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Tragedy After Darwin: Timberlake Wertenbaker Remakes “Modern” Tragedy

SARA FREEMAN

None of the plays in this volume has easy answers, none had an easy reception, and they are permeated with sadness: the sadness I have felt that in this twenty-first century, in this third millennium, human beings are in trouble in some way. They have lost their certainty. Perhaps it was never really there…. Perhaps this was lost with Darwin, then lost more profoundly in the twentieth century, partly through an awareness of the limits of science, its own uncertainty; and partly because of the savagery of the wars; then lost again with the fall of political ideologies in 1989; and now with 11 September, when even the rules of hostility have changed. Indeed, when there seem to be no rules.

—Timberlake Wertenbaker, Plays Two

What type of play can a playwright compose that adequately reflects this decentered sadness ringed by savagery? Is tragedy, or a type of tragedy, the form that must call to this sadness, especially since, as Terry Eagleton somewhat ruefully notes in Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic, “The truth is that no definition of tragedy more elaborate than ‘very sad’ has ever worked.” Sadness lies at the heart of both the form of tragedy and its social meaning. In an age of sadness such as Wertenbaker describes, just as in the post–World War II moment described by Raymond Williams and Susan Sontag, a playwright might have to remake tragedy in the context of world events more tragic than any stage can seemingly record.

To do so seems culturally efficacious because tragedy’s elevated status commands certain types of attention. As Stephen Brockmann writes, “For centuries western writers and critics have viewed tragedy as central to their cultural tradition,” and following Jean-Paul Vernant, a powerful conception of tragedy argues that as a form, tragedy rises to prominence in times of social upheaval and changing values. In the introduction to Theatre Journal’s 2002 special issue on tragedy, David Román wants
to discuss tragedy because of his sense, made more acute by September 11, that when tragedy is at stake, theater’s interaction with and use to the larger culture is really the topic, which follows Sontag’s dictum that “modern discussions of the possibility of tragedy are not exercises in literary analysis; they are exercises in cultural diagnostics, more or less disguised.”

What consistently remains important about tragedy, then, is not its literary structure, but the sense that Western culture employs tragedy to understand itself when it is in crisis and that the literary structure therefore comes to reflect the culture’s modes of exploring and, depending on the view of catharsis, its mode of confronting its crises and upheavals. Even though it premiered three years before September 11, 2001, Wertenbaker’s After Darwin follows “after” tragedy in this vein, seeking a form that will allow the contents of contemporary crises to be explored and dealt with by an audience, all the while asking: how does tragedy persist, though changed, after Darwin?

As Stuart Young, Maya Roth, and I have argued elsewhere, in her plays Timberlake Wertenbaker insistently reworks dramatic form. Greek plays, as well Racine’s Phèdre, stand prominent among the tragic texts to which Wertenbaker (re)turns. Her translations/adaptations of Sophocles’ Theban plays and Euripides’ Hecuba exert impact on not only Love of the Nightingale, but also Credible Witness. Dianeira works with and through Sophocles’ Women of Trachis while Three Birds Alighting on a Field writes “after” the Philoctetes myth (also dramatized in Sophocles). Wertenbaker’s own commentary, “The Voices We Hear,” articulates how fully Greek tragedy inspires her theatrical mindscape. Meanwhile, Wertenbaker’s version of Phèdre was workshopped and performed at Canada’s Stratford Theatre Festival during the summer of 2009, before moving to San Francisco’s American Conservatory Theatre in early 2010. Classical tragic forms collide, are questioned, and regularly emerge to new use in Wertenbaker’s work.

Yet, while in her other original plays Wertenbaker has primarily “translated” Greek tragedy, After Darwin “carries across” and refigures other tragic principles and debates. After Darwin falls into the third wave of Wertenbaker’s writing as Roth defines it, composed near the time she wrote Credible Witness and Dianeira, which so actively engage Greek
tragic models. After Darwin, however, does not work with or through an ancient tragic text. At its start, it might not be apparent that tragedy has anything to do with After Darwin at all. The play begins as if it is a historical drama about Charles Darwin and Captain Robert FitzRoy of the Beagle, but fractures to reveal that it is also about the contemporary director, writer, and actors of this interior play about Darwin and FitzRoy. Only in the play’s penultimate scene (act 2, scene 6) does Lawrence, the playwright character, announce After Darwin’s relationship with tragedy: in a discussion about FitzRoy’s suicide attempt, Ian, the actor playing FitzRoy, opines that if he “could have this gun rather than a razor it would be more tragic.” “You cannot be tragic after Darwin,” Lawrence remonstrates. And so, despite the seeming firmness of Lawrence’s statement, a question is posed that insists on reconsidering this text in light of the potential dynamics of tragedy “after Darwin.” Within the parameters of this contemporary metaplay, Timberlake Wertenbaker puts modern tragedy to use for the twenty-first century.

I. Why Tragedy? Which Tragedy?

Wertenbaker’s play may or may not “be” a tragedy, whatever the tenability of that ontological state, but it is deeply concerned with what tragedy means and does in the contemporary political, social, and artistic world, or, in other words, with tragedy’s epistemological status. Why is it impossible to be tragic after Darwin? How does that claim shift across modern and postmodern paradigms? Of what use is theater in the absence of tragedy? Lawrence has caught “his” characters in a “modern” drama, one in which, like The Cherry Orchard, a gun can be shown early in the play but does not have to go off (168). “Modern” drama incited the twentieth century’s entire debate about the death of tragedy, but Wertenbaker’s metaplay composition allows her to write both a modern tragedy and a species of postmodern drama that might be called posthistorical tragedy, or simply post-tragedy: a form that is “after” tragedy, but which cannot do without a conversation about tragedy.

Noting the use of “after” to attribute certain types of adaptation, cultural remaking, or simply artistic influence (for instance, a play “after” Chekhov to describe Simon’s The Good Doctor, Martin’s Anton in Show
Comparative Drama

Business, or Wertenbaker’s own The Break of Day), Julie Sanders writes evocatively about the dynamics of being “after”:

The term “after” might seem, then, to endorse postmodernism’s beloved idea of belatedness. “After” can be a purely temporal epithet; a work that is later in date chronologically necessarily comes after. But “after” can also mean allusive to or referential…. Yet could we not also riff on the word further and suggest that to go “after” something would be to pursue it or to chase it? The drive of many of the appropriations studied here to go “after” certain canonical works and question their basis in patriarchal or imperial cultural contexts is an important act of questioning as well as imitative in its modes and gestures.9

Sanders continues to explore the valences of the term, arguing that “‘after’ need not, though, mean belated in a purely negative sense. Coming ‘after’ can mean finding new angles and new routes into something, new perspectives on the familiar, and these new angles, routes, and perspectives in turn identify entirely novel possibilities.”10 Wertenbaker’s play moves after Darwin and after tragedy in all these senses: it follows in time, it imitates structures, it pursues and critiques, it repurposes. That’s why Lawrence’s contention that it is impossible to be tragic after Darwin is not just a good theoretical/theatrical joke; instead it clues audience members into a branch of Wertenbaker’s cultural genealogy. It does not seem accidental that in another “thick” Geertzian type of joke, Wertenbaker has Lawrence, a black college professor in the United States in addition to being a playwright, comment that he is teaching a class on the “Metaphysics of Cultural Genealogy” (137).

Following Geertz, Roth points out that Wertenbaker’s dramaturgy invite[s] ‘thick description’ ” and that “complex kinships” are revealed when her plays are closely read with her translational poetics in mind.11 In After Darwin, Lawrence and Wertenbaker both chart a “cultural genealogy” of philosophical debate about the nature of modernity, postmodernity, and the status of tragedy that comes to a head in act 2, scene 6, which Wertenbaker titles “Natural Selection.” My project is to pursue a thick description of After Darwin, to chart those kinships, and to ask to what (metaphysical?) ends they contribute as the play ends. As I do this, the slippery, overlapping terms modern and postmodern will contend both as chronological markers and designations related to the genre of tragedy. Likewise, tragedy as a term itself defies definition. This
section therefore will work provisionally with all three terms to consider what Wertenbaker connects or dramatizes in disconnection by writing of tragedy after Darwin.

Jennifer Wallace offers several categories of tragic drama, all built on the sensible definition that “tragedy is the art form created to confront the most difficult experiences we face: death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, despair.”12 Wallace’s periodization of tragic drama after the European Renaissance proves instructive about the expectations and options Wertenbaker negotiates in After Darwin. Wallace’s strategy regarding the modern period and the idea of modern tragedy lies in using the designation “Romantic Tragedy” to encompass the trends of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, inclusive of German drama and theory from Wieland, Schiller, Schlegel, and Goethe through the work of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. “Late nineteenth-century tragedy is haunted by the Romantic legacy,” argues Wallace, charting how the “basic Romantic dichotomy between the self and the rest of society” also underlies the writing of the realists and naturalists, who relocate the dichotomy to “particular social contexts, with more parochial, specific concerns.”13

When drama of the late nineteenth century is tragic, it is concerned with the alienation of individuals, with the human desire for authentic experience and community crushed by narrow social conventions and the deadening demands of social conformity. It would be possible to make Charles Darwin the hero of such a play: a voice of dissent and truth up against the overpowering hierarchies and structures of Victorian society, though that is not what Wertenbaker does, even if the text conjures that option before discarding it. Darwin begins to describe his ideas about evolution—“Suppose, only suppose that these volcanic islands emerged from the sea, as Lyell suggests, seed drifted from South America…. Suppose that in this strange, this brave new world, isolated from the rest of the continent … suppose there began to emerge birds so different from their forbears—look at the beaks, FitzRoy—that they must, in truth, be called a—new—species”—in order to both challenge and persuade a representative of the existing order (139). But Darwin does not choose the martyrdom of his ideas, instead carefully concealing them until a much later date, when similar theories by another researcher are about to be
published. Wertenbaker emphasizes this and ultimately gives us a Darwin who is less Ibsen’s Dr. Stockman and more Brecht’s Galileo Galilei.

It would also be possible to cast the tormented relationship between Darwin and FitzRoy as a Mephistopheles/Faustus pairing of Romantic tragedy, and in fact, that is how FitzRoy speaks about Darwin in their scenes of highest confrontation—“The devil is at work, here, in this cabin! This shadow … Darwin, I know the dark night of the soul. Doubt sweeps in like a treacherous wind and puts out God’s light” (140)—but again, Wertenbaker conjures this option only within the interior play, all the while structuring the exterior play so that Tom, Millie, Lawrence, and Ian can debate Darwin and FitzRoy’s behavior and choices, excavating the social forces at work on these two figures. The contemporary characters deflate FitzRoy’s grandiose cosmological vision even while beginning to critique the social forces among which they themselves live. As a total piece of theater, After Darwin moves fully into a post-Romantic structure, but it evokes and explores the Romantic and modern models along the way. But what comes “after” Romantic tragedy? Wallace offers the categories “American tragedy” and “Post-colonial tragedy” and a discussion of Beckett’s plays as “tragic parodies of modernity.” These last two categories hint at but elide the term postmodern. Wallace avoids creating the category of postmodern tragedy, as well she might. Instead, in American drama of the twentieth century, Wallace identifies a type of tragedy focused on family dynamics and burdens. Family becomes, Wallace writes, “a form of fate,” a way of talking about the forces that propel and bind individuals, a notion that extends realist drama’s concern with genetic inheritance into the mid- and late twentieth century and connects to one of the implications of the theory of natural selection: that fate lies not in a divine plan, but in our biology and our desire.

Postcolonial negotiations of tragedy, meanwhile, problematize the genre’s Western metaphysics. Framed by postcolonial thought, tragedy as a mode can be both repressive and liberatory. On one hand, if tragedy has been “exported to the empire as part of the imperial, canonical legacy,” then “post-colonial counter-discourse would logically attempt to dismantle that canon” through comic resistance, burlesque, or other dialectical or hybrid strategies. On the other hand, hybrid and dialectical strategies lead writers like Wole Soyinka to combine elements of classical
Western tragedy with native traditions and thereby revivify tragedy or metatheatrically critique colonial dynamics. In *After Darwin*, the metatheatrical fracturing and intermingling of the Darwin-FitzRoy story with the story of Millie, Lawrence, Tom, and Ian manages to reference a brand of modern tragedy, to introduce a critique of the dynamics of that interior play, and to initiate a self-reflexive movement that indeed engages the postcolonial status of contemporary Britain, a place where a Bulgarian refugee, an African-American academic, a gay working-class actor, and a perhaps “dying species” of middle-aged and middle-class white male all contend, struggle with the legacy of the Victorian era and their current crises, and create a new community.

Given Wallace’s categories, therefore, it seems possible to call *After Darwin* a metaplay containing a Romantic tragedy, a British remediation of some of the themes of American tragedy, a postcolonial tragedy about contemporary multicultural communities in Western global cities, and a metatheatrical “parody” of modern tragedy. If this is true, why is it useful to talk about the type of tragedy this, or any, play represents? It serves a purpose only insofar as it helps to show what Wertenbaker does with tragedy in *After Darwin*, what ways of knowing and what structures of feeling, as Raymond Williams puts it, the play activates. Wallace may have been right largely to avoid the term *postmodern* in her discussion of tragedy, but both she and Wertenbaker write about (or through) tragedy situated in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Whether the term *postmodernism* serves as an aesthetic description for fragmented, parodic, quotational, master-narrative-questioning art, or as a chronological designation for a late phase of modernity or a period “after” the modern, the idea of the postmodern necessarily comes into play as part of the structure of feeling Wertenbaker’s play captures and to which it responds. And of course, the irony is delicious, since, as with postcolonial thought, tragedy would be a category that postmodern aesthetic and theoretical approaches should undermine, whether by utterly fragmenting its master narratives or by insisting on context and situating tragic art within history. Indeed, what else is a postmodern tragedy, besides a history? A fragmented, contextualized, perspectival tragedy turns into history. This echoes Sontag’s proposition, made as she considered Hochuth’s play *The Deputy* and the cultural trauma of the Jewish holocaust (the “tragedy of
the six million,” she calls it), that “we live in a time in which tragedy is not an art form but a form of history.”

II. History, Tragedy, and Metatheater

The interpenetration of tragedy and history predates the twentieth century, of course, notably in Shakespeare, but Wertenbaker’s play pinpoints how their ineluctable connection tightens within the frames of postmodernism and postcolonialism. In *Modern Tragedy*, Williams writes of coming to tragedy from many roads and of tragedy as a place where roads cross. Tragedy forms at sites and in times of intersection. The intersection of tragedy and history is the first of three crossroads on which *After Darwin* stands. In itself, the play may not be tragedy, but it records and is written for a world forged in tragic events, of societies living through tragic crises. Aptly, Roth positions *After Darwin* as a history play in her probing chapter “Engaging Cultural Translations: Timberlake Wertenbaker’s History Plays from *New Anatomies* to *After Darwin*,” as does Jay Gipson-King in his study of how Wertenbaker fractures history and writes “metahistorical” plays. Yet the prompting of act 2, scene 6 serves to recast the play as still, almost tragedy. If *After Darwin* uses the history play form, it sees contemporary history as shot through with tragic dimensions, albeit ones that cannot be reduced even metaphorically into the actions of one towering character. If *After Darwin* implicates tragic paradigms, nonetheless, it does so deeply aware of historical emplacement and contingency.

Indeed, Wertenbaker’s contemporary history of sadness has to do with uncertainty, displacement, hybridity, and the types of loss and transformation they bring. In telling that type of history, the play becomes tragic. She has Lawrence call the feeling depicted in “his” play a “new species of modern sadness” (169), but the same could be said also of “her” play, which grapples with the sadness of contemporary men and women trying to make meaning through the humble vehicle of a play. The difference between the interior play and the exterior play lies in the type of sadness experienced. If, as FitzRoy voices, Darwin’s ideas represent an undoing of religious certainty, an unmooring of universal truth and hierarchies, modern sadness stems from a cosmological vision altered. If truths and ways of acting and even anatomical structures do not endure no matter the environment, then everything happens in relation to an environment,
not a greater order. That conviction, therefore, resigns all of man’s actions to history and evacuates the sense of human destiny that animates many tragic trajectories. Traditionally, that’s why “you can’t be tragic after Darwin.” In a moment of directorial coaching about how Ian should express FitzRoy’s reaction to Darwin’s ideas, Millie tries to narrate how terrifying it must be to go from believing in a fixed order to facing the possibility that it does not exist. Channeling Stanislavskian technique, she asks her actors if they can draw on having felt such terror themselves:

To suggest the words of the Bible are not literally true and no longer hold the world safe, there is the wreckage—the madness. FitzRoy sees that all sense could crumble in his mind, have you never felt that? You look outside, it’s all a jumble and you hear, too—a jumble, words that belong to no language at all—FitzRoy sees—he hears—Darwin as Lucifer, defying God, jumbling the Creation. And he puts out his hand to hold Darwin back, keep him fixed. (142)

The moment depicted here for Darwin and FitzRoy comprises a formerly coherent system ruptured, a process potentially initiated but definitely increased by Darwin’s contribution to science. For the contemporary characters, however, the rupture has always already been there, and Millie’s evocation of sense memory does not immediately unlock their terror. Their terror may be of a different type, even if Ian can tap it to play FitzRoy’s dilemma. What is important about *After Darwin* as a history of this rupture and a remaking of tragedy after it is not that it shows contemporary characters living in the rupture (much of late twentieth-century drama does this) but rather the way Wertenbaker scripts them working through it. By the end of *After Darwin*, two great questions hover: first, after surviving exile and taking actions that break personal codes, even in this “fallen” state, are Ian and Millie going to start a romantic relationship? Second, will the play the whole group of contemporary characters has been rehearsing actually open to performance, since Tom has tried to leave it for a film job and Ian’s attempt to stop him causes Lawrence to threaten to withdraw the play’s rights? Millie desperately needs the play to open, to help her make a case for permanent residency in the UK by demonstrating that she brings important talent and will be a productive member of British society. Yet if a relationship with Ian, who is newly awoken to certain moral complexities, can blossom, perhaps she can stay even if the play does not go on. The play ends with both questions hanging
unanswered. There is the sense that the connection between Millie and Ian holds a force of desire that is both biological and individually affirmative. Meanwhile, the feeling “the play” must go on even as the other play ends propel a strong move toward renewal, not nihilism, even within the complex, ruptured world.

So, in the interior play, experiencing the rupture of his cosmology seems to drive FitzRoy to madness and suicide; culturally, it also carries consequences for dramatic form. As Williams describes in his study *Culture*, tragedy “as a mode” has “proved capable of virtually indefinite reproduction in many different social orders.” Darwin’s lifespan coincided with the incipience of modern drama in the writing of Ibsen, Zola, and Chekhov. *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and the assimilation of its arguments and the cultural effects of its ideas overlapped or cradled the careers of all three dramatic authors. Williams’s study of modern tragedy exemplifies the way definitions of tragedy could be expanded and rewritten to accommodate the structure of feeling these playwrights represent, and Wallace’s textbook testifies to the now seamless integration of modern definitions of tragedy into many taxonomies of the genre.

Wertenbaker depicts the way that living after the rupture, however, produces different effects for human psychology and dramatic form. In his 1963 book *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, Lionel Abel argued that one such effect of living after the rupture is that, as Sontag summarizes it, “modern man lives with an increasing burden of subjectivity.” This heightened self-consciousness therefore becomes the subject of Western theater. Self-reflexivity and self-referentiality become the artistic methods needed by modernity and late modernity. Abel observes metatheater as the form that can adequately capture the social and spiritual crises of the modern period. Metatheatrical plays use many techniques, including plays-within-plays, to comment on themselves, trouble a sense of illusionistic realism in representation, and create self-reflexivity not only onstage but also within the audience. It is significant, moving between Sontag and Abel, that so many of Wertenbaker’s plays are history plays that weave together past and present using metatheatrical structural devices. As a playwright, Wertenbaker consistently turns to history to reveal and challenge human behavior, depending, like Brecht, not on its universality but on its changeability. Still, Wertenbaker’s plays invest that
human capability for change with the self-knowledge and dignity that allow human choices to be read with the weight of tragedy.

Since most of the action with tragic resonance reveals itself gradually in the overlap between the past and present storylines, the play subtly channels the great social tragedies of our time (colonial expansion, AIDS, wars of ethnic cleansing, racism) and lays them beside personal tragedies of the characters. The play carefully builds an accumulation of subtextual clues that erupt into terse verbal admissions or brief confrontations which highlight the difficulty of trying to live with moral integrity and some sense of authentic identity in the face of fear, jealousy, or the pull of power. Moving between the social and the personal in this way, Wertenbaker also moves between the universal and the particular, or, as Aristotle would have it, the historical and the tragic (back to that crossroads!).

Aristotle declares that the business of poetry is the universal, while the business of history is the particular, which is why he judges tragic poetry as superior to history, since the former seems to create a lasting, unalterable insight rather than a partial or temporary one. Wertenbaker's play contains wrenching personal losses on the part of both the Victorian and contemporary characters. Darwin's daughter dies, and he wonders if it is divine retribution for publishing his scientific theories. FitzRoy deeply misfires in his civilizing mission with the natives from Tierra del Fuego. Millie suffers dispossession and as a refugee must live between identities and fates, often miscalculating both. Tom tries to evade moral responsibility, and Ian takes irrevocable actions that compromise his moral code, leading both to deep anguish. These dilemmas and losses are sad, though most of them happen offstage and only their aftermath is dealt with onstage. Almost no onstage examples of crises, lamentation, or physical suffering occur, and the deflection of brutal physicality or emotions to the offstage moderates the play's presentation of passion. Self-consciously, this diffusion and deferral of feeling serves as one of the points of debate, in fact, between Millie, the Bulgarian director, and her two English actors. She asks them to perform the roles of Darwin and FitzRoy more passionately. They try to explain habitual English repression to her to no avail. “I do not want some gloomy English Chekhov here, Ian,” Millie exclaims, “I want light and tenderness. It is thought tenderness gave mammals an evolutionary advantage” (113). While After Darwin
conjures great passion and contains complex sadness, its heights and depths are consistently decentered by these tactics and demand a great deal of reflexivity from the audience or reader.

Does it serve to say, then, that Wertenbaker’s play insists on the historical without relinquishing the tragic? If Aristotle insists on the universal in tragedy, does it follow that the key tactic for accomplishing Wertenbaker’s historical tragedy comes from drawing on Darwin for the sake of metatheatrical evolutionary metaphors to illustrate how the combined, contextual chance of adaptational processes is really a matter of the universal giving way to the particular and then the particular looping into the universal again? Wertenbaker’s plays could be metatheatrical for the sake of being metatheatrical: that is a fun game to play and one that suits the comic sensibilities of late modernity, but it can also produce sterile plays and facile approaches. Wertenbaker’s metatheatrical structure has all those “in” jokes about British Chekhov, but by elevating the “universal” tragic experiences of loss, grief, devastation, injustice, despair, sadness—and the potential for cleansing or renewal in the face of these trials—it makes a powerful case that the dynamics of knowledge, fate, and loss must be conjoined to historical situatedness if contemporary theater ever hopes to serve a function like ancient tragedy served for its society. Doing this, the play creates not universal truths precisely, but lastingly partial insights. Hers is a metatheater that aspires to the emplacement of classical tragedy and a tragic theater that does not simplify the postmodern complications and meta-levels of history and representation.

III. Knowledge, Fate, and Loss

To be able to access both the universal and the particular, the historical and the tragic, the personal and the political, usually calls for the force of myth. Mytho-historic source tales formed the wellspring of ancient tragedy, and a perceived lack of that shared, cthonic cultural reservoir in Western modernity led critics like George Steiner to declare the death of tragedy. In the plays of Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg, Steiner found only a fragmented view of life, a view that might sometimes be sad but that did not capture the sweep of human power and pain in the face of unknowable destiny:
Tragic drama tells us that the spheres of reason, order, and justice are terribly limited and that no progress in our science or technical resources will enlarge their relevance. Outside and within man is l’autre, the “otherness” of the world. Call it what you will: a hidden or malevolent God, blind fate, the solicitations of hell or the brute fury of our animal blood. It waits for us in ambush at the crossroads. It mocks us and destroys us. In certain rare instances, it leads us after destruction to some incomprehensible repose.26

Steiner also cannot resist a gesture to tragedy’s Oedipal crossroads, and the crossroads he consistently elevates is the meeting point of fate and freedom, which also forms the second crossroads After Darwin straddles.

Certainly, Steiner’s passage above could very well be mobilized as justification that it is possible to be tragic “after Darwin,” because themes about the limits of logic, justice, and progress pertain perhaps even more in a post-Darwinian world. All that is needed is myth to galvanize the discussion of these issues, and, paradoxically, that is the function Darwin serves for Wertenbaker’s remaking of tragedy. Sanders defines a “culture’s mythology” as “its body of traditional narratives,” a type of material which has, following Barthes, “already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication.”27 Sanders further notes that for contemporary literature, the Victorian era and the decade of the 1860s in particular “represent a decisive turn in the terms of postmodern rethinkings of the Victorian novel” because this was the “era that witnessed one of the greatest ever challenges to religious understandings of the world and of identity, in the shape of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution.”28 Sanders suggests that this period becomes a type of analogous, yet variant, period to our own, that “throws into sharp relief many of the overriding concerns of the postmodern era.”29 In this way, Darwin becomes for Western modernity a type of shared myth. Darwin’s adventures and discoveries now figure as part of traditional narratives; moreover, Darwin metonymically stands in for the rupture of the Victorian era so that the invocation of him serves as a “ready-made” encapsulation of all the concerns Sanders lists as central to both that time and our own:

Questions of identity; of environmental and genetic conditioning; repressed and oppressed modes of sexuality; criminality and violence; the urban phenomenon; the operations of law and authority; science and religion; the postcolonial legacies of the empire.30
Wertenbaker’s choice to use Darwin as a subject for a remade tragedy activates the historico-mythic reservoir collected around him. That Darwin is only ostensibly the play’s subject, and that the play then musters all its force to make the contemporary characters and the state of life and ethics after Darwin the true subject of the action, confirms Darwin’s mythological function. The play’s metatheatrical form bolsters a reading of Darwin as a type of myth for current times that reinfuses the supposedly bereft postmodern moment with a shared context and a shared attachment to exploring the dynamics of knowledge, fate, and loss. So a type of tragedy (re)emerges from these mythic-metatheatrical strategies because the movement between the universal and the particular (re)ignites an interplay of fate and freedom, and knowledge falls into doubt again anew, and loss still sears human experience in ways that cannot be fully explained.

It may be that Steiner’s judgment that in the modern period the wrestling of fate and freedom tragedy calls for cannot be obtained simply encodes a quasi-Aristotelian, post-Darwinian fear about the stunted moral scope of modern drama. Aristotle’s observations in the Poetics scrupulously attend to the way characters’ actions reveal moral choices and how those moral choices propel the plot. But Wertenbaker’s play does not present a stunted moral universe: moral choice is deeply at stake in both the interior and exterior play. After Darwin engages this moral facet of tragic theory because Darwin’s theories were also taken, particularly by the faithful—like FitzRoy—as an argument that human beings are not capable of moral choice, but rather are driven by the biological imperative to select and survive. In After Darwin, both the historical and contemporary characters make choices and accept the consequences, and moral choices still matter greatly in the play’s postmodern interplay of fate and freedom. Like many protagonists, Wertenbaker’s characters make “wrong” choices for what seem to be the right reasons, or the right choices out of habit, and either way find their actions turned back on them to reveal precisely the things they tried to hide, forcing them to face the intersection of fate and freedom and choose a path to take.

At first, suicide serves as the marker of this choice. After Darwin begins with a short scene titled “Despair” that shows FitzRoy confronting Darwin in 1865 after On the Origin of Species has been published, calling
him to account for what Darwin unleashed into the world. FitzRoy men-
aces Darwin with a razor and then turns the blade on himself. The scene
blacks out without indicating whether he actually slits his own throat.
Across the play, Tom, Millie, Ian, and Lawrence try to unearth what is at
stake in FitzRoy’s suicidal gesture. How can a man of faith like FitzRoy
even contemplate suicide? Is it because his family has a history of mental
illness? Is it the occupational hazard of a captain on a long journey, iso-
lated and confined on ship thousands of miles from his social context?
Both the previous captains of the Beagle committed suicide. Is FitzRoy
in some ways fated to kill himself? The contemporary characters return
twice to a chronologically earlier scene, set in 1835 on board the Beagle,
where Darwin first explains his ideas to FitzRoy and FitzRoy heatedly
puts him down. This scene is the precursor of the 1865 confrontation and
the source of what FitzRoy speaks to Darwin about in the 1865 scene.
The contemporary characters rehearse and replay the 1835 scene at the
end of act 1 and in the pivotal act 2, scene 6. In the interim, Lawrence
revises the scene because, he says, “something’s missing” that would more
directly explain FitzRoy’s suicide attempt (140). It is not enough for it to
be only a response to the changing climate around him. To be dramati-
cally interesting, FitzRoy’s suicidal gesture cannot simply be a gesture of
acquiescence to the extinction of his kind, or to mental disorder, or to
his professional failure. This would be a too simple submission to fate. In
the revision, Lawrence hypothesizes that in 1835 FitzRoy does not simply
refute Darwin with words, but brandishes a gun, forcing Darwin to his
knees and threatening violence unless Darwin promises to withhold his
ideas from circulation. In this light, FitzRoy’s suicidal gesture in 1865
becomes a defiant atonement for his betrayal of his own code by using
violence to achieve his ends. In the beginning of Wertenbaker’s play,
which seems to be the end of Lawrence’s play, FitzRoy tries to use suicide
to mark his free will, his capacity to carry out his moral code, even after
he has failed it.

FitzRoy’s suicidal gesture is not the only such gesture in After Darwin.
When Millie must confess that she has never directed a play before, that
all she knows about theater comes from serving as a janitor in a state
theater after a purge removed her from her university study in the sci-
ence department, she describes how she discovered that her family had
suppressed its Turkish surname when the Communist Party began to favor “pure” Bulgarian descent. So she proclaimed her Turkish identity in a fit of will, or what might have been an embrace of her fated origin, and brought the purge to her family’s doorstep. “I don’t know why, I really don’t know why,” she admits. Then, “when the communists fell, I took back my Bulgarian name, but it was too late to go to university. I came here and implied I was a director who had worked as a cleaner. You were so romantic about us, no one asked questions” (155). Millie describes her choice to reclaim her Turkish identity even in the face of known persecution as a suicidal gesture, one that cannot be explained by evolution. She also tells the cast that she has fallen in love with Lawrence’s play, as she already loved Darwin’s writing, and fallen in love with the work of making theater, not only because it might save her from forced repatriation but also because “maybe it could explain my suicidal gesture” (155). In the cases of FitzRoy and Millie, a suicidal gesture forces a discussion of fate and freedom, the limits of self-knowledge and scientific knowledge, the force of desire, and the (im)possibility of living after wrenching loss.

After Darwin’s insistence on the category of moral choice also surfaces in the central plot turn where Tom receives an offer to appear in an action movie. When he reveals his plans to accept the offer and thereby leave the theater in the lurch without an actor to play Darwin, it prompts both Millie and Ian to tell him he cannot take such an action because it would be immoral to advance his own interest at the expense of their ruin (149, 158). Ian gets no offers for films because he refused to play a serial killer in a high-budget thriller, so this play represents his venue to return to notice, and Millie faces the evaluation of immigration officials. Both need the work of the play to survive. Tom does not accept their definition of morality—“I don’t understand that word, Ian”—but he is honest about his actions (149). Is he in truth behaving morally? Meanwhile, Ian, under the delusion that he can behave immorally and achieve moral ends, undertakes the subterfuge of e-mailing the producers of Tom’s movie with the false information that he has AIDS. Ian hopes that Tom will simply be fired, since the production company will not pay to insure an HIV-positive actor. Thus, Tom will quietly stay and continue with the play. Everyone will be better off, Tom included, because he is doing noble work in the
theater, rather than debased film work that trades on violation and terror. But, in that climactic scene just before the end of the play, Ian confesses what he has done. He feels morally compelled to. In fact, it is Lawrence’s rewrite of FitzRoy and Darwin’s confrontation that causes Ian’s admission. While trying the new pages, playing FitzRoy’s violent outburst and failure of moral restraint, Ian feels the whole weight of his own mistaken action, his own broken integrity. Overwhelmed by his own suicidal gesture, Ian sputters out what he has done, aghast at how he chose to do it yet felt like it was happening without him, as if fated: “it was so easy. Words …” (170).

Though Lawrence reacted calmly when Tom told him he was taking the film part three scenes earlier, when he finds out about Ian’s subterfuge, he withdraws the rights to produce the play, even though Tom would be able to play the role still. “I cannot accept Ian’s gesture,” he says. “I would be colluding” (171). Millie argues with Lawrence, using many tactics. “Your mother’s here” to see the show, she says. “Aren’t you doing this for her?” Lawrence lashes back: “If there’s one thing a black American woman from Washington D.C. knows, it’s the difference between right and wrong” (172). Millie maneuvers Lawrence into seeing how deeply all of them need the show to go on for both economic and spiritual survival. Then, after Millie confesses that she’s “done a lot of shameful things” to get where she is, she and Lawrence face the eternal and terrible dilemma of moral choice framed anew in a post-Darwinian world:

*Lawrence:* Don’t make me betray my moral code.

*Millie:* Ian’s broken his, Tom never had one, what makes you think you can survive without getting your hands dirty? (172–73)

Like each of the contemporary characters, Lawrence stands at the intersection of fate and freedom in this moment, unsure of what he must do, what he will allow himself to do, and what the spiritual and social consequences of his actions will entail. And with Darwin functioning as a type of myth for Wertenbaker’s renegotiation of tragedy, the play makes the case that after Darwin, we understand fate and freedom with vivid new acuity. Therefore, both human knowledge and lack of knowledge take on an increased order of magnitude. So we evaluate choices ferociously, scouring them for the place where desire overtakes reason, where free
will turns into fate, or fate yields in light of knowledge, or where loss can be vanquished or suffering avoided.

Eagleton summarizes tragedy’s understood approach to loss as presenting “a suffering which chastens and transfigures” emerging from a situation that is not only poignant, but which has “something fearful about it too, some horrific quality which shocks and stuns. It is traumatic as well as sorrowful.”\textsuperscript{31} The situation of four displaced, complicated, contemporary people trying to put on a play and figure out how to live despite the fact that they must get their hands dirty while doing so may not rise to a level of gut-checking shock. But their situation is the paradigmatic one of postmodern life: a mediated, historicized, fragmented existence still struggling with the dynamics of fate and freedom, still riven by losses that cannot be fully explained. The tragic dynamics of the play meld with its metatheatricality to probe a seriousness and a depth without grating, as Eagleton puts it, “on the postmodern sensibility.”\textsuperscript{32} Eagleton writes of tragedy as a “symbolic coming to terms with our finitude and fragility,”\textsuperscript{33} and Wertenbaker’s characters face those terms drawing on a sensibility that accommodates the way both Chekhov’s and Beckett’s characters have also dealt with finitude and frailty.

Eagleton also posits that because it deals with finitude and frailty, the tragic genre carries with it a “history of the body, which in respect of physical suffering has probably changed little over the centuries” that can serve as a basis for “authentic politics” and free societies.\textsuperscript{34} Wertenbaker’s play strives for those ends even while it accepts that there is no transcendence at the crossroads of fate and freedom. \textit{After Darwin} proposes that there may be provisional transcendence and authenticity accessible for those living between what seems fated and what is chosen, in the muddle of suffering and loss, and that may enough. The gravity of the exterior play lies in the conversation the contemporary characters are able to have while rehearsing the interior play, moving between what it shows about loss and what they are able to do with their own loss. If tragedy has use as a response to suffering and a way of processing loss, Wertenbaker works “after” the form in order to show what might be done with suffering now. Though \textit{After Darwin’s} first scene bears the title “Despair,” its last scene is titled “Evolution.”
IV. Catharsis and the Contexts of Tragedy

Up to this point of the study, the second-to-last scene of *After Darwin* has commanded the most attention. This scene announces the play’s relationship with tragedy as a genre, explodes the moral crises in the contemporary storyline of the play, and brings the two lingering questions of the play—Will the show go on? Will the very compromised Ian and Millie come together?—into sharp relief. But if one reason to remake tragedy lies in the focus on what to do with suffering that the tragic form carries, then only the last scene of the play can tell what *After Darwin* proposes about how to process suffering.

This movement to the end of the play (which may be the prelude to a performance of Lawrence’s play) returns to some of the definitional questions about tragedy, since the way the stage directions direct the char/actors to turns out to the audience as the play ends opens the age-old questions of whether a tragedy is a type of story and play structure or whether tragedy is a type of feeling and response. For instance, Richard Palmer’s “working definition” of tragedy depends on audience response. Palmer finds one consistent theme in tragic drama and tragic theory: the form “evokes an ambivalent response that simultaneously attracts and repels the audience.” Palmer therefore develops the following definition: “Tragedy is a dramatic form that stimulates a response of intense, interdependent, and inseparably balanced attraction and repulsion.”

Tragedy lies not only in form, but mainly in audience response to the play as stimulus. Working from his definition, tragedy after Darwin could certainly exist because tragedy is a matter of response. Indeed, after the cultural sea change represented by Darwin, some plays that had previously seemed tragic may have ceased to seem so, while plays that would not have produced the perfect balance of attraction and repulsion before might do so after. Returning to the impossibility of making a precise line between the tragic and the “merely” very sad, September 11 becomes an interesting pivot point for *After Darwin*. The play premiered before September 11, and its remediation of modern tragic trajectories may suddenly have become too muted to produce the right balance of civic and personal response in the face of that very vivid catastrophe.
Opposite Palmer, Steiner’s denial of tragedy stems in part from the trouble of audience response. Steiner details how a lack of coherent, shared values leaves the audiences of Western modernity unequipped to react to tragedy and its “ordered and stylized vision of life” and to decode its “attendant context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference.” What Aristotle writes of catharsis in the Poetics remains elliptical in terms of audience response, since the formula “through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics” could describe the effect tragedy should produce in a living audience, though it could also be a description of what should happen in the plot. At stake in discussions of audience response is emotion: how it is stirred and where it carries an audience, but also how emotion changes and depends highly on context. Is it terrifying or liberatory that the measure of an artwork’s status as tragedy could lie in what happens to the audience watching it, rather than something about how the play is built? Brockmann outlines the way “tragedy comes to represent western civilization itself,” and, not unlike Darwin’s theories, the relocation of tragedy to the audience produces a sense that “civilization itself” is being destabilized and left to chance.

Yet the movement of twentieth-century discussions about tragedy proceeds inexorably toward placing the tragic locus in a structure of feeling circulating between the play and the audience. Williams and Eagleton are part of that movement. In Theatre Journal, Román also shifts the locus of tragedy from the stage to the events of the social world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which dwarf the subjects of stage tragedy. Román wants to see theater playing a critical role in a “culture already infused with the tragic.” To do so, theater may not need to be tragic in a formal sense, but to allow audiences to process the tragic events of their social and political worlds. In the forum on tragedy that follows Román’s introduction, Diana Taylor applies her influential notion of the scenario to tragedy. Taylor highlights how “tragedy cuts catastrophe down to size. It orders events into comprehensible scenarios.” In The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, Taylor employs the term scenario to describe “a paradigmatic setup that relies on supposedly live participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) end.” Most importantly, she writes,
“scenarios exist as culturally specific imaginaries—sets of possibilities, ways of conceiving conflict, crisis, or resolution—activated with more or less theatricality.” To think of tragedy as at least partially a function of audience response makes it a type of scenario, a paradigmatic setup that exists in a culturally specific imaginary which puts certain sequences, logics, and connections into motion.

In *Theatre Journal*, Taylor argues that to talk of September 11 in terms of tragedy tries to give “events a sense of directionality, containability, and moral purpose.” Taylor critiques this narrativization of the attacks since it “not only structures the events but also blinds us to other ways of thinking about them,” occluding especially non-Western viewpoints. Her critique derives from the way tragedy, as a scenario, implies a timetable, an ability to make sense of events, and the eventual arrival of purification and release, thereby serving as a justification for another favored neo-conservative scenario, “war.” After Darwin’s sadness predates September 11, but like *Credible Witness*, the play already senses the very unstable terrain of international politics and where it will lead. Wertenbaker’s introductory remarks quoted in the epigraph to this article suggest that her remaking of form wants to activate tragedy as a Taylorian scenario precisely to dramatize the type of critique Taylor voices. A “thick description” of the play’s relationship with tragedy and tragic theory paradoxically justifies the existence of tragedy “after” Darwin. But the final scene, while evoking the choral rhythm of ancient tragedies, provides that the tragic scenario can be redirected. The adaptability, a supremely Darwinian trait, of a scenario’s end allows its survival, its potency, and its ripeness for reappropriation. Wertenbaker could leave her characters atomized and shattered and end the play with act 2, scene 6, the stage metaphorically littered with bodies after the great moral confrontation. Instead, she imagines another conversation.

Wertenbaker’s play takes on modern tragedy as a scenario because, as Román would have it, the world at the end of the twentieth century needs art to process what is happening and because the ends of modernity’s tragic scenarios, which derive, as Wallace shows, from the Romantic movement, can be rewritten in favor of community and perseverance, instead of alienated individualism. The history of tragic drama pulses with the tension between the one and the many, and the third crossroads in *After*
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_Darwin_ forms at the meeting of the individual and the community. At the end of act 2, scene 6, there are four individuals in pain and at a loss how to proceed, but, like Beckettian figures, they must go on. Better, the play goes on because what these characters do with their suffering, to paraphrase Lawrence’s words from an earlier scene, “emerges” from the tragic but is a hybrid of individual apotheosis such as might be found in Ibsen or Arthur Miller and the reaffirmation of polis or tribe that solders the end of ancient tragedy. This individual revelation and group affirmation form a new hybrid community, one forged in the struggle for “existence on this small space” (160).

As act 2, scene 6 ends, Ian and Lawrence are not left to their respective moral failure and moral revulsion. First, Tom declares a new conception of (his) fate. He may be “the victim” who lost his option for “glamour, wealth, even a little security,” but suddenly

> I don’t seem to care. Maybe I don’t care about anything. It’s your Darwin, Lawrence, he’s scrambled my brain. He’s turned Ian into moral puss. But I’ve been feeling this virus, gripping me. Maybe I’ll be remembered as Darwin. Maybe I really do want to do this, or rather, maybe it wants to use me to do itself. And I don’t mind. Yeah. And then, even you couldn’t say no, Lawrence, could you? (174)

Having admitted that he’s never had an AIDS test, Tom now feels infected by fate, and the play becomes an object of destiny: “maybe it wants to use me to do itself” (174). Lawrence goes offstage with Tom to consider allowing the production after all. Ian and Millie wait for their return. An agonized Ian writhes in his guilt. He mourns for FitzRoy and himself. “I play the one who gets it wrong. Means well. Does ill. Always. Tragic.” (175). Then Millie holds out her hands to him. Ian’s desire for and jealousy about Millie has increased across the play as her precarious situation has become ever clearer. She has refused him, deflected him, ignored him. But now she holds out her hands to him. “Love makes you ambitious and culture uses you to multiply,” he admits. “My question is: could you love me?” (175). In this moment, Millie’s reply, “I think it’s time for you to commit suicide,” does not indicate a refusal; instead it commands him to perform the beginning of the play when FitzRoy tries to commit suicide. Here is the suicidal gesture reclaimed from the existential void. Her response testifies to faith in Ian and the play, and to an imperative to go forward, to begin again.
The final scene takes place in Darwin’s study “as it is now in Down House, some of it cordoned off” (175). It as if Millie and Lawrence have gone to tour the Darwin Museum. Tom-as-Darwin speaks the text of On the Origin of Species, while Ian-as-FitzRoy speaks parts of Genesis. Weaving between these strands, Millie looks at the bookshelf in the museum and reads the titles of the volumes of books written “after” Darwin. Then, FitzRoy begins to speak to the audience and Lawrence stares at him. Millie and Darwin persist in their litanies. FitzRoy explains to the audience how his legacy intertwines with Darwin’s and then turns to Lawrence, imploring him to “give me substance.” Millie and Darwin persist. Lawrence interjects about what called him to write plays: the ancestors, the “shelves of my memory—a parallel evolution, where imagination multiplies.” FitzRoy asks Lawrence to find him, to “give [him] room,” to make him part of history, and as the alternating pulses of their fragmented, overlapping speeches subside, all four char/actors “look at one another and out towards the audience” (177–78).

Whether this scene represents a dream state, or Lawrence’s interior process, or fragments of real time jumbled in that liminoid space of theater, it stems first from one person offering her hands to another, then two people making a trip to a historical site together, then three people speaking together calling to a playwright about what he might represent, then four people performing a play turning out to those who watch them perform. This sequence bridges the individual and the community, something that feels especially potent in a live theater space because the audience sits as individuals together. Ancient tragedies, as Wallace notes, were usually set on the threshold between public and private space.43 Wertenbaker’s metatheatrical placement of her play as a set of historical chambers revealed to be theater performs the same oscillation between public and private. With this final scene, the meeting at the threshold culminates. Indeed, the scene builds a momentum that undermines the blocking opposition Lawrence provided in the previous scene. Lawrence had revealed early on that FitzRoy, not Darwin, drew him to write his play. “Playwrights are the anatomists of the failed character,” he says (137). What playwright could resist his main character pleading with him so powerfully? What playwright could resist the hope that this might powerfully impact the audience? The scene, for all its fugue-like quality,
conveys the probability that Ian and Tom have performed Lawrence's play, in part because we who watch or hear the final scene have read or seen Wertenbaker's play. The play has gone on, and the final turn marks its passage out to the audience.

What does an audience do with this scene? Will they experience something like catharsis? Do they feel connected not only to the contemporary characters, with whom they might find many reasons to empathize based on proximity or similarity of experience, but also to the historical characters? Do they also evaluate them? In feeling this connection, does a provisional type of renewal steal over them? Were their attitude and emotional response encouraged by the context in which Wertenbaker's redirection of the modern tragedy's operating scenario took place? After Darwin played at the Hampstead Theatre before it was remodeled with lottery funds. In July 1998, the Hampstead was a longstanding new-writing theater still housed in practically pub-theater conditions in the Swiss Cottage district of Camden, in northern London. Aside from newspaper reviews, no record tells about audience response, if the play struck the average viewer as tragic, if this was a site where an audience might expect a renegotiation of tragedy. The positive, though mixed reviews cannot make up their minds about the way the play ends. Most comment on the power of the themes but worry over how the “material refuses to fuse into anything significant or explosive.” Many praise the play highly, but a few miss the sense of a “wave” which would “sweep” forth from the play and catch the audience in its arc. In other words, the reviews record very well the way the play invokes but redirects the expected tragic scenario and how that effect leaves an audience stirred, yearning, and a bit uncertain in its connection.44

Writing about how Heiner Müller remakes ancient tragedies for postmodern ends, Peter Campbell unearths in Müller’s metatheatric, interstitial, remaking techniques a strategy for wrestling with “the very texts we must confront in order to progress in our storytelling and our consequent understanding of the world” and quotes Müller’s assertion that “the future will emerge only out of dialogue with the dead.”45 Wertenbaker's play suggests that perhaps the scenarios of modern tragedy are the texts that must be confronted at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The use of tragedy continues to lie in its ability to allow the culture to
understand itself and to deal with crisis. To that end, Wertenbaker stages a conversation with the dead in *After Darwin* and foregrounds not only Darwin, but particularly FitzRoy. After that conversation with the dead, Wertenbaker resolves her play with a depiction of a complex but affirmative community of very disparate individuals involved in a very rich conversation with the past. In Wertenbaker’s dramaturgy, these conversations and confrontations mine the intersections of history and tragedy, fate and freedom, individual and community, and see the living momentarily illuminated in the process.  

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**Notes**


10. Ibid., 158.  

12 Wallace, 1.
13 Ibid., 63.
14 Ibid., 102.
15 Ibid., 77.
16 Ibid. 87.
17 Ibid., 88.
18 Sontag, 128, 125.
19 Williams, 13.
24 The Grace of Mary Traverse is set in the late eighteenth century, as is Our Country’s Good. The Love of the Nightingale is set in the mythic Greek past, and New Anatomies takes place in turn-of-the-century (nineteenth to twentieth) Algeria and Europe. The Break of Day has a modern setting but is intertextually entwined with The Three Sisters in a way that consistently invokes a metaphorical comparison between the 1890s and the 1990s, just as After Darwin literally moves the audience between past and present. These plays are available in Plays Two and in Plays One: New Anatomies, The Grace of Mary Traverse, Our Country’s Good, Love of the Nightingale, Three Birds Alighting on a Field (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).
29 Ibid., 129.
30 Ibid.
31 Eagleton, 1.
32 Ibid., ix.
33 Ibid., xv.
34 Ibid., xiv–xv.
Aristotle, 25. Since Aristotle does not usually address plays in performance or audience response, catharsis is often framed in terms of how a plot resolves, of how the protagonist, for whom the audience feels pity and fear, faces the major conflicts and sees them brought to a logical conclusion. Given the partial state of the *Poetics*, the issue cannot be resolved. Else writes in the notes to his translation that “the usual interpretations of ‘catharsis’ are far too numerous to list here, but they all, or almost all, have in common a focus on the pity and fear which are aroused in the spectator. These are somehow either ‘purified’ (reduced to beneficent order and proportion) or ‘purged’ (expelled from his emotional system) by the play. Such interpretations are not sustained so much by anything in the *Poetics* itself as by a passage in the *Politics* … which speaks of a musical ‘catharsis’ in comparable terms and refers to ‘the Poetics’ (not the extant portion, obviously) for the definitive discussion” (98).

Brockmann, 25.

Román, 14.


Wallace, 26–27.

See the collected reviews of the premiere, directed by Lindsay Posner at the Hampstead, in *Theatre Record* 18.14 (2–15 July 1998), 896–900.


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