Shakespearean Tragedy. Kiernan Ryan.
London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2021. xvi + 294 pp. $90.

Kiernan Ryan's Shakespeare has always been a utopian. In his first book, *Shakespeare* (1989), Ryan rode the cultural materialist wave, finding in the plays a vein of biting social critique. Yet Ryan also parted ways with his radical colleagues. He bridled at their committed historicism, as well as the nihilism that sometimes followed from it; what distinguished Shakespeare's plays, he came to insist, was their irrepressible futurity—their commitment, as he put it in *Shakespeare's Universality* (2015), "to the *universal human potential* to live otherwise" (9). In his new book, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Ryan takes up the same case once again. What is new is where and how Ryan argues it: on the terrain of tragedy, the least utopian, the most despairing, of Shakespeare's genres.

Shakespearean Tragedy is a culminating effort in more ways than one. More expansive than *Shakespeare's Universality*, the book gathers the fruits of years of reading and teaching the plays. Indeed, it often has the feel of a reworking of university lectures. The form of the book is simple and syllabus-like: each tragedy is taken in its chronological turn (after an introductory turn to the history plays). And its approach is casual. There are no footnotes, and there is only a brief, informal works cited. Critics more recent than Stephen Booth and Harold Bloom are ignored, and the names that do appear with frequency—Coleridge, Hazlitt, Bradley—tend to be much older. Yet Ryan's aspiration is hard to place: the length and density of his readings indicate ambitions beyond writing a lay reader's introduction to the topic.

Ryan takes his title and his reliance on close reading from A. C. Bradley, but it is also Bradley at whom his argument takes aim. For all his interpretive brilliance, Ryan suggests, Bradley's psychologizing led him down the wrong path: it emphasized the tragic individual rather than the social collective, and it framed tragedy as a genre of resignation rather than revolution. For Ryan, "Shakespeare's tragic protagonists can never be prised apart from the social circumstances that shaped them," and what emerges from the recognition of those circumstances is a commitment to social transformation (xiii). Ryan begins with a compelling reading not of Shakespeare's early tragedies but of the first tetralogy, arguing that these plays reveal, in their skeptical deflation of kingship and their fascination with rebellion and revolution, "the political rationale of Shakespearean tragedy" (12). The rest of the book follows the arc of Shakespeare's career in tragedy from *Titus Andronicus* to *Coriolanus*, omitting *Timon of Athens* (which Ryan addresses in *Shakespeare's Universality*) and devoting special attention to *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

In each case, Ryan's readings work to bring out a fundamental tension between historical reality and prospective liberation. Hamlet may be caught in a claustrophobic world of monarchal power games, but his "egalitarian voice" (104) nonetheless manages to evoke "a future humanity is still struggling to create" (111). Othello and Desdemona,

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acting as if they are “free citizens of a truly civilized future,” furnish a critique of racism that, Ryan insists, is even more powerful today than it was when the play first appeared (113). The readings that support these claims are often deft and perceptive, but they tend toward a worryingly comfortable conclusion: that Shakespeare is as progressive as modern readers might wish him to be.

The problem lies in part in what Ryan looks past: the cultural materialists and New Historicists who had already turned Bradley’s psychological Shakespeare toward politics. Overlooking these critics magnifies the novelty of Ryan’s own arguments for the plays’ radical politics, but it also allows him to evade the challenges that this earlier political turn still presents, most notably its skeptical critique, influentially articulated in Jonathan Dollimore’s *Radical Tragedy* (1984), of the ideological essentialism on which universalizing conceptions of the human subject rest. Rather than vindicating our own categories and commitments, a truly radical reading of Shakespeare might throw them into doubt.

Still, there is something to be said for Ryan’s universalism, which remains unfashionable even as it flatters modern sensibilities. The one sensibility that it does not flatter—and it is an influential one in Shakespeare studies—is the desire to differentiate among identities. For many, Ryan’s insistence on the universality of Shakespeare’s vision will seem like a willful avoidance of the durable forms of difference that framed the world then and now. But the prevalence of that impulse may mean that the time is right to remember how unsettling and challenging Shakespeare’s encounters with “unaccommodated man”—with a humanity before and beyond difference—really are.

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Storyworlds of Robin Hood: The Origins of a Medieval Outlaw. Lesley Coote. London: Reaktion Books, 2020. 304 pp. £20.

Lesley Coote’s monograph follows two volumes she coedited on the Robin Hood tradition: *Robin Hood in Outlaw/ed Spaces: Media, Performance and Other New Directions* (coedited with Valerie Johnson [2016]) and *Robin Hood and the Outlaw/ed Literary Canon* (coedited with Alexander L. Kaufman [2018]). These volumes provide a welcome overview of how and when Robin Hood emerged as a particular figure in British and American popular consciousness from the Middle Ages through the modern day. The recurrent reminder of Robin Hood’s outlaw status in Coote’s titles speaks not only to the character as the quintessential medieval English outlaw but also to the ways in which primary texts about Robin Hood and his companions have existed on the borders of the English literary tradition. Next to King Arthur, Robin Hood, it seems, may be the most significant representative of popular medievalism in the past six centuries, but until recently he has been of little interest to academic medievalists.

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