

Shakespeare's Tragedies

Prior to the emergence of modern political philosophy, political life was thought to be a stage on which virtues and vices were made manifest—a place where those human capacities which can develop fully only in civil society were exercised. Shakespeare made human beings who lived that life—full political life—the subject of much of his poetry. For this reason his plays were able to shape the taste and prudence of many generations of statesmen and citizens. Political men and women found in his plays vivid examples of political greatness, sound and flawed. (Marlborough, for example, tells us that he formed his understanding of English history from Shakespeare alone, and Lincoln found *Macbeth* to be the perfect illustration of tyranny and murder.) That is no longer the case, and we are arguably the worse for it. For it is not hard to see that political life in our time, even at its best, lacks the richness and the elevation of reflection that we meet on every page of Shakespeare's work. We who live in an age that is politically impoverished stand in greater need of Shakespeare than citizens of past generations. He provides us with something that we are not likely to witness in our daily lives: moving and *comprehensive* pictures of the fate of tyrants, the character of good rulers and good regimes, the relations of friends, and the duties of citizens. The situations, customs, and beliefs of the characters we will confront in the plays are, to be sure, particular: Brutus is a Roman, Hamlet a Dane. Yet the wisdom that Shakespeare conveys through the characters' speeches and deeds is more permanent and universal. As we will see, his characters wrestle with some of the deepest moral and political problems that any serious human being is likely to confront. And if our minds are genuinely open, we will see that those problems remain with us; they are permanent problems. As we become engaged in Shakespeare's dramas, *moved* by them, we are compelled to reflect on those problems. A full awareness of them can then begin to assist us in understanding our world and ourselves.

In order to take advantage of the opportunity that Shakespeare thus affords us to better understand ourselves and our world, we must do something unusual. We must try to avoid imposing any categories of contemporary thought on the plays. We must try to understand his characters as they understood themselves. This may sound simple, but it is not a simple thing. Like any human beings, we are shaped by the political regime in which we live, and we have to make great efforts if we wish to be free of its particular limitations. As it happens, our political regime is to a remarkable degree shaped by both modern political philosophy and contemporary social science. These two forces inhabit and form our opinions and thoughts. (Think how often you use words like ego, identity, culture, rights, self, dysfunctional, role model, etc.) While this is doubtless the source of many good things, it can impede us when we approach the work of a thinker like Shakespeare. Instead of becoming a guide for us, he can become trapped and bound by our vocabulary and jargon. We will therefore try to approach his plays *naively*, without the sophistication that is lent to our thinking by contemporary social science.