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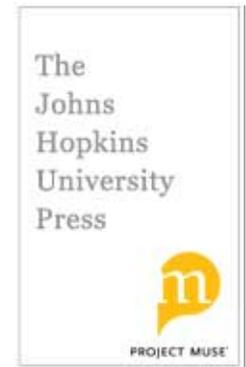
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*Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic  
Literature and Tragic Theory* ed. by Kevin Taylor, Giles  
Waller (review)

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*Christianity & Literature*, Volume 63, Number 4, Summer 2014, pp. 560-564  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Oehlschlaeger's pun in "Being Here" suggests not only Berry's desire to be fully present to the world around him (to *be here*) but also to acknowledge the beings that are present to him (to see *the Being* that is *here*). Berry, like Thoreau and Frost before him, writes with an unwavering commitment to particular things as they are—a commitment to "the real as poetry," as Oehlschlaeger calls it—rather than as they may be. Attempts to transform other beings into the means for another's use is, of course, the danger of technology and total economy, which together tempt us to see all beings in terms of units of production or the mere "resources" of their ostensible proprietors. The poetic conceits of farming and marriage, which pervade Berry's poems, dispel and redress this un-real vision of other beings, for the love that moves the spouse and the farmer is a love that must attend to the unique being of another. Oehlschlaeger finds in Berry's vision the possibility of "the love of God evident in the risen Christ," a love that "requires us to recognize our enemies are included in it," resulting in the "reconciliation and peace" (242) that Berry's career has stood on.

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***Christian Theology and Tragedy: Theologians, Tragic Literature and Tragic Theory.*** Edited by Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011. ISBN 978-0-7546-6940-1. Pp. x + 259. \$118.70.

At first glance, this volume's title seems antithetical. "Surely," we say, "Christianity is the *antithesis* of tragedy; after all, the story of the cross has a Happy Ending!" To the contributors and editors of *Christian Theology and Tragedy*, however, such a reaction is both reductive and hopelessly inadequate to account for the tragic lived experience of humanity in a world where cruelty, genocide and indifference persist in spite—and sometimes because—of Christianity. In fact, the literary genre of tragedy provides ready access to the universality of human suffering that defies (or defiles) the Christian worldview. Editors Kevin Taylor and Giles Waller stress that this book is not about "religion" or "religious themes," "but rather the broader theological insights that emerge from an engagement with tragedy" (9).

Taylor and Waller have compiled a collection of essays by second-generation writers about the intersection between tragedy and Christianity. (The first generation, frequently cited by both editors and essayists, includes Donald MacKinnon, John Millbank, David Bentley Hart and Paul Janz, among others.) In the introduction, the editors assert that tragedy and Christianity are only incompatible if we consider the definitions of one or both terms inflexibly rigid. To regard tragedy as inevitably

“allied to pessimism” (to quote Arthur Miller from his 1949 essay “Tragedy and the Common Man”) is necessarily to exclude it from Christian promise or, worse, to accept a worldview which surrenders human agency in the face of evil. The very real suffering and cruelty represented by the cross require our attention. In his essay Waller remarks that “[tragedy] recalls us to the specificity of suffering, to the irreducible pain and loss suffered by the other, about which we are not ethically entitled to speculate in teleological terms” (107). While the essays in this book provide useful considerations of specific texts and theological writers, these admonitions lie at the heart of the argument in favor of linking tragedy and Christianity and should be the ultimate take-away for the reader.

Taylor and Waller divide the volume into three parts: “Theology and Tragic Literature,” “Theologians and Tragedy,” and “Theology Engaged with Tragic Theory.” As indicated by its heading, the first section analyzes specific literary texts using the theoretical writing of Hart, Janz, MacKinnon, et al. Part II discusses the way tragedy intersects with the work of twentieth-century theologians/philosophers. The third grouping of essays further considers the relationship between theology and tragic theory. The volume concludes with a call to action, of a sort, enjoining us to heed and respond to cries of suffering.

Because MacKinnon’s work is so foundational for understanding the perspective of this collection it actually makes sense to begin one’s perusal with “Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon’s Use of Tragedy” by Giles Waller. Waller usefully articulates MacKinnon’s argument in favor of classical tragedy (as opposed to philosophy) as a model for exploring Christian theology in the context of lived experience: whereas philosophy invites abstraction and idealism, tragedy “bids us attend to the ambiguities of concrete life” (105). The insights provided by this essay set the stage for the rest of the volume.

In “Four Biblical Characters: In Search of a Tragedy,” Ben Quash employs the dilemma posed by Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* to explore whether or not tragedy is congruent with Christian theology. Examining Biblical figures Judah, Samson and Saul as “characters” rather than “historically embedded agents” (22), Quash proposes the “transcendence” of Jesus that both continues and responds to tragic tropes acted out by the Old Testament figures. Quash uses the work of Hart, Janz MacKinnon and John Millbank to argue that tragic experience reveals that there is something out there we can’t comprehend, and that tragedy itself offers us a way of getting at that transcendence.

Jennifer Wallace, in “Tragic Sacrifice and Faith: Abraham and Agamemnon Again,” also makes use of a prominent Old Testament figure, this time as a foil to the classical characters Agamemnon and Iphigenia. She posits that ritual sacrifice is necessarily thoughtless because with thought the whole symbolic structure collapses in on itself, generating a crisis of faith. Tragedy occurs, Wallace argues, when there is a rupture in the rhythm of ritual and the subject/actor becomes aware of the irrationality—even absurdity—of the act itself (45).

In “Primo Levi and the Tragedy of Dante’s Ulysses,” Vittorio Montemaggio takes on tragedy as a way to find meaning in suffering. Levi, of course, faced the ultimate meaninglessness of the Nazi camps in the Second World War and understood that the only way through tragedy is to retain one’s humanity. In particular, Montemaggio argues that in “Il canto di Ulisse” Ulysses’ tragedy is not so much his death at the hands of “some higher force undermining his pursuit of truth” (71), but his “self-centered” pursuit of that truth which “makes him blind to those human relationships in and as which truth might actually be found” (72). The experience of the “Shoah” of the camps is redeemable only through human love and friendship, which have the potential to ensure that such tragedies do not occur again.

The final essay in this section is Robin Kirkpatrick’s “‘Thee thither in a whirlwind’: Tragedy and Theology in Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*.” Kirkpatrick proposes the character of Timon as a Job figure—betrayed and abandoned, but stubbornly independent in his suffering (which is, to some extent, of his own making). Like Job, Timon suffers the deprivation of everything, including agency and conviction. In this loss, and in common with the tragic protagonists in the previous three essays, both Job and Timon encounter the “naked” (according to Timon) condition of humanity. And as in the case of the other three essays, our response to such tragedy must lie outside ourselves; in Kirkpatrick’s argument, that response is *caritas*.

In the second section of the volume, “Theologians and Tragedy,” Giles Waller, Adrian Poole, Kevin Taylor and Michael Ward consider the intersection between theology and tragedy in the work of, respectively, Donald MacKinnon, Simone Weill, Hans Urs von Balthasar and C. S. Lewis. The first and third of these figures are frequently invoked in the other essays in this book, and it might be advisable for a reader not thoroughly familiar with them to start with Waller and Taylor. Only Poole’s essay, “Simone Weill: Force, Tragedy and Grace in Homer’s *Iliad*” takes on a single text; the other three are more interested in the Christian implications of the tragic mode. I will therefore take this section slightly out of order, starting with Waller and Taylor, followed by Ward, and concluding with Poole.

Waller’s “Freedom, Fate and Sin in Donald MacKinnon’s Use of Tragedy” articulates MacKinnon’s argument in favor of viewing Christianity through a classically tragic lens as opposed to a classically philosophic one. Tragedy, MacKinnon argues, keeps us from oversimplifying theology by balancing abstract (philosophical) clarity with the real messiness of human experience (103). Tragedy is always specific, and therefore not easily reducible to a convenient teleology (107). Tragedy, like scripture, resists easy resolution and explanation, in part because it is “contingent” (112). As such, tragedy is a most apt reflection of Christianity’s mixed legacy, because all moral action is contingent and subject to “perversion.” This tendency toward perversion (“original sin?”) corresponds, according to MacKinnon, to “the ‘objective guilt’ of Greek tragedy” (116).

Taylor, in “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Christ the Tragic Hero,” takes a crack at the specificity of the intersection between tragedy and Christianity by exploring Balthasar’s concept of Jesus as “the fulfillment of the tragic imagination” (133). Taylor points out that there are limits to Balthasar’s argument, however. For Balthasar, the classical model is primary, not the theological (138). This threatens to reduce Christ to a “type” like Prometheus or Heracles. Although Balthasar recognizes that “Christ always exceeds and redefines tragedy” (142), he tends, according to Taylor to see *all* suffering as a form of *imitatio Christi*, which it surely cannot be: “Some suffering is meaningful,” asserts Taylor, “while other kinds are empty and absurd” (145). We cannot impose Christological significance on *all* tragedy.

In his complementary essay, “The Tragedy is in the Pity: C. S. Lewis and the Song of the Goat,” Michael Ward examines the tragic theology of one of the twentieth century’s most accessible and beloved Christian writers who, certainly, experienced the kind of “contingent” suffering that challenges faith. Taylor begins by asserting that Terry Eagleton’s description of Lewis’ “witheringly patrician” critique of real-life grief as a comparison between “tragic art” and “modern vulgarity” misses the mark because it denies Lewis’ very real compassion for the “ordinary man’s woes, fully accepted and properly understood” (153), and because it fails to comprehend the importance of “pity” in the tragic scheme. Pity, for Lewis is both a response to suffering and a cause of it. God’s pity for humanity leads to Christ’s suffering on the cross. “Lewis’ theory of tragedy,” writes Ward, is less concerned with the occasionally hallowing effects of suffering than with the unavoidably harrowing effects of sanctification” (160).

Where Ward identifies Lewis’ focus on pity, Adrian Poole finds grace the central motif in Simone Weill’s consideration of Homer’s *Illiad*. Grace, for Poole, is the ability to tap into the creative rather than the destructive power of force, as exemplified in both Homer and the gospels (131). Weill, Poole argues, with her “astonishing capacity to identify with the victims of violence,” was deeply ambivalent about the *Illiad*, precisely because for her both victim and victor are subject to the “degrading empire” of force (126). Poole, in response, teases out the precious nuggets of grace from the textual ore, suggesting that Weill herself might have found redemption in them.

The third section of the volume is “Theology Engaged with Tragic Theory.” As opposed to those who would argue that tragedy has direct application to lived experience, Craig Hovey asserts that artistic tragedy is always at one step—or more—removed from real life (167). The question becomes, then, how do we “theorize” tragedy in a useful way? Hovey proposes, in “Emplotting the Dionysian in Christian Thought,” that Friedrich Nietzsche does this very thing in his account of tragedy. In Nietzsche’s configuration, it is not so much the fact of suffering that matters, or how we respond to it psychologically and spiritually, but what we do creatively to cope with it. Such a view requires us to regard tragedy as Dionysian (improvisatory) rather than Apollonian (predetermined).

Larry D. Bouchard returns to Waller's concept of contingency in his paired consideration of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Denys Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal*. In these texts Bouchard asks whether not just suffering, but also atonement, can be a product of contingency. Both play and film embody the salvific potential of both relationship and accident. "One of the thieves was saved" comments Vladimir in *Godot*, but only in one of the four gospels; what determines the outcome of sin? In *Jesus of Montreal* the Christ-figure is "resurrected" in the recipients of his organs; who determines the beneficiaries of grace?

In "Sacrifice and the Tragic Imagination," Douglas Hedley returns to the concept of sacrifice (and René Girard's examination of it) that Wallace explored in Part I. Instead of considering the irrationality of the sacrificial project, however, Hedley addresses it within its own context, that of making something holy "through an offering to the deity" (199). Hedley reviews the accounts of Nietzsche, Hume and Schopenhauer, and then applies their findings to the works of Richard Wagner who, he asserts, "shows how powerfully certain mythic and Christian themes—the sacred, desacralizing and making sacred or redemption—resound in the contemporary imagination" (208).

In the penultimate essay, "Tragedy Without Evasion: Attending [to] Performances," David S. Cunningham takes issue against John Millbank's ambivalence toward an application of the tragic to Christianity that makes the Fall "necessary," which undermines Christian optimism and diminishes human accountability for that Fall (218). The antidote to such fatalism, argues Cunningham, lies in the performative nature of the text itself. Like Hovey, Cunningham sees tragedy's distinction from "real life" as an important one which keeps us actively, rather than merely emotionally, engaged, and is thus key to the drama's intended "teaching effect." Cunningham cites Arthur Miller's "optimistic" understanding of tragedy which "encourage[es] audiences to imagine a better way" (227).

In his concluding essay, "Tragedy, Theology and the Discernment of Cries," David Ford looks ahead to the practical potential of a "theological account" of tragedy (233). Tragedy, he argues, enables us to hear the "cries" of pain in our world and to address them (239). The study of tragedy and Christianity, then, is not just a call to contemplation but to action. As Miller so idealistically puts it, tragedy fosters "the belief—optimistic, if you will, in the perfectibility of man" ("Tragedy and the Common Man"). While that is a tall order, it is an aspiration to which we can aspire.

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