

THE NATURE OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

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According to Northrop Frye, Aristotle's ideas on tragedy are based on *Oedipus Tyrannus* while Hegel drew his by reading *Antigone*(127-8). A.C. Bradley, in the first part of his *Shakespearean Tragedy* states that tragedy "would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery" (28). In the five tragedies to be analyzed in this essay -*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*- I hope to reach certain conclusions about the nature of Shakespearean tragedy. Could we draw as many theories about Shakespearean tragedy as the number of tragedies Shakespeare wrote or are there any elements common to them all? In order to answer this question, I am going to concentrate on three points of the above mentioned tragedies: the structure, the tragic hero and the outcome.

I) THE STRUCTURE:

1) Usually the play opens with what could be considered a stable situation, but soon the characters reveal through their comments their surprise, insecurity or misgivings about it. For example, *King Lear* opens with a conversation between Kent and Gloucester about Lear not favoring Albany over Cornwall and continues with Gloucester's mixed feelings about having had an illegitimate child. Similarly, *Antony and Cleopatra* opens with Demetrius' and Philo's comments about Antony's dotting on Cleopatra. In *Hamlet* Francisco's ("I am sick at heart" (I.i.9) and later Marcellus's ("Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.90)) words add to the atmosphere of impending doom. *Othello* opens with Roderigo complaining to Iago about having used his purse and withholding information apparently important to Roderigo. In *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* the

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appearance of “aliens” or supernatural beings help to create this feeling of instability.

2) There is an evil character -or characters - who through ambition or malice destroys -Iago, Lear’s daughters, Edmund, Macbeth -or has destroyed -Claudius -the once stable situation.

3) There is some character (Iago, Cordelia) or spirit (Ghost, Weird Sisters) whose words push the hero into tragic action. In Antony’s case it is Cleopatra’s charm that leads him to tragic inaction.

4) All the tragedies we are going to analyze, with the exception of *Antony and Cleopatra*, are tragedies concerned with an individual, that is, they are about a single tragic hero. I conceive the tragic hero as endowed with a tragic sense of life in spite of his jesting, as would be the case of Hamlet. During most of the action of *Antony and Cleopatra*, both lovers seem too decadent or frivolous to qualify as tragic heroes. However, at the end, they show through their tragic sense of life, their true stature.

As aforementioned, the Shakespearean tragedy revolves around a tragic hero, that is, it is mainly concerned with a single character. However, contrary to what happens in Christopher Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*, where the fall of the tragic hero¹ does not have any fatal consequences on the other characters -at most, it arouses pity in them -in Shakespeare the death or “fall” of the tragic hero involves the death of many of the surrounding characters and a change in the political status. This is very clearly seen in *Hamlet*, where his actions, or his inaction, results in the death of almost all the remaining characters. In the case of Macbeth, however, he kills on his way up and in order to maintain his position, but on his falling he only kills once, Seyward’s son (V.vii).²

II) THE SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGIC HERO

With respect to the Shakespearean tragic hero the following points can be made:

¹ Some critics deny Dr. Faustus the qualifications of tragic hero.

² A variation of Seyward is Siward; the former appears in the *Riverside* edition and the latter in Penguin.

1) he is usually an honest person -“indifferent honest” (III.i.121) in Hamlet’s words, though he may have some defects, great defects as is the case of King Lear, but in any case “More sinned against than sinning” (III.ii.60), or even greater and without excuse as would be the case of Macbeth. With regard to the tragic hero, Robert B. Heilman in “Tragedy and Melodrama: Speculations on Generic Form” says that Aristotle defined “the tragic hero as the good man who gets into trouble through some error or shortcoming for which the standard term has become the tragic flaw” (Corrigan 206). Aristotle called the protagonist’s weakness the tragic flaw because, he believed this flaw was the cause of the hero’s fall. In Shakespearean tragedy the tragic hero sometimes plays an active role in the events that follow, while at other times he does not. For example, Lear divides his kingdom and disinherits the daughter who really loves him, and Richard II banishes Mowbray, his supporter. Similarly, Macbeth is coerced into acting by Lady Macbeth, though he had previously stated: “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me / Without my stir” (I.iii.143-4) He could have waited for the “Weird Sisters’” prediction to take place. Impatient, and like Richard II, insecure and jealous of any opponents, Macbeth tries to secure his position by plotting their death. Northrop Frye equates the tragic flaw with false pride, and calls the tragic hero “an imposter”, “self-deceived or made dizzy by Hybris” and continues:

In many tragedies he begins as a semi-divine figure, at least in his own eyes, and then an inexorable dialectic sets to work which separates the divine pretence from the human actuality. (Corrigan 131)

This could apply to King Lear, who, in Regan’s words: “ ... hath ever but slenderly known himself” (I.i.293-4). Not surprisingly on becoming aware of his deceit, he asks: “Who is it that can tell me who I am”. (I.iv.230) But close to the end of the play conscious of his true identity he laments: “They told me I was everything” (IV.vi.104-5) and realizes his hand “smells of mortality” (IV.vi.133) His flaw is not too different from that of Richard II who thinks that “Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an annointed king” (III.ii.54-5). They both have a false sense of what they are worth. Their reactions at the time of their awakening are different; while Richard feels sorry for himself, Lear addresses the most vicious insults to his own daughter, then starts feeling sorry for himself, afterwards for others, and finally, aware of his own guilt, tells Cordelia: “You have some cause” (IV.vii.74). Lear and Macbeth create their own

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tragedy, while Hamlet, Othello and Antony seem to be moved by external forces. In the case of Hamlet, he inherits the situation and is commanded to act in a certain way, while Othello is like a puppet in Iago's dexterous hands and Antony yields too easily to Cleopatra's charm.

2) Some critics insist that the tragic hero "must not be the average man: nor ordinary, commonplace, undistinguished; not like the fellow next door or a girl like me" (Krook 37) or in Frye's words, that seem to contradict his previous assertion about self-deceit, "The tragic hero is typically on top of the wheel of fortune, halfway between human society on the ground and the something greater in the sky," (Corrigan 125). This does not apply to many Shakespearean heroes. Nothing is so far removed from the top as Hamlet's first appearance, in mourning trying to make his presence as little obvious as possible, despite his claim to be "too much on the sun" (I.ii.67). Hamlet is never "on top of the wheel of fortune." He could have reached it, but he missed the opportunity.¹ Before the play's action he was just a student, an old student for that matter. He was a prince, but in spite of Claudius's contention about "the great love general gender bear him" (IV.vii.18), nobody seems to pay much attention to Hamlet, who is not even allowed to court the woman he likes. Lear is at the top for a mere hundred lines of the play. Macbeth reaches the top, but his insecure position causes him to impose a tyrannical regime. Othello is at the top as a general but soon he begins behaving irrationally and Antony, though he is "the triple pillar of the world", is described by his friends as "transform'd / into a strumpet's fool" (I.i.12-13).

3) With the exception of Macbeth, usually the evil character or characters, whose actions unsettle the delicate balance of the opening situation, is not the tragic hero. In the case of *King Lear*, Lear, in spite of

¹ It is said that Hamlet should have avenged his father's death when his uncle was alone praying. The audience knows that, by killing his uncle, he would have avenged his father's death because Claudius's prayers, due to his lack of contrition, could not reach God. Hamlet, however, believed his father's death would not have been avenged. The ghost had said about his death: "No reckoning made, but sent to my account / With all my imperfections on my head. / O, horrible! O, horrible! Most horrible! / If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not" (I.v.78-80). And Hamlet thinks: "A villain kills my father, and for that / I, his sole son, do this same villain send / To heaven" (III.iii.76-8). Hamlet was apparently a perfectionist and would not do anything halfway.

his flaws, cannot be considered evil; he created the tragedy because he placed his trust in his two eldest daughters, who are the real evil characters. *Antony and Cleopatra*, seems to be a tragedy very different from the others. Here we cannot talk of an evil character. We have two political figures. Ceasar is level-headed and shrewd, a real politician and consequently unsympathetic. Antony is warm and pleasure indulging, and consequently sympathetic.

4) The tragic hero usually has a trustful nature. Hamlet, however, though he is referred by Claudius as “being remiss, / Most generous, and free from all contriving” (IV.vii.134-5), does not trust the king, and for this reason he was able to exchange his lot with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Not surprisingly, Hamlet has his misgivings about the duel, in spite of the fact that he insists “it is such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman” (V.ii.215-6). Knowing Claudius, Hamlet is necessarily suspicious of anything in which the king is involved. The Shakespearean tragic hero may be credulous or at least give a lot of importance to words - Othello, King Lear, Gloucester¹ but Hamlet does not trust words (II.ii.192), not even those of the Ghost. Antony is the other exception. He does not trust Ceasar or his men.²

5) According to Heilman “The drama is a lesser one ... if the hero simply does not know what it is all about or never comes to know what it is all about” (Corrigan 207). In my opinion, the tragic hero must experience a feeling of guilt, has to know the part he has in the tragic events. Oedipus’s tragedy starts when he gains self-awareness, before his acquisition of knowledge, the events occurring in his country were just disastrous happenings. However all Shakespearean tragic heroes do not experience feelings of guilt at the same time, do not become right away aware of their tragic flaw. Early in the play, Antony realizes that “These strong Egyptian fetters (he) must break, / Or lose (himself) in dotage” (I.ii.116-7) and a little bit later insists that he “must from this enchanting queen break off” (I.ii.138). Lear also realizes soon: “Woe that too late repents!” (I.iv.254)

¹ Gloucester, though he is not considered a tragic hero, because of his parallelisms with King Lear shares several of his features.

² Antony warns Cleopatra about Ceasar’s men by saying: “None about Caesar trust but Proculeius” (IV.xv.48), however, even Proculeius will prove false to Cleopatra by allowing his soldiers to take her while she is talking to him (V.ii.35).

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and, in order to make clear what he repents of, a few lines later adds, “O most small fault, / How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!” (I.iv.263-4).¹ Richard II and Othello do not become aware of their flaw until few moments before dying. When in prison, Richard II realizes his ear was tuned to musical instruments while he “Had not an ear to hear (his) true time broke” (V.v.48), and it is only when the tragedy has taken place that Othello learns that the handkerchief was put on purpose and exclaims: “O fool, fool, fool!” (VB.ii.323).

For Heilman “The tragic character is essentially a divided character” (Corrigan 206). The cause of it could be “between the moral ordinance and the unruly passion” (Corrigan 207). Macbeth is a divided hero between his desire to become a king and his conscience, so the idea of murdering the King awakens in him the following thoughts:

... why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? (I.iii.133-6)

Thoughts that will be awakened again before the actual murder cooling his will, that will be enkindled by Lady Macbeth’s persuasions (I.vii). Though in a different sense Lear is also a divided character because he wants to keep on believing in his daughters. For that reason he is not the first one to complain about the way he is being treated at Goneril’s. However, on hearing one of his knights comment that Lear is not receiving the due treatment from Albany or Goneril, he exclaims: “I have perceived a most faint neglect of late, which I have rather blamed as mine own jealous curiosity than as a very pretence and purpose of unkindness” (I.iv.67-80). In spite of Goneril’s rejection, he still believes in Regan, and exclaims: “Yet have I left a daughter” (I.iv.251). Their combined ingratitude awakens his self pity: “O Regan, Goneril! / Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all!” (III.iv.19-20). But only after continued suffering does Lear become aware of the others’ misery and eventually of his own sin.

¹ Notice this is Lear’s first time to mention Cordelia. Remember that on hearing about Cordelia’s banishment as the cause of the fool’s sadness, he interrupts with: “No more of that!” (I.iv.74), however he added, “I have noted it well.”

Antony and Macbeth are aware of their guilt even before acting. At times suffering seems to make the hero aware of his flaw as is the case with Lear and Richard II, but not in the case of Othello. Othello thinks he is doing justice for he says: "I did proceed upon just grounds / To this extremity" (V.ii.138-9).

Not all heroes experience the greatest suffering at the end of the play. Hamlet, at the beginning of the play is at the height of his misery. He is totally depressed and considers suicide. It is the time of "O that this too too sullied flesh should melt" (I.ii.129), and "To be, or not to be" (III.i.55). But later on he fights for his life as his action against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern proves. Perhaps the explanation could be that now he needs to be alive in order to do justice. Concerning the consequences due to Hamlet's delay in carrying out the vengeance he does not seem to experience guilt. He does not feel sorry for having accidentally killed Polonius and in his mourning of Ophelia there is competitiveness.

With respect to suicide, Antony and Othello commit suicide, but they had not considered it before. In Antony's case, he is lingering to life but is pushed to imitate Cleopatra's supposed honorable ending. When their end approaches some characters seem to react from their lethargy. Richard II, who has spent the entire play pitying himself, shows last minute bravery by killing one of his executors, while Lear, "a very foolish, fond old man" (IV.vii.59), avenges his daughter's death.

III) THE OUTCOME.

According to Northrop Frye "tragedy ... is not confined to actions that end in disaster" (Corrigan 124) and gives examples of some of Shakespeare's so called tragedies which end in serenity. Aristotle considered that unhappy endings are the right endings since "pity and fear are most fully excited by a change in Fortune from good to bad" (Muller 7), however, he adds later that it is better if the hero learns "the truth just in time to avoid the tragic deed" (Muller 8-9). Thus he grants the possibility of a tragedy with a happy ending. Joseph Wood Krutch also talks about happy endings but his idea of what constitutes a happy ending differs from that of Aristotle's:

All works of art which deserve their name have a happy end ...
Whatever the character ... we accept gladly the conclusion which they

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reach and would not have it otherwise ... Tragedy, the greatest and the most difficult of the arts ... must reach its own happy end in its own way ... we are glad that Juliet dies and glad Lear is turned out into the storm. (Corrigan 275-6)

All the tragedies under study end with the death of the tragic hero, an element apparently common to most tragedies, not only to Shakespeare's. In Shakespearean tragedies the death of the tragic hero is not an isolated event because it brings with it the death of almost all the other characters. The king's plan to kill Hamlet results in the deaths of Gertrude, Laertes and the king himself, who receives the poisoned sword Laertes had used on Hamlet. Usually, the more meaningful characters are swept by the tragic events while the characters who remain alive are passive (Horatio, Albany, Edgar) or less important ones, exception be made of *Othello*, where Iago, the action's prime mover, and Cassio, though wounded, remain alive. Other exceptions would be *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but while in *Othello* the death toll is relatively low, in the other two, especially in *Antony* it includes almost every character. The only survivor in *Hamlet* is Horatio, a very passive spectator of the events. All of them, who knowingly or unknowingly help to shape the events, die an often-times violent death: Polonius, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Ophelia, Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet. *King Lear* is no exception, where the long list of meaningful characters who die starts with Cornwall and his servant, continues with Oswald and Gloucester, and in the final act with Regan, Goneril, Edmund, Cordelia, perhaps the Fool, King Lear himself, and possibly Kent (V.iii.322-3). In addition, the death of the tragic hero has consequences for the whole nation because it brings about a change in the political situation. In *Hamlet* Fortinbras at the beginning is said to be pestering Denmark for the surrendering of the lands his father lost (I.ii.22-3); however, at the end of the play Hamlet predicts that "th'election lights / on Fortinbras" (V.ii.355-6). In *Othello*, Cassius, who early in the play is deposed, (II.iii) in the end becomes the ruler of Cyprus. In *King Lear*, Albany who opposes his forces to King Lear's defendants, at the end, after his victory, resigns his power to King Lear (V.iii.301). In *Macbeth*, Malcolm, who on learning of his father's assassination flees to England (II.iii.137) leaving the throne to Macbeth, at the end becomes king. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Caesar, who had to share power, after Antony's defeat becomes the single ruler of the civilized world.

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To summarize, there are very few generalities to be drawn from Shakespeare's tragedies since Shakespeare does not seem interested in repeating himself. The only characteristic that seems to apply to those under study is the death of the tragic hero and the political turmoil and loss of lives that this death brings with it. However, with respect to the tragic hero, we cannot find many general characteristics because sometimes he is not only the "hero" but the villain, as is the case with Macbeth. The same can be said about his character or reactions. Hamlet is as obsessed with his mother's marriage as Othello is with Desdemona's supposed infidelity. However, Hamlet does not kill his mother, even though the thought does come to his mind (III.ii.394-5). Lear, the epitome of arrogance, who disowns his favorite daughter because she is incapable of flatteries and who banishes a loyal vassal for speaking the truth, later kneels in front of Regan (II.iv.154), something unthinkable to Lear at the beginning. However, all Shakespearean tragic heroes, even the evil ones, eventually exhibit that special stature that makes us feel we are confronting a demigod. If we feel repelled by Macbeth's actions we are drawn to the character by his inner struggle and determination. But though all Shakespearean tragedies do not have common characteristics, each tragedy shares at least some feature with most of the others, and all of them share that special and intangible Shakespearean quality that makes them great.

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