RICHARD VAN OORT

Shakespeare's Big Men

Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press 2016
Toronto Buffalo London
www.utppublishing.com
Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN 978-1-4426-5007-7

Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer recycled paper
with vegetable-based inks.

Van Oort, Richard, author
Shakespeare's big men : tragedy and the problem of
resentment / Richard van Oort.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4426-5007-7 (cloth)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. Julius Caesar. 2. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. Hamlet. 3. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. Othello. 4. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. Macbeth. 5. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. Coriolanus. 6. Men in literature. 7. Resentment in literature. 8. Desire in literature. 9. Guilt in literature. 10. Evil in literature. 11. Protagonists (Persons) in literature. 12. Anthropology in literature. 13. Literature and anthropology. I. Title. II. Title: Big men.

PR2992.M28V35 2016 822.3'3 C2016-900610-7

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario.

Canada Council for the Arts

Conseil des Arts du Canada

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Funded by the Government of Canada

Financé par le gouvernement du Canada

Canada

For Sheila, Max, Katie, and Dominic

Contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xv

1 Why Shakespeare and Generative Anthropology? 3

2 The Originary Hypothesis: Hierarchy, Resentment, and Tragedy 12

3 Brutus's Neoclassical Irony 22

4 Hamlet's Filthy Imagination 57

5 Iago, Our Co-Conspirator 97

6 Macbeth Unseamed 134

7 Coriolanus's Impotence 162

8 Coda: René Girard's Shakespeare 188

Notes 201

Bibliography 239

Preface

The title of this book requires a brief word of explanation. In the most literal sense, it refers to the protagonists of Shakespeare's tragedies. There is something colossal about these men. "They are," A.C. Bradley observed, "not merely exceptional men, they are huge men; as it were, survivors of the heroic age living in a later and smaller world."[1] Bradley's landmark study of Shakespearean tragedy has been subject to strong critical objections both earlier in the last century and, more recently, on formalist and historicist grounds. I think these objections are less decisive than might appear for reasons I will develop in chapter 1 – and of course the endless reprints of the book throughout the last century and into this one suggest that it continues to speak to the concerns of a substantial audience, if not necessarily the audience assumed by the academic commentary on Shakespeare's plays.[2] From this point of view the more serious problem with Bradley resides not so much with his aesthetics as with the anthropology underpinning his aesthetics. After making the above comment about Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Bradley does not explain why tragedy concerns itself with the representation of these colossal figures, nor why our attention to them takes place within the context of their suffering. He simply takes these things for granted. I want to dig a little beneath these assumptions; in trying to do so, my title takes on a second, more specific meaning. Anthropologists have observed that among tribal cultures there exists the political type of the big man. The big man is not, however, a chief or king. His capacity to attract followers depends not on his divine right, but upon his ambition and charisma. "His every public action," the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins writes, "is designed to make a competitive and invidious comparison with others."[3] This book is about Shakespeare's big men

in both senses of the word. Shakespeare's big men are to be admired, as Bradley suggests, but they are also to be suspected of promoting competitive and invidious comparison. Identification with the tragic protagonist is inseparable from resentment of him.

The experience of this paradox, I argue, lies at the heart of tragedy. Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 explore the ways in which this paradox manifests itself in *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Coriolanus*. I take it as given that each of these plays addresses the ambivalent experience of resentful identification differently. For instance, it is much easier to identify with Hamlet than Brutus. Despite his abominable behaviour towards Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, Hamlet wins us to his viewpoint, and we tend to excuse his behaviour on the grounds that he is, on balance, more of a victim rather than a persecutor. We are much less tempted to make similar excuses for Brutus, whose centralizing inner conflict peaks in the play's second act only to be rapidly overshadowed by the collective action of the conspirators in the third. Antony, somewhat comically, attempts to restore Brutus's nobility at the end. In a jarring and hasty eulogy, he declares that, unlike the other conspirators, Brutus was free of envy, "the noblest Roman of them all." But Brutus's significance cannot be so easily divorced from the envy driving the conspiracy against Caesar. Identification with Brutus cannot be separated from resentment. This paradox reaches a new lucidity in *Othello*, where admiring identification with the protagonist is systematically obstructed by the presence of the play's antagonist. Iago's resentment dominates the stage until Othello becomes an echo of his more resentful counterpart. In *Macbeth*, this paradox receives yet another formulation. Here resentment is overshadowed by guilt. But guilt is also a species of alienation, and consequently works to produce the tragic effect in a different way. Finally, Coriolanus, whom Bradley described as Shakespeare's biggest big man, is variously applauded and derided by the patricians and plebeians who share in his glory even as they participate in his downfall. Yet when Coriolanus abandons his desire to burn Rome in the fifth act, he refuses the violence of the centre. This extraordinary act from Shakespeare's most violent hero creates difficulties for tragic form, which demands the protagonist's commitment to the violent agon of the centre. As many commentators have noted, in this context Coriolanus's destruction is apt to appear ironic rather than truly tragic. In laying bare the generative paradox of tragedy, Shakespeare emptied the scene of its affective power. The most perverse of tragic heroes, Coriolanus is also Shakespeare's last.

My selection of these five tragedies is not meant to be exhaustive or definitive. I could have included *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, or *Timon of Athens*. Nor are the histories or comedies irrelevant to my theme. The point, however, is not to reduce Shakespeare's plays to a single unchanging pattern or idea. Precisely in the case of the aesthetic, the idea is not a substitute for literary or dramatic experience. This is why a theory or hypothesis about the plays must be cashed out in an analysis of aesthetic content. There is no shortcut around, or substitute for, the aesthetic text. Aesthetic form is inseparable from aesthetic content, and the content changes from play to play. In this regard Shakespeare is an embarrassment of riches. Inevitably, I have had to draw the line somewhere, and I have chosen to draw it around these five tragedies.

The chapters dealing explicitly with Shakespeare (chapters 3 to 7) represent the core of this book. These analyses will, I hope, persuade readers that Shakespeare can profitably be read from the perspective of what has come to be known as "generative anthropology." Chapter 2 explains why we need such an anthropology. Here I introduce the work of Eric Gans, whose theory of aesthetic history I find extremely useful for thinking about Shakespearean tragedy. I realize that many Shakespeareans will be more interested in hearing what I have to say about Shakespeare than in what I have to say about the anthropological specificity of language or the ethical structure of "big man" societies, so I have tried to keep my discussion of the theory as brief as possible. Readers who want to get to the pudding before hearing the proof may wish to skip chapter 2 and proceed directly to the analyses of the plays. But I recommend that at some point they return to chapter 2 because it provides the foundation upon which the analyses are built. In particular, it explains my reasons for adopting Gans's notion of the "neoclassical esthetic" to describe Shakespearean tragedy. To put it another way, chapter 2 answers the question of why anyone should bother reading Shakespeare at all. It can therefore be usefully read in conjunction with chapter 8, which explains in more detail the basic difference between generative anthropology and René Girard's related theory of mimetic violence.

I realize that the approach adopted here may strike many Shakespeareans as intolerably eccentric. I come at Shakespeare from a perspective that seems to eschew the more familiar historicist focus on the political, religious, or economic contexts of early modern drama. In chapter 1, I address this concern by showing that there are others in Shakespeare studies treading if not exactly the same path, then convergent paths heading in the same direction. Historicism no longer

has such a tight grip on the kind of work we do. Other approaches, including more philosophical or anthropological approaches, are making their way from the margins to the centre. My particular approach to Shakespeare may seem somewhat unusual in the explicitness of my commitment to the idea of an "originary hypothesis," but the usefulness of the theory in the context of Shakespeare studies is not, I think, hard to demonstrate. Chapter 1 makes the case for why Shakespeareans should care about generative anthropology by showing how much common intellectual ground exists between the two. As much as possible, I attempt to explain the situation from the viewpoint of a Shakespearean rather than the perspective of a "vernacular"[4] amateur of generative anthropology. I then switch perspectives, in chapter 2, when I adopt the minimal position of the originary hypothesis. The minimality of the hypothesis is intended to be maximally inclusive, in the sense that it assumes not merely the preoccupations of professional Shakespeareans but the anthropological or vernacular preoccupations of anyone interested in what makes us human. The next five chapters are devoted to a back-and-forth dialogue between the minimal anthropological hypothesis and Shakespearean tragedy. The final chapter functions as a kind of summary of my position vis-à-vis Girard's well-known but controversial reading of Shakespeare.

Nothing I have said so far explains why we need another book on Shakespeare. Yet it is precisely this question that obliges us to formulate Shakespeare's relevance to our humanity as sharply as possible. The purpose of tracing cultural forms such as ritual or tragedy back to an originary scene from which they are hypothesized to have emerged is to grasp these institutions in terms of their minimal anthropological structure or essence. The most powerful explanation is also the most parsimonious. If we explain the origin of tragedy in ancient Greece as the emergence of a more powerful means to explain our engagement with and resentment of the big man, we have made a historical argument about the origin of a new cultural form. But to understand why tragedy should emerge at this point rather than another, we need to understand why resentment is a problem and why the preexisting ritual means for controlling it proved inadequate. But this requires us to understand the structure of hierarchical society and, more precisely, its difference from the egalitarian forms of social organization that preceded it. What motivated the first big man to appropriate the ritual centre that was denied to his egalitarian ancestors? The origin of agriculture in the later Neolithic period would seem to provide an obvious explanation, but

the presence of a material cause does not explain the *ritual* aspect of the big man's appropriation of the centre. The big man does not seek mere appetitive satisfaction; he desires the symbolic prestige associated with the centre itself. But whence comes this prestige? The originary hypothesis explains the big man's desire for prestige as a fundamental element of the scene of representation. Desire for the centre is a corollary of the word that refers to its object by simultaneously interdicting it. But desire also breeds resentment. This resentment is unleashed when the appetitive object is destroyed in the collective *sparagmos*, a moment commemorated in all sacrificial ritual. But the *sparagmos* is preceded by the word in which transgression of the interdiction is first imagined within the individual's internal scene of representation. This is the aesthetic moment of the scene, the moment reproduced in tragedy.

As this brief synopsis suggests, there is no purely logical justification for the originary hypothesis. Once formulated, the hypothesis must be evaluated on the basis of its ability to provide a plausible analysis of the particular moment of history we wish to examine. It is a heuristic device that cannot be assessed independently of the results it produces. In terms of the argument of this book, the hypothesis functions as a minimal starting point from which to understand the general question of why tragedy should originate as an alternative to ritual in ancient Greece and then reemerge in Shakespeare's day as the central cultural form. The abstract manner in which I have posed the question may make it appear that my argument is purely historical and deductive – in other words, that I am not concerned with providing an analysis of the plays themselves. But precisely in the case of the aesthetic, form is revealed in content. It is only by appreciating the *irony* of tragedy, in which the suffering of the central protagonist is a condition of our identification with him, that we can gain an insight into the problem of resentment.

Acknowledgments

This book is the result of the highly agreeable task of teaching Shakespeare to many hundreds of students over the past decade. I am grateful to all of them. Nothing would give me more satisfaction than to learn that this book succeeded in speaking to them and to readers like them. It is good to see that Shakespeare continues to inspire non-experts to serious personal and ethical reflection despite the historical distance between our time and his.

I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for providing me with a grant in 2010 to get started on writing this project. Some of the arguments in this book were presented at the annual meetings of the Shakespeare Association of America, and I am grateful to my colleagues for the feedback provided on these occasions, most recently at the 2015 meeting in Vancouver. Thanks are also due to four anonymous reviewers of the University of Toronto Press for suggesting ways to make this book more palatable to Shakespeare experts. I am particularly grateful to the Generative Anthropology Society for providing me with a publication subsidy just when I needed it. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the support and generosity of this most invigorating and convivial group.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my wife, Sheila, and our children, Max, Katie, and Dominic. This book is for them.