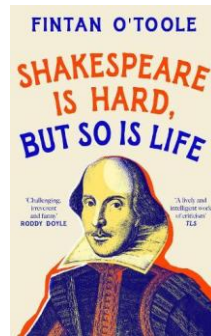


Fintan O'Toole, *Shakespeare is Hard, But So is Life*, Bloomsbury 2024.

Reviewed by Ann Skea



Fintan O'Toole takes issue with the way Shakespeare has commonly been taught and discussed since the nineteenth century. In particular, he disagrees with the claim that Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth, exhibit a 'fatal flaw' and that audiences and readers should take a 'moral lesson' from their fates. Shakespeare's tragedies, writes O'Toole, 'do not come with a set of instructions'. You are not expected to observe that 'the ruinous end is of [the character's] own making', or that they were branded from birth with some 'variant of Original Sin'.

He quotes Miss Prism from *The Importance of Being Earnest* – 'The good end happily and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means' – and concludes that if this were true 'it would be crushingly dull' and, anyway, such tales are 'ten a penny'.

It also does not apply to Shakespeare's dramas, where good people die, too: Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Desdemona and Emilia in *Othello*, Cordelia in *King Lear*, King Duncan in *Macbeth*. All are good and all end badly.

He deplores the 'classroom' approach of reducing study of these plays to soliloquies said to reveal tragic flaws in the protagonist's character and to provide us with 'moral instruction'. Soliloquies, he says, are not 'the most important part of any tragedy'; they are not a form of 'spiritual striptease' revealing the character's true self. The actors, as would have been clear in Shakespeare's time, are not talking to themselves but are sharing thoughts and sentiments with the audience and keeping them involved in the play's dramatic action. He notes the frequent use of 'we', not 'I' in the most 'intimate' soliloquies of Hamlet and Macbeth.

Nor do *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* conform to the Aristotelian form of Classical Greek tragedy, which has a strict and formal shape, although they have been labelled and analysed as such.

O'Toole (who has years of experience as a theatre critic and was once literary advisor to the Abbey Theatre in Dublin) sets out to show that none of this:

bears even a passing resemblance to the experience of seeing or reading a Shakespeare play. It is terrifyingly clear to us as we encounter these dramas that we are not in a moral universe of deserved comeuppances and rewarded virtue.

The world Shakespeare's seventeenth-century audiences would have recognised in the plays was their own world of religious, economic, social and geographical change – a world of wars, danger and uncertainty. They would have shared the characters' emotions, doubts, ambitions, superstitions and confusion. This, too, is our world, and our response (when caught up in the drama of the play) to the very human thoughts and feelings displayed by Shakespeare's characters.

O'Toole discusses the way this works in individual plays, and he shows convincingly the importance of other characters in the plays, their speech, their actions, and the skill with which Shakespeare shapes the wholeness and power of the dramatic action. He is also challenging and funny, as some of his chapter headings show. His chapters on *Hamlet*, for example, begin with '1. The Making of A Slob', in which he offers various popular views of Hamlet:

Hamlet is a slob, a shirker. He has a job to do and won't get on with it. He keeps persuading himself that there is a good reason for not getting on with the job in hand. He is certainly unwell and possibly evil ...

Alternatively: yes, Hamlet is guilty of delay and indecision, but this is a flaw in an essentially noble nature. He is a melancholy intellectual, in black tights, leaning up against a headstone with a skull in his hand.

Similarly, he begins his chapters on *Othello* by asking 'Is Othello Stupid?'

O'Toole adds interesting facts about Shakespeare's world, which he uses to throw light on some of the less noticed themes in the plays. In his discussion of magic, superstition, and the importance of ritual in Shakespeare's world, he notes the repeated imagery of childhood in *Macbeth* and the superstition that an unborn child could be 'both dangerous and powerful'; that babies could be 'an evil spirit possessed by the devil'; and that until 1552, when the practice was 'officially dropped by the Protestants', the priest would meet the child at the church door and blow into its face three times saying, 'Go out of him unclean spirit, and give place to the Holy Ghost the comforter.' Clearly there are powerful and dramatic images of unborn children in *Macbeth*, especially in ghostly form, and O'Toole suggests that images of unborn children run throughout the play, underlining its disturbing doubleness and uncertainty: the fluidity between life and death, the natural and the supernatural, loyalty and betrayal, strength and madness.

In our own time of social awareness of racism and 'black-face', it is also interesting to learn of earlier reactions to the blackness of Othello. The marriage of a black man, Othello, to a white woman, Desdemona, was a problem. Coleridge, for example, apparently thought Othello should be 'merely brown'. Another well-known critic thought he should be 'tanned', otherwise he would be 'unacceptable to a civilised audience'. O'Toole shows that Othello's blackness was essential to Shakespeare's imagery in the play and to the way Othello views himself.

O'Toole's discussions of all four tragedies offer interesting and different ways of appreciating the plays. He shows the interaction between characters as an essential part of the drama, and gives weight to characters who are often ignored. Fundamental to all of the plays, as he shows, is the instability of the world being depicted and its effects on the thoughts, emotions and actions of its inhabitants. Doubleness, contradictions, and resulting chaos are

built into the theatricality, characters, language and imagery of each play. 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' is a theme that runs through them all, and O'Toole's tracing of the parallels between Othello and Iago in patterns of jealousy, and the way the language used by each of them becomes interchangeable as the action progresses, are just two examples of this interdependency.

In spite of his claim that soliloquies are not as important as they have been made by 'classroom' teaching, O'Toole relies on many of them to make important points. Certainly, they should not be seen as representing the meaning and theme of the whole play, but they are powerful pieces of poetry, full of eternally thought-provoking questions. Macbeth's speech, 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow', referred to by O'Toole at the end of his book, certainly expresses Macbeth's 'deepest internal feelings, his most profound sentiments', and 'he does not use the word "I" or talk about himself. He uses the word "our" and talks about humanity', but, even isolated from the text, it is as relevant to our days 'full of sound and fury' as it was to Shakespeare's audience. O'Toole does not say so, but many of that audience, too, would have recognised the echoes of the Biblical words of 'the Preacher' (Ecclesiastes 1:2 KJV. 'vanity of vanities all is vanity. / What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?'), which are centuries older.

Shakespeare is Hard, But So is Life is readable and interesting, and O'Toole writes with his usual easy style. It offers another good way of understanding Shakespeare's world and the way it underlies his plays. The lasting wonder of Shakespeare's art, however, is that he was a superb dramatist who knew how to sway an audience, how to present life and death, and how to create characters in whom we recognise common humanity – the good, the bad, the horrifying and the admirable. We recognise ourselves and people we know or know of, as have readers and audiences in many different times and places, and so we continue to respond in very many different ways.