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Tragedy and Laughter

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Tragedy and Laughter

Jennifer Wallace (bio)

"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that....Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world," says Nell in Beckett's *Endgame*.¹ While this might hold true in Beckett's world, it is more commonly assumed

that there is a fundamental distinction between "unhappiness" and the "comical." Classical Greek tragedy is thought to portray the main hero as noble and statuesque, while comedy, which relies on a spectrum of jokes, trickery, slapstick and good humor, is dismissed as relatively lightweight. Even if these distinctions have lost their edge since classical times, this is conventionally seen as a matter for regret. John Milton, for example, set out his admiration for what he believed were the characteristics of ancient tragedy—"the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems"—and announced, in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, his intention to rescue the tradition from what he saw as its modern corruption: "This is mention'd to vindicate Tragedy from the small esteem, or rather infamy, which in the account of many it undergoes at this day with other common Interludes; hap'ning through the Poets error of intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath bin counted absurd; and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratifie the people".² More recently the critic J. L. Styan bemoaned the blurring of genres and the degeneration of tragedy's traditional seriousness in the twentieth century. "We now flounder in the near-meaningless terminology of the farcical tragedy and the pathetic comedy, the *drame comique* and the *pseudo-drame*, the 'charade' and the 'extravaganza,'" he complained. "It is time to call a halt to the Polonius-like mobilization of genres and sub-genres."³ George Steiner believes in such a phenomenon as "absolute tragedy," or "tragedy, pure and simple," which we know "well enough to **[End Page 201]** recognize the real thing" and in which there is no hope.⁴ And even recently in a radio interview the theater director Simon McBurney reiterated the conventional polarization of tragedy's supposed dignity and comedy's triviality. "We've always had this feeling that somehow tragedy is more serious, and more profound about human life and comedy's somehow light and artificial and escapist," he observed. "I tend to think that the opposite is true. Tragedy is rather good for man's dignity. It makes us feel we're really important creatures whereas comedy reveals the absurd truth."⁵

Of course, while the commentators I have just mentioned were

declaring opinions on Tragedy in general, the theatrical form of tragedy has been determined by historically specific contexts and has changed over the centuries from culture to culture. Drama is defined partly by the institution of its initial performance. While Greek tragedy and comedy were both performed in fifth-century Athens during the week-long City Dionysia festival, they were staged on different days, conformed to different conventions, and used different actors. In contrast, Shakespeare's company of actors could turn its hand equally to tragedy or comedy, performing both in the same theatrical space. Tragedy is also defined by a tradition of cultural expectation and critical commentary, which shapes the theatrical event and to which playwrights sometimes allude. Aristotle, writing a century after the heyday of Greek tragedy in Athens, drew a careful distinction in his *Poetics* between the tragic representation of the *spoudaios*, or serious, and the comic portrayal of the *phaulos*, or inferior, assigning them different origins and functions. Meanwhile John Heminges and Henry Condell, Shakespeare's fellow actors and the compilers of the first Folio in 1623, were careful to designate his plays generically as Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies.

But drama is also defined by its subsequent performance history, restaged to suit—and challenge—each culture's particular needs and expectations. By the fourth century BC, tragedy (written by playwrights such as Aeschylus and Euripides) was produced and performed with great enthusiasm, and yet, with its focus on rhetorical style, elaborate plot construction, and spectacle, its "anti-tragic" direction was very different from the classical tragedy of the previous century.^{6...}

Tragedy and Laughter

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“Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that...Yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world,” says Nell in Beckett’s *Endgame*.¹ While this might hold true in Beckett’s world, it is more commonly assumed that there is a fundamental distinction between “unhappiness” and the “comical.” Classical Greek tragedy is thought to portray the main hero as noble and statuesque, while comedy, which relies on a spectrum of jokes, trickery, slapstick and good humor, is dismissed as relatively lightweight. Even if these distinctions have lost their edge since classical times, this is conventionally seen as a matter for regret. John Milton, for example, set out his admiration for what he believed were the characteristics of ancient tragedy—“the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems”—and announced, in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, his intention to rescue the tradition from what he saw as its modern corruption: “This is mentiond to vindicate Tragedy from the small esteem, or rather infamy, which in the account of many it undergoes at this day with other common Interludes; hapning through the Poets error of intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath bin counted absurd; and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratifie the people.”² More recently the critic J. L. Styan bemoaned the blurring of genres and the degeneration of tragedy’s traditional seriousness in the twentieth century. “We now flounder in the near-meaningless terminology of the farcical tragedy and the pathetic comedy, the *drame comique* and the *pseudo-drame*, the ‘charade’ and the ‘extravaganza,’” he complained. “It is time to call a halt to the Polonius-like mobilization of genres and sub-genres.”³ George Steiner believes in such a phenomenon as “absolute tragedy,” or “tragedy, pure and simple,” which we know “well enough to



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