, the end of Coriolanus "is the sort of anti-climax inherent in the day-to-day activities of common humanity." (10 pg. 113) No matter how much Coriolanus seems to bring his fate upon himself, the audience is forced to feel Coriolanus' outrage, his betrayal, as its own, for in his truthfulness he is the one who is essentially the nobleman whose nobility, rather than the hypocrisy of others, destroys him. Shakespeare's tragedy explores the inability of human effort and goodness alone to redeem history. Rome is saved neither by decisive action nor by virtue. Shakespeare frames a world in which insight and self-deception, idealism and vanity, public and private interest, virtue and jealousy, are so inseparably intertwined in the ruler and the ruled, the hero and the traitor, as to demonstrate the impotence of human will to bring about goodness.

#### TRAGEDY

 Stephen Booth writes that "the search for a definition of tragedy has been the most persistent and widespread of all non-religious quests for definition." (1 pg. 81) The assignment for this paper suggests the temptation to define tragedy and measure Shakespeare against such a definition. I have resisted that temptation. I think of clergy who go to visit the dying with verses from the Bible or small talk about the weather to shield themselves from the dying person, from the person's fears and loneliness, despair and grief, from really being "with" the dying. Booth warns that the function of "the theory of tragedy is to keep us from facing tragedy itself." (1 pg. 84) I intend therefore to speak of the tragedy that Shakespeare pictures. A. C. Bradley says of it that Shakespeare confronts us "with the inexplicable fact or the no less inexplicable appearance of

a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste." (2 pg. 40) Shakespeare presents a world that does not allow reasonable understanding. [Both Macbeth and Coriolanus suggest a world that cannot be broken into simple good and evil, nor the triumph of the good over the evil.] The opposing forces he envisions do not break down into easy categories that make for a smooth and simple moral logic. Norman Rabkin notes that "the terrifying convolutions and perplexities of Shakespeare's Tragedy, do not permit us to resolve the conflicts between views of the cosmos as savage, benign, retributive, indifferent, rational or bestial." (8 pg. 83) The world we are shown paradoxically embraces contradictions. Right and wrong do not retain the artificial dimensions of a reasoned universe. We are accustomed to a world which demands that one choose. But Shakespeare, by elucidating the diversity of claims, the deep drives and urges, the chance of a world that demands order, even the conflicting goods (and the evils as well) shows that choice to be impossible.

Reality is in the fullness of Shakespeare's tragedy unfathomable. (8 pg. 139-40) Human behavior is reckoned by unknown and unknowable powers both from within and without.

Howard C. Goddard, writing in The Meaning of Shakespeare, holds that Shakespeare's truth is delphic, It is not obscure, it is ambiguous. (5 pg. 11) There are many contradictory understandings possible of Shakespeare's tragedies, which is not to say that all are equally correct. Some are clearly wrong. However, Shakespeare does make two (or more) possible but contradictory understandings tenable without making either one right or wrong. Shakespeare's tragedies are a recognition of chaos, chaos in the sense that reality cannot be reduced to a single understanding. (8 pg. 141) Most of us must operate from day to day assuming that what we have experienced is the way we can expect things to go on being, that life is predictable. But as Stephen Booth says, "Tragedy operates

from and demonstrates the proposition that there is a way things are, and that fools assume it is knowable and know." (1 pg. 78) In the safe confines of the play Shakespeare disabuses us of such foolish notions. . To quote Booth again, Tragedy "is a category for things that should not have happened but can be neither remedied nor filed away under 'things to have been expected under the given circumstances.'" (1 pg. 84) But they do happen. In tragedy we are confronted with what had not seemed possible - or the fact of "infinite possibility." (1 pg. 85) "Tragedy" then is a word that lets us pull down the incomprehensible that which we are helpless against, that which defies the limits of our human understanding, pull it down and give it a name which lets us limit it to talk about "without denying its namelessness, its incomprehensibility, its indefiniteness." (1 pg 118) Shakespeare provides no comfort and safety in his tragedies; he unsettles our easy notions that we live in a known, limited universe and that we will continue to do so. Shakespeare's tragedy, in the safe confines of the drama, brings the audience, us, to the spiritual crisis, the shaking of the foundations, where we can consider the frightening universe of infinite possibility where humankind does not rule and only Grace will suffice.

#### PURE KIRKWOOD PULPIT TALK

I was once rebuilding a porch on an old farm house. A neighbor from up the road, himself 80-plus years old and a farmer, stopped by to examine the progress of the work. I complained that the rebuilding was not going well because the house was not "true" - that is strictly built at right angles or level. As a result, a number of compromises had been made which displeased me. The old farmer heard the complaints, looked over the work and then said, "Well, the dumb fella will think it's supposed to be that way, and the smart fella will know it had to be that way."

Last year at the meeting of this august fellowship we heard quoted:

"As I grow older, I come more and more to believe that the life we live is characterized by strange twists and turns, momentous surprises, endings and unexpected beginnings. The myth that this life is a straight line progressive enterprise no longer seems to fit life as I and many others have been experiencing it. A truer myth is this one of hope returning unexpectedly out of hopelessness, of lively possibility arising out of defeat, of new beginnings emerging from The End. The established powers of the secular and religious realms say sensibly that the end is the end, that a dead person foments no cultural reorganization. The secular rulers and the religious leaders in the New Testament story symbolize this conventional wisdom, this common, ordinary outlook. But there is this other view and it has been commended to us by reformers, revolutionaries, revitalizers in many places and times; this view that God is not a staid, predictable, old power that runs on and on and then runs out, but rather that God is an ever-active, creativeness that lets no creature rest; God is hidden in the universe, ruling this world so strangely by making a hubbub; building up out of the wreckage; stirring things up; reawakening people; bringing life up from unlife."

Now you have heard John Robinson quote John Wolf quoting Roy Phillips who quoted Martin Luther.

To this quote I would not only add my agreement, but suggest further that the older I get the surer I am of the words of Dag Hammarskjold: "That way leads to triumph which is a catastrophe, and to a catastrophe which is a triumph."

(7 pg. 205) For I find that the creative power by whose grace we live, the living God, proceeds in creativity not by a simple succession of goods, but through the collision, conflict, destruction and defeat of succeeding goods and evils. The Garden of Eden is a lovely place, but it quickly becomes very boring because the creation is finished. I do not separate the creation from the creative power that gives it being or that is being itself. To have moved beyond believing in God the great manipulator or, more to the point for Unitarians these days, from disbelieving in God the great manipulator, is to begin to see the power of being, doing the most impossible of all tasks, continuously creating in the midst of the emptiness of void space, all that is - and can be.

The more I experience the dark side of life, the more I am inclined to stop lamenting that the universe is supposed (by God) to be this way, and to accept

the understanding that the universe has to be this way - a complex, often unintelligible, unfathomable mixture of good and evil which sometimes seems tragic from the human perspective, yet indeed exists. Norman Rabkin says, "Shakespeare reminds us in his last plays...that God created our universe as a work of art." (8 pg. 139) For the artist to create the whole there must be both the light and the dark.

So it is, not that God rules, so much as that God creates, is creation, and that creation if it is to be more than the mere artless mass production of identical things, is found in the new, in unexpected combinations. Creation, if it is to be more than the mindless deduction from what was already here, is found in the unique beauty which comes in something new that wasn't here before.

What I mean to suggest to you is that the creative story is a story of trouble, of difficulty, of frustration and even of failure, and only very late triumph, and if there is to be more creation that triumph must be temporary. It is, I believe, in a complex world such as Shakespeare acknowledges in his tragedies, in the disorder and chaos, that the hope of creativity is born.

#### THE LORD GAVE AND THE LORD HATH TAKEN AWAY

I am suspicious of the motives of the program committee in assigning me this topic, for I have on occasion (notably R. W. Emerson) insisted that one does not have to wallow in tragedy to have an appreciation for it. Among Unitarians these days it is fashionable to be a victim. Whether it is the unfairness of the social order or of men's exploitation of women, (or women's of men) of discrimination because of one's sexual preference, or of the power structure of society or the government, many Unitarians are convinced that if they were allowed to arrange things according to another plan, everything would be better. For many free religions the fact (and sometimes the myth) that the universe is not arranged fairly or, according to some reasonable understanding, that it is "indifferent," is excuse to rant and rail against life, to excuse their own des-



otic behavior, to be angry. Macbeth, angry that the world should be that way, that Duncan should make Macdonald his successor, kills and starts a cycle of tragedy all his own. The true horror, to quote Rabkin, is that nihilistic criminality comes "from the very hatred of that which has given us life."

(8 pg. 108) In Macbeth, even that tragedy ushers in a new creativity, the rise from Banquo of the House of Stuart. Shakespeare greatly admired King James, its latest issue. Perhaps even the anger at tragedy is God's own way to keep the creative power of good and evil ever potent. As for myself, I am sanguine, comfortable to say things are this way because they have to be. Who am I to say the world should be some other way, to suggest that I have a better plan for organization when I cannot keep my checkbook balanced, or my weight in line, and only lately by grace have made a good marriage. Who says I could out of nothing organize being that would be better. Each day I am amazed, nay grateful to find that beyond any control of mine, my heart functions, my reason works after a fashion, and my body continues at 98.6 F. with far less margin of error than there is with my spelling.

Annie Dillard turns the old philosophical conundrum on edge, "Does a tree falling in the forest make a sound if no one is there to hear it?" by asking, "Are beauty and grace performed if no one is there to see them?" The answer, she says, must be, "Yes." And the least we can do is try to be there. (4 pg. 8)

There are those who do not see beauty or are not as moved by beauty as I, for whom this world strikes no resounding chord, who are not lifted and stirred by the gift we are given. I have often been tempted to feel sorry for them, but that is patronizing of me. Perhaps it is they who should feel sorry for me for they may escape the pain of being wholly broken open in joy and wonder that is almost beyond bearing. They may escape being driven out of themselves and their self-preoccupied concerns, to feel inadequate, even guilty, by the smallness of our thanksgiving against the infinite gift. If you are one of those who is so unmoved, you will understand by this essay that there is a gulf between us, and

in knowing that, if we believe each other, perhaps we can then reach across to one another.

This beauty, this gift is a grace, the only grace I know. Some insist that grace is only a free ticket into heaven, given not because you deserve it but because God gives it. That may be well enough, but I have no need for some free pass into a golden gated future.

I see in beauty here, the seraphim, even among the pain and evil and ugliness. I see beauty here if even in little things. I am thankful for this free ticket of life I am given. I demand no more of God, ask no more of God, for I have received the grace of life, the wholly gratuitous gift of days and nights of love and tenderness, even of pain that says, "though it is not joy...even this out of the nothingness of empty space...you are given to be conscious and know." A Holy (spelled both ways, but especially Holy) - a Holy gratuitous gift. For others, grace is only to get something more. As for me, I could leave the world with only today in my eyes.

We, that is we humans, are given to ask: Why? Why all this? Why do we live? Why are we conscious? What does it all mean? What is our purpose? I once worried myself long with such questions. Then I stopped worrying, Now I believe that our purpose is, as Annie Dillard says, "to be there," to see the shimmer of light as the sun sets or rises, to be open for grace, for the wholly gratuitous gift, freely given and freely taken. Whether or not Shakespeare is right that God created our universe as a work of art, it is to be here that I am grateful for.

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to argue that Shakespeare came to such a notion of grace. So I only point in the direction Norman Rabkin does when he says that in the artistic multivalence of Shakespeare's earlier years is "the mirror of an unfathomable reality which is the source of trouble..." "an inadequacy of reasonable understanding." Shakespeare's last plays "reflect

a new kind of acceptance and peace...an ability to live at ease with the intransigent reality..." (8 pg. 139-140) That is, at ease with the God of being and to say with Job: "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1:21)



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