

Fins tragiques: Poétique et éthique du dénouement dans la tragédie de la première modernité (Italie, France, Espagne, Allemagne). Enrica Zanin.

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“A tragedy, it is said, is a story that ends badly”: so Zanin opens her study of the genre as people thought and practiced it from about 1550 to 1650 in the countries named. That tragedy is alone among literary genres to be defined by its ending (others are defined by style, form, or effect), she observes, poses several problems. One is literary-historical, since this way of describing it is today general. Yet it is untrue of the genre as founded in ancient Greece. There, a fortunate end was as common as any other, even preferred, as far as a plot’s ethical outcome was concerned, if not its dramatic effect. Another problem is, precisely, one of ethics: if the story ends badly because a good person is harmed, something is rotten in the world’s moral balance; but if the story ends badly because a bad person gets their desert, the audience may applaud. It won’t be much moved. The

play loses its dramatic and emotional effect. Another problem concerns how to conceive of tragedy's structure and creation if it is defined principally (or wholly) by its unhappy ending.

Zanin pursues these issues, noting, first, that this way of understanding tragedy was fixed only in the European sixteenth century. So a principal question is, "why is it just then that the unhappy outcome becomes tragedy's defining trait?" (13). To this, her answer is that, as Greek tragedy and Aristotle's *Poetics* were rediscovered, dramatists and theorists referred mostly to Horace, late Latin grammarians, and medieval genres, thinking about tragedy essentially in nondramatic terms — except in Italy, where the *Poetics* held dominant sway by midcentury, with the result, she argues, that Italian tragedy barely made it to century's end as an active genre, so divorced was it from a theatergoing public's interests. These interests are, Zanin shows, pace many literary historians, why tragedy existed in Spain and Germany more as "modulation" (38) of dramatic performance than singular genre, enlarging its sweep and variety. In the German case, this enables Zanin to adjust Walter Benjamin's account to show less difference between *Tragödie* and *Trauerspiel* than is today widely assumed. In both countries as in France, the topos of misfortune was allied with a moralizing value of exemplarity (47).

A "network of resemblances" (56) lets us see tragedy as common to antiquity and various national early modernities, as did writers of these last. Zanin traces the network's complexities in theoretical writings and in plays, after first arguing what allows these last to be uniformly called tragedies, showing the variety of their endings, and noting their moral aims. Her other three sections look at the nature and meanings of the ending (part 2); its "modalities," or how, that is, the reversals that produce it structure plays, stay within the bounds of probability or not, yet affect their audience via "suspense and surprise" (183, 213) (part 3); and the ending's "structure," how its intended pathos is balanced with moral exemplarity, the protagonist's ethos, and a broader ideal of "poetic justice" (part 4). If Pierre Corneille seems the author who gets most attention, many others and several themes (Cleopatra, Dido, Iphigenia) serve to compare dramatic structure across times and countries, though Germany gets short shrift. The impression, too, is of a conversation with early modern and modern theorists more than with dramatists, and stays, too, entirely focused on texts. Zanin is explicit that she seeks to define, internally, an early modern genre, comparing tragedy to "a rhetorical joust" and a "poetics of dialogue" (283). Yet it seems a bit odd, given the opening question "why then? Why there?" that Zanin alludes only once to real historical events: the French "conflicts of 1562" apropos of Garnier's *Porcie* (129) — in a clause of that length.

This is a big book. I may have missed other allusions. I think not, for tragedy's ending exists "for poetic reasons: to articulate *noeud* and *dénouement*," intrigue and solution — the ground of tragedy's specificity (390), its portrayal of "exemplarity's failure," of the fragility of any relation between a rational ethics and contingent events (391). Tragedy, Zanin says, deals with ethics and poetics, not the real world.

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