

King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy

By Stephen Booth

In this provocative book, first published in 1983, Stephen Booth speculates on the essence of tragedy. He argues that the literary works we call tragedies have their value as enabling actions: dramatic tragedies can render us capable, temporarily, of enduring practical, personal experience of the fact of infinity.

In the first part, "On the Greatness of King Lear" Booth's starting point is the impact of the play. Through analysis of its variously indefinite particulars, he works toward general assertions about tragedy. The second part, on Macbeth, starts with the idea of tragedy and works back to the play. Seeing an essential connection between tragedy and human intolerance for indeterminacy, he characterises Macbeth as a flirtation between definition and indefinition.

In a brief chapter bridging these parts Booth points out the indeterminacy that Love's Labor's Lost shares with King Lear and describes the categorically necessary function of indeterminacy in jokes and puns. In an appendix on the practice of doubling by Elizabethan and Jacobean actors he considers the possibility that Shakespeare's purposeful exploitation of artistic definition/indefiniton extended to the particulars of theatrical production.

“*A compelling book, both in the claims it makes for the essentially formal and epistemological nature of tragedy and in its willingness to suggest the problems these claims raise for our own practice as critics and interpreters.*”

Christopher Pye, Theatre Journal

The Author

Stephen Booth, Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, is well known for his writings on Shakespeare. His other books include Shakespeare's Sonnets and Precious Nonsense: The Gettysburg Address, Ben Jonson's Epitaphs on his Children and "Twelfth Night".

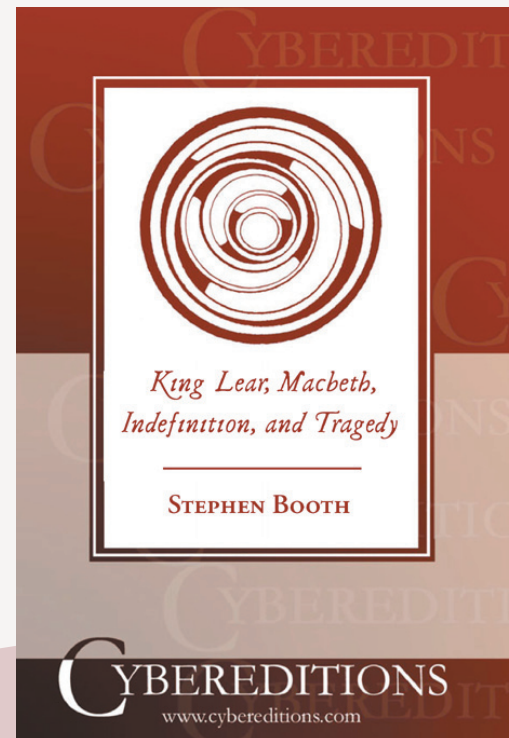
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