

The Excess of Heroism in Tragic Drama

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~
Leonard Moss

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"Many technical studies within classics or comp lit make one feel inferior, lacking in the requisite languages or critical grammar. Moss's work, to the contrary, gives the intelligent reader all that is necessary."--William G. Doty, Auburn University

The Excess of Heroism in Tragic Drama is a critical study of what makes tragedy tragic. Leonard Moss seeks an answer in his readings of three seminal philosophers of tragedy: Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche. He then takes the subject a step farther by directly applying their different philosophical approaches to the underlying ethical contradictions operating in tragedy, as well as to the technical resources of tragic drama.

Discussing tragic elements of major works from the Greeks to Shakespeare to Kafka and outlining the continuities that link them through time, Moss claims that protagonists normally display stereotypical attributes of masculinity or femininity that ultimately lead to their undoing. Principal figures in tragic dramas of classical Athens are seen as victims of a profound egoism that distorts their idealized image with self-pity, anxiety, and wrath. Shakespeare's noblest characters, too, turn themselves into victims of an intense fixation on power and perfection.

According to Moss, Shakespeare and the Athenians were delivering a radical critique of their respective cultures' notions about human excellence; they were playing variations on a single theme. The tragic hero doesn't only self-destruct, he or she personifies the inconsistency of an entire value system. Moss connects this theory to specific literary techniques to describe how ethical considerations are embodied in the images, narrative format, and rhetoric fashioned by great tragedians.

Leonard Moss, professor emeritus of comparative literature at the State University of New York at Geneseo, currently edits the journal of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association in Providence. He is the author of *Arthur Miller* and of many articles on tragic drama.

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