

deep
comedy

*Trinity,
Tragedy,
& Hope
in Western Literature*

Peter J. Leithart



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To MargaretAnn

Remember that tempests are kind

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: A Roadmap of the Argument	xi

Part I: Tragic History

1. Golden Age Past	3
2. The Best Is Yet To Be	15

Part II: Tragic Metaphysics and Theology

3. Metaphysics of Death	37
4. Supplement at the Origin	73

Part III: Tragic Literature

5. Ancient Literature and Tragedy	99
6. Deep Comedy	115

Afterword	149
Index	151

Acknowledgments

At times, glory cuts through the mundane like water in the desert. As a long day fades, a weary farmer brings his combine to the top of a hill and finds himself bathed in the blended light of moonrise and sunset. Tracing a footnote in a dusty library basement, a scholar makes a discovery that fundamentally alters the direction of his research, and perhaps the direction of his field. Trudging through an endless round of diaper-changing, child-watching, dish-washing and clothes-washing and everything-else-washing, a mother stops in wonder as her infant daughter takes her first steps.

Such experiences provide some support for the comic vision of reality that I sketch in this book, and, suitably enough, the book originated out of such an experience. Perhaps there are teachers who go into raptures at the thought of grading a stack of papers, but for myself grading is drudgery. Normally, that is. This book, however, originated during a late evening of grading. Scattered through the stack that night were three papers by three different students—Laura Blakey, Michelle Lano, and Hannah Griffith, each of whom developed very similar insights concerning the relationship between ancient heroism and the jolly heroism of Sir Gawain. As I graded those papers, several years of teaching a Western literature survey clicked into place, and the notion of “deep comedy” took form in my mind. The heavens opened, angels descended singing, and a bright light illumined the room. I am grateful to those students, and to the many

others who have contributed to this book in ways that I can no longer retrace.

Thanks to Randy Wood and Randy Compton of Lee University, Cleveland, Tennessee, who invited me to give the Humanities Lecture in the spring of 2004. I used the occasion to present the essentials of the argument in this book, and I was blessed by the interaction with the “Randys” that followed.

Portions of chapters 1, 2, and 4 have been previously published as “Supplement at the Origin: Trinity, Eschatology and History,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2004), and that material is used here with the permission of Blackwell Publishers. Thanks to Douglas Jones for his willingness to publish the book, and to Canon Press assistant editor Jared Miller for diligently pressing me to provide actual page numbers in my footnotes.

This book is dedicated to my third daughter, MargaretAnn, who at five exemplifies as well as anyone I know what it means to live out of and in deep comedy. She is a constant source of amusement, with her bizarre, frequently gruesome stories, her prankishness, her wildly expressive eyes. More importantly and profoundly, she exudes the childlike confidence and careless freedom that comes from knowing all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. And with her on my lap or in my arms, I am reassured that it will.

Introduction: A Roadmap of the Argument

Portions of this book are dense and will be obscure to some readers. In order to guide the reader through these dangerous and dimly lit valleys and caverns, this introduction provides a (sketchy) map of where you are heading. You might find the destination is not worth the risks or labors of the journey, and in that case you may, as Lemmony Snickett would say, put down this book and find something more pleasant to read.

The thesis of this essay grows out of two observations, both of which, particularly the first, will require detailed defense in the pages that follow. Viewed as a whole, firstly, the Christian account of history is eschatological not only in the sense that it comes to a definitive and everlasting end, but in the sense that the end is a glorified beginning, not merely a return to origins. The Christian Bible moves *not* from garden lost to garden restored, but from garden to garden-city. God gives with interest. To say the same in other words, though the Bible gives full recognition to sin and its effects on creation and humanity, the Christian account of history is ultimately comic. The classical world, by contrast, was dominated by a tragic view of history, in which history moved from a glorious beginning toward a tarnished end, and a tragic understanding of the constituent realities of life (a “tragic metaphysics”), manifested in a predominantly tragic literature. As it penetrated the Greco-Roman world, the Christian

gospel challenged this tragic classicism (or classical tragicism) by presenting a fundamentally comic vision of history.

“Tragedy” is used here (at least initially) very loosely, as a story in which the characters begin neutrally or well, but slide inexorably to a bad end; “comedy” is a story in which the characters may face dangers, perhaps dangers of great intensity, but ultimately rise to a happy ending. “Deep comedy” brings two additional nuances: First, in deep comedy the happy ending is uncontaminated by any fear of future tragedy, and, second, in deep comedy the characters do not simply end as well as they began, but progress beyond their beginning. Comedy may move from glory to glory restored, but deep comedy moves from glory to added glory. While the classical world did produce comedy, it did not produce “deep comedy.”

What I mean by “tragedy” and “deep comedy” may best be captured by two biblical citations. “The last state is worse than the first”—Jesus’ saying can serve as a summary of ancient sensibility about history. “Deep comedy” is best exemplified by the vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22, and particularly by Revelation 21:4: “He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be death; there shall no longer be mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”

My second observation is more straightforward: The Christian God is a triune God. This stands in contrast to all other forms of monotheism and polytheism, ancient and modern.

This small book is an effort to discern a connection between these two unique or at least highly idiosyncratic features of Christian faith. Is Christianity eschatologically comic *because* it is trinitarian? Is history moving toward a comic climax as a revelation of the nature of the triune God? To ask the question from the other end: Is there an “eschatological moment” in the life of the Trinity? Is the life of the Trinity comic? In this book, I sketch the outlines of an affirmative answer to these questions. If trinitarian theology is an answer to the question, “Given the gospel story, who must God be for this to be possible?” I wish to broaden the question beyond the narrative of Jesus’

life, death and resurrection to ask, "Given the biblical vision of history and eschatology, who must God be for this to be possible?" The answer is the same in both cases: the immanent Trinity is manifested in and is the ontological ground and condition for the possibility not only of the death and resurrection of the Son, but of a world-history that moves from Eden to New Jerusalem. Paganism's tragic view of history is allied with a tragic metaphysics and theology, while Christianity has a comic view of history because it has a fundamentally comic theology proper (doctrine of God).

The argument proceeds in several stages. Part I examines a single but popular classical myth of history, Hesiod's myth of the "four (or five) ages," to show that the classical world had a predominantly tragic notion of history. In contrast, the biblical conception of history, particularly as evidenced in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament and the New Testament, is predominantly comic. Scripture teaches that history does not degenerate from life to death but is translated from the reign of death into the reign of life.

In Part II, the argument shifts from an historical/mythological plane to a metaphysical/theological plane. I show that for Greek philosophy tragedy was woven into the fabric of existence, and also that these tragic obsessions are common elements of modern and postmodern thought as well. This discussion will be transposed into a more directly theological key as I examine Jacques Derrida's treatment of the problems of writing and supplementarity, especially as they arise in Plato, to point out similarities between ancient conceptions of history and "Platonic" metaphysics and theology. As Derrida shows, it is axiomatic for Plato that supplementarity is degenerative; that is, anything added to an original, anything flowing from a source, is "worse" than the source itself, precisely because it has moved away from the source. This metaphysical assumption is parallel to mythical views of history for which *temporal* supplementation necessarily means degeneration. For Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysics, the lower is always lesser; for Hesiod, Ovid, and other myth-historians the later is always lesser. Such a metaphysics cannot support a comic view of history, much less deep comedy.

Postmodern atheist though he was, Derrida opened the way for a trinitarian response to the problem of supplementarity by treating the relationship between speaker and text, and between origin and supplement more generally, as a father-son relation. Derrida's father-son, however, is heretical or even pagan, rewriting Hesiod's myth of patricidal Zeus and Sophocles' story of Oedipus as if it were metaphysically necessary. An orthodox trinitarian theology avoids the problematics of Platonic supplementarity in two ways. First, orthodox trinitarian theology asserts that there is always a "supplement" (Son and Spirit) with the "origin" (Father), and, second, insists that the Son and Spirit, though "supplemental" to the Father, are "equal in power and glory." There is no degeneration or "leakage" of glory or divinity as the Father begets the Son or, together with the Son, spirates the Spirit. trinitarian theology thus provides theological ground for a view of history where the passage of time does not necessarily mean decay, where history can move from death to life rather than the (common-sensical) reverse. Thus, for a trinitarian theology, time and history can be redeemed and brought to comic conclusion. For trinitarian theology, the "Second" is fully equal to and is in fact the glory of the "First," and therefore for the Bible, the golden age is always out before us not behind us. Here, as elsewhere, the dominical axiom about protology and eschatology subverts the common sense of antiquity and modernity: "the last first and the first last" (πρωτοι εσχατοι και εσχατοι πρωτοι, Mt. 19:30).

Part III, finally, sketches the effects that the Christian comic vision of history and the Christian comic confession of the triune God had on the shape and tone of Western literature. I return to the classical world to show that, even in its most comic manifestations (the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid* in particular), classical literature never arrived at "deep comedy." Even comically-shaped classical epics, dramas, and stories of the ancient world are overshadowed by the fear of death (cf. Hebrews 2:14–15). Christendom, imperfectly to be sure, has produced a literature characterized by "deep comedy." With the fall of Rome, tragedy virtually disappeared for the better part of a thousand

years. Meanwhile, heroes of medieval romance refused to wait for adventure to be thrust upon 'em; they sought it out, gladly and confidently. Contrary to the caricature of dourness and dullness, medieval writers produced a rich literature of parody and travesty. Tragedy was reintroduced in the late medieval period and especially in the Renaissance, but by then it had been irrevocably contaminated by Christian hope. The gulf that divides ancient and Renaissance comedy and tragedy is unfathomable. I end the book by examining two of Shakespeare's plays: *Twelfth Night* manifests the profundity of Shakespearean "deep comedy," while *King Lear*, Shakespeare's least hopeful play, shows how far tragedy had been transformed by the Christian hope of resurrection and the Christian comic vision of history.

My main argument—that there is a fundamental connection between trinitarian theology and Christian eschatology—was articulated in its essential features by Basil the Great, who pointed out in his treatise *On the Holy Spirit* (section 47) that the superiority of the Last Adam to the First Adam has crucial implications for theology proper. Responding to opponents who argued that a "Second Person" of the Trinity was necessarily an inferior supplement to a "First Person," Basil writes, "If the second is [always] subordinate to the first, and since what is subordinate is always inferior to that to which it is subordinated, according to you, then, the spiritual is inferior to the physical, and the man from heaven is inferior to the man of dust!"

A disclaimer is necessary before closing this introduction. Despite the footnotes and other scholarly paraphernalia, this is more an impressionistic essay than an academic treatise. I am confident of the broad strokes of the thesis, but a great deal more research would be required to develop it fully, and a fully investigation of these themes might nuance the argument into quite different directions. *Deep Comedy*, further, operates throughout at a high level of rarified abstraction, a weakness that might have been corrected by incorporating anthropological and sociological evidence (on, say, Christian burial customs). Yet, I had to stop and start somewhere, and I am hopeful

that the thesis is clear enough and plausible enough that it will inspire writers with more time and competence to follow up its suggestions.

I
Tragic History

1

Golden Age Past

FOR GREEKS and many other ancient peoples, history was essentially tragic. Things had begun well in a world of plenty and joy, but the world was bound to degenerate and decline until it sputtered and whimpered to a halt. For some, history was seen as a turning wheel, so that the pathetic end was a prelude to a new beginning. Cyclical views of history such as these look more optimistic, but that is only apparent. If it is cyclical, history merely repeats the story of decline again and again, unto ages of ages, the tragedy becoming more banal with each repetition. My argument in this chapter is that the ancient world, and the classical world in particular, knew nothing of eschatology—“eschatology” meaning the view that history moves toward an end that is greater than the beginning. The classical world knew nothing of “deep comedy.”

I.

The classical form of the degenerative myth is the myth of the five (or four) metallic ages found in Hesiod. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod reviews history as a regression from the age of gold, through the age of silver, to an age of bronze. The sequence of metallic ages is interrupted by an age of heroes, but then resumes in the fifth age, the age of iron, in which Hesiod unfortunately found himself. The contrast between the two end points of this sequence is particularly striking:

Several commentators suggest that the myth should be read as something other than a pure myth of degeneration. The metals that characterize the ages get less valuable as the sequence progresses, but at the same time they get more useful and tougher. Besides, Hesiod ends the whole with the lament, “Would that I were not then among the fifth men, but either dead earlier or born later!”³ which suggests that Hesiod expected the degeneration of the iron age to issue in a renewal, leading ultimately to a renewed golden age. M. L. West has responded to this line of argument by suggesting that “the system as [Hesiod] expounds it is finite and complete; . . . if the logos [word] had had a hopeful ending he would surely have not omitted to mention it.” Though Hesiod may personally hope for a renewed age, “it is not necessarily the case that Hesiod’s inner convictions coincide with the myth he is telling.”⁴

West’s comment is sensible, and cyclical interpretations necessarily extrapolate beyond the myth as Hesiod gives it. Yet, even if Hesiod is assuming a cyclical view of history, the larger argument of this chapter would stand, since this myth gives no hope for a movement toward an eschatological “golden age” that would never end. For Hesiod, every golden age, however many there may be, will eventually degenerate into a silver age, and thence to a bronze age, and so on. Thus, in Jean-Pierre Vernant’s cyclical reading, each cycle in itself traces a decline. Responding to criticisms of J. Defradas, he writes that “my view was that the sequence of the races made up a complete cycle of decline. Starting off with an age of gold where youth, justice, mutual friendship, and happiness reign, all in their pure state, we end with an age which is its opposite in every respect: it is entirely given over to old age, injustice, quarrelsomeness, and unhappiness.”⁵

For different reasons, Robert Nisbet argues that the myth is not properly a “myth of degeneration,” since the bronze age is “markedly

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴ *Works and Days*, ed. by M. L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 197.

⁵ *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 39.

Spring was forever, with a west wind blowing
Softly across the flowers no man had planted,
And Earth, unplowed, brought forth rich grain; the field,
Unfallowed, whitened with wheat, and there were rivers
Of milk, and rivers of honey, and golden nectar
Dripped from the dark-green oak-trees.⁷

Strikingly, for Ovid even more than for Hesiod, men of the golden age were completely innocent of culture, including agri-culture, as well as of social and political institutions and of economic activities. For both, culture is a product of the process of degeneration, a “fall” from nature. Though both would no doubt endorse this as a “fortunate fall,” culture remains a product of the tragedy of human history. We will meet this notion that culture is a contaminating supplement to an originally pure nature again and again in both ancient and modern writers.

As in Hesiod, the iron age differs from the golden at nearly every point:

The Iron Age succeeded, whose base vein
Let loose all evil: modesty and truth
And righteousness fled earth, and in their place
Came trickery and slyness, plotting, swindling,
Violence and the damned desire of having.
Men spread their sails to winds unknown to sailors,
The pines came down their mountain-sides, to revel
And leap in the deep waters, and the ground,
Free, once, to everyone, like air and sunshine,
Was stepped off by surveyors. The rich earth,
Good giver of all the bounty of the harvest,
Was asked for more; they dug into her vitals,
Pried out the wealth a kinder lord had hidden
In Stygian shadow, all that precious metal,
The root of evil. They found the guilt of iron,

⁷Trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1960), 5–6.

explicit use of the metallic myth and treat it as a myth of degeneration.¹⁰ The age of sons is always worse than the age of the fathers, and the more distant the fathers the more superior they are. E. R. Dodds summarizes the situation of the ancient world as follows: “Later poets [than Hesiod] who saw history in cyclic terms tended to follow Hesiod’s example: they have much to say about the Lost Paradise, but almost nothing, until Virgil, about Paradise Regained. The cyclic theory is most often found in the service of pessimism.”¹¹ The last state is always worse than the first.

II.

There are, to be sure, occasional affirmations of a conception of progress in Greco-Roman literature that could be taken as hints and gestures toward an eschatological conception of history. Xenophanes said that the gods did not reveal everything to mankind at the beginning, but “in the course of time by research men discover improvements.”¹² Aeschylus gave a more elaborate statement of human achievement and progress to Prometheus:

listen to the tale
 Of human sufferings, and how at first
 Senseless as beasts I gave men sense, possessed them
 Of mind. I speak not in contempt of man;
 I do but tell of good gifts I conferred.
 In the beginning, seeing they saw amiss,
 And hearing heard not, but, like phantoms huddled
 In dreams, the perplexed story of their days
 Confounded; knowing neither timber-work
 Nor brick-built dwellings basking in the light,
 But dug for themselves holes, wherein like ants,
 That hardly may contend against a breath,

¹⁰ For details, see Patricia A. Johnston, *Virgil's Agricultural Golden Age: A Study of the Georgics* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 15–40.

¹¹ E. R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Beliefs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 4.

As Dodds points out, this passage appears to say more than it does. The cleverness that the chorus celebrates here is not an undiluted good: “Cunning beyond fancy’s dream is the fertile skill which brings him, now to evil, now to good.” Sophocles, further, hardly presents a hopeful portrait of life in the overall scheme of the *Oedipus* cycle. Such expressions of a hope for human progress appear mainly in fifth-century Athens, but this is an exceptional period in this regard throughout ancient history. He adds, more generally, that while “it is untrue that the idea of progress was wholly foreign to Antiquity,” still “our evidence suggests that only during a limited period in the fifth century was it widely accepted by the educated public at large.”¹⁵

Virgil was the first to state an explicit belief in a restored golden age and also the first to claim that the dawning of the new age was imminent.¹⁶ In his Fourth Eclogue (the so-called “Messianic Eclogue”), Virgil wrote of the birth of a child through whom the new golden age would be born. Initially, while the child is still young, the golden age will come only in part, but as the child grows and reaches manhood, the golden age will dawn in earnest. When, like a latter-day Hercules, he assumes full humanity, not only war but commerce and farming will cease, because the earth will be as fruitful as it was in the long-ago days of the original golden age:

when the years have confirmed you in full manhood,
 Traders will retire from the sea, from the pine-built vessels
 They used for commerce: every land will be self-supporting.
 The soil will need no harrowing, the vine no pruning-knife;
 And the tough ploughman may at least unyoke his oxen.
 We shall stop treating wool with artificial dyes,
 For the ram himself in his pasture will change his fleece’s colour,

¹⁵ *Ancient Concept*, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21. Johnston, in *Virgil’s Agricultural Golden Age*, claims that “One of the crucial distinctions between Vergil’s conception of a golden age and that of his predecessors is the fact that Vergil’s golden age can recur” (8).

all these cultural supplementations are aspects of a “fall” from natural bliss. Virgil does not imagine a garden-city or even a literal return to Eden, but a world scoured of commerce, agriculture, labor, travel and trade. Second, Virgil’s apparent optimism in the Fourth Eclogue and elsewhere is crossed by his persistent melodramatic sentimentalism. Aeneas establishes a purported *imperium sine fine*, but does so through tears and laments, so that Aeneas’s *sunt lacrimae rerum* (“here are the tears of things” or “here they weep for how the world goes”), uttered as he examines the depictions of the Trojan War on the walls of Juno’s temple in Carthage, is something of a Virgilian motto. Virgil is nowhere more himself than when he is wringing his readers’ hearts with a pathetic description of the death of a beautiful youth (Marcellus in *Aeneid* Book 6, and Pallas in Book 9).

It also appears that Virgil’s enthusiasm was checked by later events. The older and presumably wiser Virgil of the *Georgics* recognized that the golden age had not materialized, that there was no going back to the age before the age of Jupiter, and that tilling the soil remained the arduous price of survival:

The first rule in farming
 Is that you are never to hope for an easy way.
 The land demands your effort. Body and mind
 Are sharpened, that undisturbed would grow vague with sloth.
 Before Jupiter’s reign the fields had no masters.
 Even to mark out land and divide it with bounds
 Was unlawful. No one took thought of yours or mine
 While the generous earth gave enough for every need.
 Jupiter first put the poison in black snakes
 Sent wolves marauding, set the clam sea heaving,
 Shook honey off the leaves, took fire away,
 And stopped the wine that ran everywhere in streams.²⁰

²⁰ Georgic 1 in Virgil, *The Georgics*, trans. Robert Wells (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1982), 32–33.

Afterword

“Of the making of books there is no end.” Solomon’s bemused observation is usually taken to mean that there is always one more book to be written, if only because humans feel compelled to comment on the last book. But it applies equally well to individual books, at least to this book. Though this book is done (as is evident from the rapidly approaching back cover), it is still true that “of the making of *this* book there is no end.”

If this book were brought to a real end, it would include at least two extensions. First, as I hinted in my discussion of *King Lear*, Christian literature not only produces deep comedy but also, and for precisely that reason, deep tragedy. Christian tragedy can no longer mean what ancient tragedy meant. There are still sad stories, but Christians cannot believe the world is not a sad story without abandoning their fundamental convictions about the triune God and the incarnation of the Son. Or so I have argued. But if the world is not a sad story, then the sad stories that remain are altogether sad because they need not be sad. So, I should add to this book a companion book on deep tragedy.

Second, the Christian possibility of comic resolution lends modern Western literature (particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) its particular power and intensity. Modern tragic literature (one thinks, for example, of Faulkner) adds to the noble resignation of ancient tragedy a post-Christian rage arising from frustrated

Index

A

- Abraham 121
Absolute, Hegelian 63
Achilles 40, 55
Adam, first vs. last 22
adventure
 gospel and 121–122
 in medieval romances 119–122
Aeneas 108–114
Aeneid 12, 107–114
 as comedy 107–108
 structure of 111–112
 tragic qualities of 112–114
Aeschylus 9, 62
anti-Semitism 30
Antigone 58
Apuleius 119
Aratus 8
Aristophanes 62
Aristotle 45, 46, 48, 50, 52
 definition of tragedy and 42
 theory of signs 76
Augustine 80, 84, 93
Augustus Caesar 107

B

- Bacchae, The* 43
Bakhtin, Mikhail 116–120
Barth, Karl 59

- becoming 52, 61, 64, 80, 90
 as philosophical problem 38, 47
Begbie, Jerome 88
being 80
 chain of 46
 death and 59
 “guiltiness” of 28
 Hegelian view 63
 in Trinity 87
 Nietzschean view 67
 supplementarity and 77, 84
 violence of 24, 46
 vs. becoming 47
Benedict 115
Beowulf 121
Bible
 framed by comic story 21
 promise of glorious future age in
 15
 tragedy in 27–30
Big Bang 87
Bloom, Harold 78–79
Boethius
 definition of tragedy 42
Brueck, Katherine 31

C

- Captain Ahab 40
Carmen Saeculare 12

universalism and 143
 unknown in classical world 3
 Virgil does not achieve 14
 Defradas, J., on Hesiod 5
 Deleuze, Giles 69
 Derrida, Jacques 73–81, 83–86, 89,
 91, 93
 lingering Platonism in 84–86
 tragic metaphysics of 86
 Trinity and 84
 Descartes 60, 70, 85
 desire 71, 74
 as inherently tragic 54
 as lack 91
 biblical view of 56–57
 vs. civilization 92–93
 desire, problem of 54–57
 Dickens, Charles 55
 Dido 108–112
 Dilthey, Wilhelm 64–66
 Dionysius
 compared to Christ 67
 festival of 43–44
Divine Comedy, The 118
 Dodds, E. R. 9, 11
 Dollimore, Jonathan 51, 53, 55, 60,
 69
 drama, tragic 37, 39, 39–40, 44, 46,
 56
 origins of 43–44
 dualism 45
E
 Eagleton, Terry 37
 Easter 147
 Ecclesiastes 19–21, 28
 Eden 13
 Eliot, T. S. 100
 Empedocles 8
 Enlightenment 62
 Epicureanism 67

Ecclesiastes and 21
eros 51, 54
 eschatology 87
 Christian 12, 23, 33
 classical comedy and 99
 classical worldview and 3, 5, 9, 12
 creation and 16
 definition of 3
 in *King Lear* 137
 tragic 33
 ethics, Greek 47–48
 Euripides 42, 43, 49, 58
 evil
 creativity and 47
 virtue and 50
 Exum, Cheryl 27–29

F

faith
 in comedy 141
 resurrection and 24–25
 tragedy and 37
 tragic heroism and 28
 Fajardo-Acosta, Fidel 106–107
 Feder, Lilian 113
 festivals
 Dionysian 43–44
 medieval 116, 117
 finitude
 as “problem” 38
 as violence 86
 Derrida and 85
 Dilthey’s view of 66
 goodness of 86, 89
 Hegel’s view of 63–64
 Kant and 61–62
 postmodernism and 70
 refusal to accept 21
 Freud 55, 56, 71, 92–93

in Hesiod 3–6
 in Ovid 6–8
 Trinity and 87–88
 Homer 78, 101
 Horace 12
 Hunt, William 111

I

id 92
Iliad 39–40, 101
 Incarnation
 effects of 26
 insight to life of God 83
Iphigeneia in Tauris 42

J

Jesus
 as tragic “hero” 29–33
 compared to Odysseus 114
 historicity of 26
 images God 82–83
 miracle at Cana 22
 resurrection of 23, 26
 second Adam 22
 Job 40
 John (Gospel writer) 81–83
 Johnston, Patricia 14
 joy, tragic 66
 Julian of Norwich 100
 Juvenal 8

K

Kant, Immanuel 60–62
 Kelly, Henry Ansgar 42
 kenosis 32, 87
King Lear 122–137
 as absurdist 122, 133, 136
 Christian universe of 125–126
 civilization and barbarism in 132–
 133
 comic aspects of 123–126, 136

consequences in 136
 deep comedy in 135
 fate and free will in 126–127
 justice in 125
 meaninglessness in 130
 nature of tragedy in 126–127
 potential of salvation in 125, 135
 sin in 127, 131, 136
 theme of 123

Kojeve, Alexandre 70

L

Lacan, Jacques 69
 Lash, Nicholas 31
 Levi-Strauss, Claude 85
 Levinas, Emmanuel 68–69
 literature
 Christian 114, 120
 death and 100
 Greco-Roman 9
 Greek 39, 99, 101–107
 eroticization of death in 55
 medieval 115–122
 Roman 107–114
logos 58, 79, 80
 luck, moral 47–51
 Lucretius 8
 Lyotard, Jean-Francois 70

M

Macbeth 123, 129
 MacKinnon, Donald M. 29, 31
 Marvell, Andrew 53
 Marx, Karl 71
Merchant of Venice, The 139, 146
 metaphor 88
 metaphysics
 Aristotelean 52
 as tragic story 37
 classical 38
 comic 44

P

- Parmenides 52
 parody
 medieval 118
 Paul 81, 120
 Pentecost 23, 24
 perichoresis 81–83, 88
Perithous 58
Phaedrus 74
 phallus 43–44
 philosophy
 Greek 44, 45, 47
 inseparable from theology 38
 modern 60
 tragic 37
physis 58
 Pindar 48, 50
 Plato 70, 73, 76–77, 80, 84
 moral luck and 49
 Platonism 45, 60, 74
 compromise of being and becoming 52
 Derrida and 73, 76
 Hesiod and 46
 traces of in Derrida 84–86
 tragic 38, 45
 Poe 55
Poetics 42, 46
 politics 57–59
 Greek 44, 47
 polytheism
 violence and 47
 postmodernism 38, 44, 57, 60, 62,
 66–71, 78–79
 definition of 70
 pre-Socratics 45
 pride
 tragedy and 40, 147
 progress
 in Greco-Roman literature 9–14,

11

- Prometheus 9
 Punic Wars 108

Q

- quest 119

R

- Rabelais 117
 reason
 self-sufficiency and 48–49
 Reformation 60
 Renaissance 116, 117
 resurrection 24, 46, 89, 101, 147
 comic theme of history 90
 comic vision and 23
 in *Twelfth Night* 142–143
 Rieff, Philip 92
risus natalis 116
risus paschalis 116
 Roman New Comedy 124
 romance (literature) 119–122
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead
 123
 Rousseau 77, 85, 93–95

S

- Saccio, Peter 123, 145
 sacrifice 45, 46
 satanic imagery
 in *Twelfth Night* 145–147
 Saul, tragic view of 27
Scarlet Letter, The 92
 Schopenhauer 69
Second Shepherds' Play 118
 Segal, Charles 57
 Shakespeare 41, 115, 117, 122–147
 sonnets, mutability in 53
 sin
 tragedy and 126, 129
 Smith, James K. A. 84

trinitarianism. *See* theology:
 trinitarian. *See* Trinity
 Trinity 87
 comedy and 90
 Derrida and. *See* theology:
 trinitarian: Derrida and
 desire, fullness, and 57
 heresies of, and tragedy 34
 life of 89–90, 147
 life of, as story 59
 metaphor and 88
 terminology of, in Derrida 74
 time, perichoresis and 89
 unity of Father and Son 83
Troilus and Cresida 127
 Troy
 in *Aeneid* 110
Twelfth Night 122, 124, 137–147
 deception/disguises in 137–143
 deep comedy in 137–147
 exclusion from joy in 143–144,
 147
 faith in 141
 resurrection in 142–143
 role of time in 141
 satanic imagery in 145–147
 self-love in 144–145, 146
Two Gentlemen of Verona 139
 typology 88–89

U

Unitarianism. *See* theology: unitarian

V

Van Til, Cornelius 70
 Vernant, Jean-Pierre 5–6
vestigia Trinitatis 80–81
 violence 68, 76
 supplementarity and 77
 ubiquity of 77
 Virgil 9, 55, 78, 101, 107–114

eschatology of 12
 “Messianic Eclogue” 11
 pessimism of, with age 13
 return of golden age and 11–14
 virtue 49, 50

W

Weil, Simone 31–34, 38, 87
 West, M. L.
 Hesiod, interpretation of 5
Will to Power, The 67
 wisdom, ancient-tragic 15, 20, 34, 46
 Ecclesiastes and 19
 wisdom, tragic 136, 137
 Wodehouse, P. G. 124
 writing vs. speech 74–80

X

Xenophanes 9

Y

Yeats, W. B. 51, 100

Z

Zeus 81