In this essay I consider whether Shakespeare’s tragedies are, in Søren Kierkegaard’s terms, ancient or modern. The text of Kierkegaard’s with which I am chiefly concerned is “Ancient Tragedy’s Reflection in the Modern” from Either/Or (1843), addressed by a pseudonymous Aesthete to a fictitious society of grave-dwellers, and subtitled an “Essay in the Fragmentary Endeavor.” Whatever else “a fragmentary endeavor” may mean here, I think we may assume that even if Kierkegaard ends up telling us a good deal about antiquity, modernity, and their respective forms of tragedy, we should not expect exhaustive or systematic treatment. I put this disclaimer in place because my study itself reaches no definite conclusions; I argue that Shakespeare’s tragedies resist simple characterization as ancient or modern, but do not ultimately settle how best to describe them. This essay is divided into two main sections. In the first, I introduce Kierkegaard’s essay; it takes Hegel’s Aesthetics as its starting point, but pointedly critiques some of Hegel’s conclusions. In the second, I turn my attention to Shakespeare. I begin by arguing that the bard’s tragedies cannot be neatly characterized as ancient or as modern, then assess two further ways of viewing his tragedies: as “truly” modern tragedies in a non-Hegelian sense, or as religious dramas.

Kierkegaard’s essay begins with the Aesthete’s remark that he would not object too much “if someone said that the tragic will always be the tragic,” assuming, he adds, that the statement makes sense, “that the twice-repeated ‘tragic’ isn’t just a meaningless bracket surrounding a contentless nothing.” He explains that while “aestheticians still

constantly invoke Aristotle’s apparatus of conditions and criteria as exhaustive of the [tragic] concept,” nevertheless Aristotle’s criteria “are quite general in kind, and one could easily agree entirely with Aristotle and yet in another sense disagree.” So while, “the concept of the tragic remains essentially unchanged, just as weeping comes no less naturally to man,” the Aesthete thinks no observer can have failed to notice that “there is an essential difference between ancient and modern tragedy.” The gist of the Aesthete’s inquiry will not only be to explain this difference, but to “show how the special characteristic of ancient tragedy can be discerned in the modern, so that the true tragedy in the latter may come to light.” According to the Aesthete, then, there is an important sense in which the tragic is not always the tragic. Once one has discerned what is particular to ancient tragedy, one will find that it can be embodied in a modern setting as well. But this implies that true modern tragedy has not yet come to light, which contradicts Hegel’s influential teaching in the Aesthetics. Indeed, as Clyde Holler informs us, the Aesthete’s opening remarks are carefully structured around Hegel’s notions regarding ancient and modern drama, and the essay as a whole is a microcosm of Kierkegaard’s anti-Hegelian polemic.2 To understand it, let us look briefly at Hegel’s opinions on tragedy, then at how the Aesthete criticizes them.

Hegel writes that all dramatic poetry “makes central the collisions between characters and between their aims, as well as the necessary resolution of this battle,” and holds that “the real beginning of dramatic poetry must be sought in Greece where the principle of free individuality makes the perfection of the classical form of art possible.”3 He makes two important points here. First, the central feature of all tragedies is a conflict and its resolution. This is true of both ancient and modern tragedies. Second, the principal characters must act freely in achieving the conflict’s resolution.

A third point follows quickly: the exact nature of the conflict, the factors determining the scope of the action, varies from age to age. In Greek dramas, the conflict is produced by characters running up

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