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## Review

Reviewed Work(s): Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time by David Scott Kastan

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of the genre nor entirely escapes problems of method. Yet the book's failure to be complete is in fact part of its attraction. In the present state of our knowledge, thoughtful boldness has more to teach us than the bland and unexceptionable. We desperately need works that goad us to think seriously about Roman comedy, and the present book goes far toward answering that need.

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David Scott Kastan. *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time*. Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1982. Pp. viii + 197. \$25.00.

While some years ago Ricardo Quinones wrote about the *Renaissance Discovery of Time*, David Scott Kastan's book *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* suggests that we should rather 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 "theatre" of God's beneficent action. In the Renaissance it "increasingly becomes a source of anxiety. The bells that tolled the canonical hours and attested to the role of time within the economy of salvation give way to mechanical clocks that mark the moment by moment annihilation of the present" (p. 5).

Kastan, whose approach is grounded in a unique and appealing genre theory, argues that Shakespeare's dramas represent "not merely literary conventions but ethical categories" (p. 171). His conclusion impressively suggests 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. 173). E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has demonstrated that genre is a crucial category in understanding the "meaning" of a work of literature or other art. Kastan is, furthermore, correct when he argues that Shakespeare's plays are not simply "reflections of reality" but rather "each is a provisional and exploratory 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 thus successfully avoids the danger of imposing alien criteria of value which are not inherent in the subject matter of his plays. He briefly sketches the two models of historical time: the providential-linear-directional-developmental model of the Patristic tradition, and the exemplary-cyclical-repetitive views of the humanistic heritage. He thereupon illustrates how Shakespeare had affinity with both traditions. His whole approach, however, remains embedded in his structural genre theory. Like Northrop Frye, he finds that "fictions that adequately represent reality in one age are usually inadequate in another" (p. 7).

Kastan then sets out further to distinguish three shapes of time in the plays. The first shape is linear and open, corresponding to the history plays which emphasize "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," he writes, "set on the ineluctable process of history but is contracted to focus upon the fate of the individual as he tests or is tested by the limits of his humanity" (p. 26). The third shape, corresponding to the romances, is again linear and open-ended, "but in their luminous endings . . . signal the way to the perfect revelation of the meaning of time that will come at the Final Judgment" (p. 32). Kastan rejects the often upheld view that there is a cyclical progress of time in the romances, and rather finds that the circularity is renewal instead of recurrence, "it must be understood axiological rather than structural" (p. 32).

My own opinion is that the structural distinctions between the histories and the tragedies are not sufficiently flexible. The elements of the tragedies are already present in the history plays, and the tragedies are likewise touched by the themes established in the histories and their atmosphere. Shakespeare's shift to tragedies seems to witness the process in which the time-scale of events has immediately shrunk: what was acted out as an epic flow in the panorama of history is now contracted and condenses upon a single character or situation. Instead of labeling both structures "linear," I would suggest the introduction of the terms "horizontal" and "vertical." I find that the histories obey the rhythm of a horizontal flux-time, while a vertical pattern is to be observed in the tragedies. Kastan is also aware of Susanne Langer's remark that "tragedy is a cadential form" (p. 27). Tragedy too had been described since the Middle Ages as a *fall* from prosperity into misery. And it would appear further that the Elizabethan sense of tragedy has additionally inherited from the medieval period the idea of the endless movement of the blind wheel of fortune. Thus I tend to see the shape of tragedy as having more affinity with the cyclic view of time.

When discussing the shapes of the histories, Kastan suggests that their real sources are the Corpus Christi mysteries 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 John*. Kastan reports that after Tillyard's book on the histories (1944), the idea of the providentialism of Tudor historiography as represented by Hall and Holinshed has too often been imposed on Shakespeare's dramas, though recent critics have tended to challenge this view. Kastan, however, does not reject the idea of providence as present in the history plays, but he argues that it is necessary to hold it up for careful reevaluation (p. 17).

The chapter "Tragic Closure and Tragic Disclosure" is a penetrating and exhaustive meditation on 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 shape and significance in the temporality of the individual life rather than in the continuous flow of historical time" (p. 80). With the death of the hero the tragic structure closes. It contradicts the morality structure and contradicts likewise 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 power of destruction. However, Kastan argues, the position of the hero who feels like one "tied to a stake" is both heroic and tragic. "At the heart of 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 transcend "the image of that horror." Kastan acknowledges that there is an element in the play which suggests that truth and justice will eventually prevail in the sense established by the traditional emblem *Veritas filia temporis*. Yet, we should not neglect the device of irony in the play which Elton has demonstrated. After the emblematic relief of Act IV, the inevitable human suffering is reaffirmed 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. 116). For all that, however, we cannot deny that authentic human experience 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 also for every human being who has been concerned with the vexed questions and the ultimate significance of human existence. Indeed, this is a genuine and marvellous book on Shakespeare which subtly suggests how artistic form and shape can respond to what philosophy or discursive thinking have failed to answer exhaustively.

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*The York Play: A Facsimile of British Library MS Additional 35290 together with a Facsimile of the Ordo Paginarum Section of the A/Y Memorandum Book.* Introd. Richard Beadle and Peter Meredith. Leeds Texts and Monographs: Medieval Drama Facsimiles, VII. Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1983. Pp. lxi + [546]. 5 Color Plates. £80.

This facsimile of the Register of the York Creation to Doom cycle is the most ambitious of the Leeds Medieval Drama Facsimiles, and includes in addition six pages from the York Memorandum Book A/Y that provide further information concerning the production of this theatrical effort, which took place almost yearly at the Feast of Corpus Christi from the fourteenth century until its suppression approximately two decades after the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. The introductions by