SHAKESPEARE: SEVEN TRAGEDIES

Also by E. A. J. Honigmann

THE STABILITY OF SHAKESPEARE'S TEXT
SHAKESPEARIAN TRAGEDY AND THE MIXED RESPONSE

Also edited by E. A. J. Honigmann

KING JOHN
RICHARD III
TWELFTH NIGHT
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MILTON'S SONNETS

SHAKESPEARE: SEVEN TRAGEDIES

*The dramatist's manipulation
of response*

E. A. J. HONIGMANN

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A Note on Dates and Definitions

In his first ten years or so as a dramatist Shakespeare wrote a few tragedies (notably *Romeo and Juliet*) but specialised in comedy and the history-play. In his second decade he was pre-eminently a writer of tragedy, and composed the mature tragedies in the following order: *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Hamlet* (1600–1), *Othello* (1603), *King Lear* (1605), *Macbeth* (1606), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606–7) and *Coriolanus* (1607–8). The order is now pretty well agreed, but the dates are not so certain.¹ Yet at much the same time, it should be remembered, he also produced other plays, most of them comedies: *As You Like It* (1599–1600), *Twelfth Night* (1599–1600), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600–1), *Troilus and Cressida* (1601–2), *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602–3), *Measure for Measure* (1603–4) and *Timon of Athens* (1607–8). The dates, again, have to be regarded as conjectural.

The mature tragedies are traditionally divided into two groups, the 'Roman plays' (*Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*), and the four to which I sometimes refer as 'the central tragedies' (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*). Each group has its distinctive features.² The Roman plays, all based on the same source – Plutarch's *Lives* in Sir Thomas North's translation (1579) – express Roman attitudes to the state, to religion, suicide, love and marriage, whereas the central tragedies are more 'Elizabethan' and Christian in outlook. The Roman plays examine political questions, the central tragedies have a more metaphysical bent. But these are rough and ready distinctions, for *King Lear* is less overtly Christian than the three other central tragedies, the Roman plays all include some Elizabethan (or Jacobean) elements, and the tragedies might be grouped quite differently. We might distinguish, for example, between those that exhibit supernatural phenomena (*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and, perhaps, *Antony and Cleopatra*) and the rest, or between tragedies of thought (*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*) and the rest. I deal with the seven mature tragedies individually, in chronological order, without paying much attention to groups, and so I must stress that the two traditional groups also differ in their manipulation of

audience-response. In the Roman plays the audience enters less completely into the hero's point of view than in the central tragedies, which no doubt contributes to our sense that we are here concerned with a different kind of play. Brutus, Antony and Coriolanus reveal less of their 'inner self' or have less to reveal, fall short of the four 'central' heroes in spiritual grandeur, and are less generously endowed with Shakespeare's finest poetry. For these and other reasons the spectator identifies himself less fully with the Roman heroes, and, I think, admires them less. In addition spectators are 'disengaged' from the Roman heroes, particularly Antony and Coriolanus, by the unusual number of comment-speeches; they know how the Roman heroes appear to others from the outside, but, paradoxically, this knowledge conceals the inner man and helps to keep him at a distance.

There is no discussion of *Timon of Athens* in this book. As I have explained elsewhere,⁸ *Timon* differs profoundly from the tragedies of the same period and has more in common with *Troilus and Cressida*, another play whose genre is hard to define. If *Timon* was regarded by Shakespeare as properly finished and was ever performed in his lifetime, it must have aroused a unique response. Some scenes appear to steer towards tragic emotions, but very few can be said to be tragic, since alien emotions almost always intrude: Timon's rage cannot compare with Lear's, affecting us as spiteful and grotesque, even petty, where Lear's is, quite simply, sublime. The audience, I think, would have been so 'disengaged' from Timon that it might well have wondered, in many scenes, whether it was watching a tragedy or a freak-show.

There is an index of technical and unfamiliar terms on page 214.

All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from Peter Alexander's edition of *The Complete Works* (Tudor edition, 1951), unless otherwise specified.