theories and methodologies

Tragedy and Temporality

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FOR MANY COMMENTATORS ON TRAGIC TEMPORALITY, TRAGIC TIME IS THE "NOW," BINDING THE CHARACTERS—THE ACTORS OF THE CATASTROPHE—in the anxiety and horror of a blinding present moment. As Northrop Frye observed in his *Fools of Time*, "The basis of the tragic vision is being in time, the sense of the one-directional quality of life, where everything happens once and for all, where every act brings unavoidable and fateful consequences, and where all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation" (3). In performance, in particular, that presentness feels relentless: as Stanley Cavell writes, tragic performance "demands a continuous attention to what is happening at each here and now, as if everything of significance is happening at this moment, while each thing that happens turns a leaf of time" (93). This sense of the present mimics our everyday sense of how we live in this world: in David Kastan's words, "Tragic time is, then, the experiential time of human life—a time, that like life itself to which it is inextricably tied, is directional, irreversible, and finite" (80).

Yet while it is clear that tragic performance can generate that sense of a one-directional present, tragedies are fundamentally polychronic, opening up a portal to other times. In his *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres outlines his thinking about time as nonlinear, as "an extraordinarily complex mixture, as though it reflected stopping points, ruptures, deep wells, chimneys of thunderous acceleration, rendings, gaps—all sown at random, at least in a visible disorder" (57). For Serres this is essentially a theory of historical time but also an assertion that every object is multitemporal, folding into itself many moments in time.

Serres's thinking about time, linked to concepts of topology in mathematics, was preceded by the influential formulations of temporality in Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenology. Husserl asks us to reject the notion of time simply as being, time as a sequence of moments of now. Rather, as Robert Dostal describes Husserl's thought, "we might say the present is 'thick' to the extent that,

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within the present, we find both the past and the future; that is, we find [there] all three dimensions of time. . . . [A]ny moment is what it is in virtue of what it retains of the past (retention) and what it anticipates of the future (protention)" (125–26; see also Wagner, chs. 1–2). While tragedy thus evokes the anxiety of experiencing an onrushing present, one can say that we are anxious precisely because that present embeds both the weight of the past and the future it brings into being.

This anxiety, rooted in ignorance and knowing, also anticipates that in a play, and in our lives, all must come to an end. In the wake of Husserl, in establishing the meaning of "being-in-time," or *Dasein*, Heidegger came to focus on the end that is our death: "Only in dying," he wrote with profound pessimism, "can I to some extent say absolutely, 'I am'" (qtd. in Hoffman 222). In that sense Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein* is deeply tragic. This is the moment to recall, in Aristotle's painfully familiar words, that a tragedy must have a beginning, a middle, and, most important, an end, in text and in performance. This is what differentiates tragedy from epic and from the ever-flowing stream of everyday human experience. Death, of course, is the common end for us all, but it is not the end for everyone in a play, and so a tragedy must find the way to conclude, for characters, readers, and spectators alike. The early modern English theater marked that end variously with the death march, the epilogue, the song, or the jig; now we know the play is over with the closing of the curtain or the brightening of the house lights. For readers all is done with the last blank page or the printer's signal of *finis*. We then pull back, remembering where we are in our own time and place.

Tragedy thus could be said to generate for characters, readers, and audiences alike that anxiety of existing in the present, trembling between the awful certainty of the past and the unknown future. Yet that present is never fully and solely present. Rather, it is Husserl's thick present: it is Serres's folded time, where the past erupts into the present and we feel, as Lady Macbeth puts it, "the future in an instant." Tragic time does make us experience the blinding present and, in particular, a moment of decision when an action must happen that will drive everything to come. But tragedy is also defined by anticipating an end, which we both fear and crave, a death and a conclusion that can be at once an imposition of judgment, a moment of ecstatic self-assertion, and an escape.

Critics have been writing thus for some time about the experience of time in tragedy, but much less has been said about how tragedy can exist differently *in time*, even if we stick with the Aristotelian idea that a tragedy, unlike an epic or a narrative, is enacted. For example, when reading *Macbeth*, a play acutely concerned with time's passage, we control the time: while Macbeth tries to master time and fails, the reader can succeed in the effort, slowing down or speeding up and moving backward and forward in the text at will. In contrast, when viewing *Macbeth* in the theater, we are drawn forward relentlessly by the action, surrendering ourselves to the players' time and experiencing the character's anxiety about temporal distortion. Watching a film of *Macbeth* may feel like attending a play, but increasingly, as viewing moves from the cinema to our private screens, we can stop, fast-forward, and replay the action as we do in reading, regaining distance from the experience of the onrushing present. And in all three modes, each experience feels unique, yet it can and will be repeated: a play is staged again and again, a film rescreened, and a text reread, each time differently and each time affected by what came before.[1]

In theorizing the temporality of tragedy, I believe we must engage with the problem of time in multiple, interconnected ways. To date, these critical practices have included tracing the deep structure of time embedded in the conventions of the genre, observ-

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ing what a play states about its own temporal conditions, studying the ideas of time current during a play's creation and reception, and accounting for the reader's and audience's temporal experience. Scholars have written much philosophically on the temporality of tragedy (e.g., for Shakespearean tragedy, Turner; Frye), as well as on how tragedies of a specific period are informed by historically specific ideas of time, such as time as it was understood in fifth-century Athens (e.g., Romilly; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet) or in early modern England (e.g., Waller; Quinones; Kastan). Some critics have brought the insights of performance studies and phenomenology to the study of tragic time (e.g., States; Wagner). A critical turn to phenomenology might be seen as antithetical to historicist and materialist criticism, but as practiced by critics such as Jonathan Gil Harris and Bruce Smith, historical phenomenology now offers a way to bridge the gap (Curran and Kearney).

I would argue, however, that we must next add a recognition of how the very materiality, or "untimely matter" (in Harris's words), of dramatic media can shape and disrupt our temporal experience of tragedy: not only do we encounter plays differently in print, performance, and film, but each medium has its own complex temporal structure.[2] As Matthew Wagner observes of performance, "[A]s time gains form and shape on the stage, it does so most often in ways that are neither literally seen or heard, nor only understood; rather, such temporal embodiment acts more holistically upon our sensory and cognitive modes of perception, turning the abstraction of time into a present—that is, immediate, in both the *here* and the *now*—reality" (5). Performance thus appears to lock us in the present moment that the genre critics identify with tragic temporality. Yet, as Wagner himself argues, what makes a theatrical performance powerful is "its marked constitution of past and future, its trumpeting of its beginning and end not as they line up sequentially, but as they stack simultaneously" (32). Further, the stuff of performance is always touched by time: costume, gesture, and stage design sediment multiple pasts. Harris has demonstrated that in early modern English theater, for example, "the stagecraft of the King's Men—their acting styles, special effects, and stage properties—arguably constitutes English Renaissance culture's most sustained practical theory of untimely matter" (20); that is, each object, movement, sound, and body had its own history, interwoven into the actions of the present. When we experience the now of performance, it is saturated with the loss and weight of the past as well as with the premonition that it hurtles to an end (from which the actors will rise to play again).

Reading tragedy, too, is materially more complicated than it appears when we sit down with a book. In early modern England performance generally preceded printing, and so, as Zachary Lesser has pointed out, we try to reconstruct staging from the book of a play, while that book, in turn, can serve as a script for later performances (19), as well as a text to delight readers (Erne). An early modern tragic playbook thus works both as a document of the past and as a script for future reading and acting, shifting constantly through time. Further, the revolution in textual scholarship of the past twenty years has exploded any fantasy that we always have in our hands a work produced by a single author at a unique moment of history: every play text is in some way a pastiche of earlier works, dramatic and otherwise, often made up of parts composed by different hands and created at different times (Stern). We must also account for the role of printers and editors, who introduce glosses, stage directions, act and scene divisions, and other paratexts that manage the reader's experience of time as well as meaning (see, e.g., Sherman on *finis*). Every printed tragedy is in this sense a palimpsest, a thick document, and although we may feel we control our temporal experience of it when we read, it draws

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us into a world of fractured time, which we may only occasionally glimpse.

Film, too, transforms a play temporally, whether through a recording of a performance or an adaptation. One critical commonplace about film is that it exists always in the present, echoing what has been said about stage performance and tragic temporality. Alain Robbe-Grillet wrote in 1962 that "the essential characteristic of the image is its presentness. Whereas literature has a whole gamut of grammatical tenses . . . by its nature what we see on the screen is in the act of happening" (qtd. in Cardwell 82). However, like the photograph, film can never be fully present, since it has captured something from another time. Mary Anne Doane points to the critical paradox of film: "Once the present as contingency has been seized and stored, it ineluctably becomes the past. Yet this archival artifact becomes strangely immaterial; existing nowhere but in its screening for a spectator in the present, it becomes the experience of presence (this is the sense in which film is usually associated with the present tense rather than the past)." The temporal effect of film is thus to evoke a sense of presence that is also "haunted by historicity" (23). The temporal immediacy of films also entails our believing that we watch events unfolding in real time, even though we know films are constituted of fragments filmed separately and assembled, adding another layer of time. If, as Gilles Deleuze comments, in cinema, "[f]irst, there is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future, by a past which is not reducible to a former present, by a future which does not consist of a present to come" (37), cinematic temporality intrinsically aligns with tragic temporality: an unfurling present entangled materially with past and future.

As a tragedy that engages formally and thematically with time, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* illustrates why the medium matters when it comes to thinking about tragic temporality. *Antony and Cleopatra* is, of course, notorious for its sprawling across continents and spanning the events of a decade, defying any decorum of time, place, and action (Rackin, "Shakespeare's Boy Cleopatra"). As a story and a linguistic artifact, the play touches multiple places and times: it adapts Thomas North's English translation (1579, 1595, and 1603) of Jacques Amyot's French translation (1559–65) of Plutarch's Greek *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, dating from the beginning of the second century CE. Shakespeare's every extraction of words and every transformation of anecdotes from North thus entails linguistic and temporal distortion of a Greek writer's account of Roman and Egyptian history, transmitted through a sixteenth-century French bishop's rendering then appropriated by an English lawyer.

Time also is a driver of the action and an object of contention in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Many scholars have observed that, as David Kaula has put it, in this play "Shakespeare . . . creates the impression that time moves at different velocities in different places" (212). This temporal oscillation in turn frames the characters' distinct relations to the past, the present, and the future. Caesar's time, Roman time, is that of the present pressing into the future, as Caesar seeks to master destiny. Antony, in contrast, is notoriously stuck in the past, except in those moments when he joins with Cleopatra in the eternal present of their pleasures. Only Cleopatra manages to slip effortlessly among past, present, and future, dissolving their boundaries. She is manifestly a creature who lives in the present, yet when she declares to her ladies, "I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony" as she prepares for her suicide (5.2.227–28), her future will repeat the past. Further, when she warns her ladies that in Rome "the quick comedians / Extemporally will stage us," exposing herself as the "squeaking" boy playing Cleopatra in Shakespeare's theater (5.2.215–16, 219), she brings her vision of the future

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into the early modern audience's present, which is our past (Rackin, *Shakespeare*, ch. 4).

In this sense the tragedy is intensely concerned with controlling Cleopatra and, with that, controlling time in the face of flux. In performance and print, the play threatens to be unmanageable, like Cleopatra herself, seeking to escape the time embedded in Caesar's futurity and the shape of the story as it has always been told. *Antony and Cleopatra* was entered into the Stationer's Register in 1608 but appears to have gone unpublished until the First Folio edition in 1623, so that text is the only evidence we have of its performance in Shakespeare's lifetime. Michael Neill concludes in his Oxford edition that this text "shows no trace of a theatrical history" (22). Since it far exceeds the normal length of stage production of the time, many scenes would have been cut if it was performed in the seventeenth century, and it remains a challenge to stage to this day. Yet *Antony and Cleopatra* is a consummately theatrical piece, its rapidly changing scenes clearly taking advantage of the blank slate of a platform stage (see Neill 23–67, on the theatrical history of the play). Like the overflowing Nile that breeds serpents from the mud (2.7.17–26), the play is fertile, demanding containment but straining against any attempts to contain it within a kind of time that a patient and attentive audience can apprehend.

If *Antony and Cleopatra* must be constrained in performance, its text, too, has been subjected to the management of its time as well as space. The Folio text begins, as do all the Folio tragedies, with the announcement of "Actus Primus, Scaena Prima," or act 1, scene 1, but then apparently the editors or the printer, Ralph Crane, abandoned the effort to divide it into acts and scenes (Hirsh, "Act Divisions").[3] Nicholas Rowe's 1709 edition was the first to insert act and scene divisions in the tragedy, in an effort to have the play conform with neoclassical tastes and Restoration stage conventions (Hamm; Taylor 80). Rowe's act divisions have not been questioned by editors since then, although his scene divisions have been changed, and scene divisions in the play remain unstable. Some might consider act and scene divisions mere conventions, a way for readers to locate themselves in the streaming text (e.g., Bevington 82). But, as Samuel Johnson observed, often "the time required by the fable elapses" "between the acts" (95); an act division means something, whether observed in the theater or silently in reading.[4] The marking of scenes sometimes appears to imply a temporal break, while at other times it does not.[5] So the editorial imposition of act and scene divisions in *Antony and Cleopatra* makes constant judgments about the play's temporality. Such divisions constitute an effort to control the stream of time in one direction and offer a means of defending oneself against temporal flux or confusion.

With the movement of the tragedy, and the tragedy's story, into film, the times change again. While not an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* per se, Joseph L. Mankiewicz's florid and controversial film *Cleopatra*, released in 1963 and starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, draws on Shakespeare and demonstrates acutely how film can thicken tragic temporality. Even more than Shakespeare's play, this film overflows temporal limits: it runs for 248 minutes, and it spans even more years of history than Shakespeare's play, beginning with Cleopatra's encounters with Julius Caesar in 48 BCE. The film reveals anxiety about handling such a superfluity of time: wide gaps in historical time are handled with a voice-over accompanied by an image of a faded wall painting. But what is more interesting is how the film implicitly documents its own making over time and connects to the present of its production. The span of two and a half years over which the film was, notoriously, produced with great difficulty is visible in the waxing and waning of Taylor's flesh on screen (Kamp). It is inescapably a contemporary film, for it

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consistently evokes Burton and Taylor's scandalous off-screen affair, identified with that of the characters they play. Film, in this sense, can reinvent the idea of the tragic present through the absorption of tragic history into the present bodies and desires of the players.

These observations about *Antony and Cleopatra* suggest a few ways in which an awareness of the temporality of media can complicate our experience and our understanding of tragic time. Perhaps more than any other Shakespearean tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*—with its tremendous hybridity and fluidity of time and space, identified with the figure of Cleopatra—exposes the dynamics of the control of tragic time. When such a play is realized in different media, the temporal structures and premises of these media can both coalesce with and disrupt the generic conventions. Performance is tragic time made live, producing the strong illusion of present experience, still haunted by history and an expectation of what is to come. Film has the potential to further disturb that experience of the present in more ways than can be suggested here, through its ability to reproduce the past in the present and to reorder and even reverse the time captured. Print may appear to give the reader of a tragedy the most temporal freedom, to escape the pressures of entrapment in the onrushing present, but we should not ignore the ways in which printers and editors may intervene to direct and control our sense of tragic time. Time is never a neutral medium in a tragedy; it is always the object of a struggle for mastery.

Notes

1. See Schechner on theater, repetition, and "twice-behaved behavior." See also Iser and Armstrong on the temporality of reading.

2. For the purposes of this discussion, I will confine myself to the early modern English theater.

3. The Folio's *Troilus and Cressida*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Timon of Athens* also lack act and scene divisions, and the marking of act and scene divisions ends halfway through *Hamlet*. Hirsh argues that this is because the printer ran out of time ("Act Divisions").

4. Taylor argues that only after 1610 do the printed plays of the adult companies appear divided into acts, because the adult companies adopted act intervals when they moved indoors (Taylor and Jowett 25). Introducing act intervals allowed for the trimming of the candles needed for interior illumination (42–43).

5. Early modern English playwrights were in the habit of thinking of scenes rather than acts when they composed their plays, but what constituted a scene was not rigidly defined (e.g., Hirsh, *Structure*). Generally speaking, we think of a scene as being contained by the entrances and exits of characters; sometimes the stage must be cleared first. Early modern playbooks rarely mark scenes specifically; see Bourne on how in moving the play into a text, printers collaborated with players in constructing an idea of a scene.

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