

"The essence of a kingly barbarian is that he has no middle range of conduct; when he is shocked out of his grand behaviour he falls straight to the level of cruelty and violence." (p.127)

What is needed here, of course, is an historical corrective of the kind G K Hunter (1967, pp. 139ff.) supplies in his seminal essay on Othello, examining Shakespeare's manipulation of response in this play in the light of Elizabethan attitudes to the black man. It simply will not do to say that "the tragedy ... hastens to its dreadful end, fed by its own fuel and obedient to its own inexorable laws" (pp. 128-9), when the play is so clearly dealing not with impersonal processes but with social and racial conflicts of considerable complexity. To be fair to Wain, though, this mistake is made by practically all critics of Othello.

Similar criticisms might be made of the section on the Comedies, which is rather dull, and insufficiently focused on the social divisions and oppositions upon which these plays are founded. But the discussion of the History plays is good, and is free of the sentimentality which mars so much criticism of (especially) the Henry IV plays. And in general, the book is designed to stimulate discussion and theatrical experiment rather than provide definitive analysis, and this it does at almost every point.

Notes and References

- David, R. 1978: Shakespeare in the Theatre. Cambridge.
Hunter, G K. 1967: "Othello and Colour Prejudice". Proceedings of the British Academy, XIII.
Jones, E. 1971: Scenic Form in Shakespeare. Oxford University Press, London.
Warren, R. 1979: "A Year of Comedies: Stratford 1978". Shakespeare Survey, 32, Cambridge.
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On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy

Author: John Jones

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Professor John Jones' book, On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy, first published in 1962, has become a classic in the field, and the reprinted paperback from Chatto and Windus promises an underpinning of the book's status.

Jones, in an author's note as preface to the book has this to say:

I have imagined this book as the first part of a trilogy dealing with the presentation of the human self in Western literature. It is also meant to stand on its own;

Professor Jones's thesis, that the way to a proper understanding of Greek Tragedy lies through plot and action rather than character, might appear today to be standard reasoning, but it forms the basis for provocative investigation and analysis. He demonstrates what Aristotle was really saying, in the face of generations of misinterpretation of Poetics. This book includes valuable analyses of the Oresteia, Electra, Antigone, Ajax and Sophocles' two Oedipus plays, as well as the Electra of Euripides. The book should become standard reading in the field for any who care about performance.
