

The Tragic Hero of the Post-Classical Renaissance

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Abstract

English drama spearheaded by William Shakespeare, is dominated by the Post-Classical Renaissance. Pre-renaissance drama in England was essentially allegorical plays extolling Christian values. This paper therefore critically looks at how Shakespearean tragic hero is defined and portrayed. The paper, using textual analysis, provides extracts from William Shakespeare's *King Lear* as the main text to present *King Lear* as tragic hero. The study shows that the post-classical renaissance period portrays the tragic hero on the basis of weakness of character and is different from the Aristotelian concept of tragedy as hamartia, a going wrong.

Key words: Shakespeare; Renaissance; Moral theory; *King Lear*

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to Greek classical tragedy in which the tragic fall has nothing to do with moral flaw (character), the Shakespearean tragic hero's character (moral flaw) is so crucial. This is so because the meaning of hamartia as understood in the Aristotelian sense in respect of the tragic hero, underwent a profound change, during the Renaissance period. The Italian scholars of the period

misrepresented the concept of hamartia and translated it as "a weakness of character". They therefore propounded the moral theory and insisted on the reading of the tragic hamartia as being inherent in the character of the hero. In the light of this, the tragic flaw theory was popularized and became more acceptable in characterizing the post-classical renaissance tragic hero. With the advent of the English renaissance, theatre, which became public, was a tradition handed down from the classical period. Therefore, it was the belief that when a prince fell, that fall was tantamount to the fall of Lucifer. The victim was forever doomed and was excluded from eternity. That was the Christian concept of tragedy. Ludowyk (1997) has indicated that Elizabethan plays and tracts were based on the ideas of the wheel of fortune and the fall of Princes and the English tragic hero was further influenced by Machiavelli.

Roche (1981) contends that the play *King Lear* is meant to show the plight of man in Pre-Christian times and that Shakespeare has had to make changes in the play to give it the required shape. He defined tragic knowledge as a set of critical assumptions about the triumph of the tragic hero in defeat. It posits that a tragic hero attains a kind of knowledge that redeems him from his suffering, and reconciles his claims to the world he leaves impoverished for his loss. Christianity and, therefore, the belief in original sin and man's innate corruption took the place of the Greek's belief of instant retribution. This belief in divine providence, a God-sent intervention to reversing a bad situation, is characteristic of the Elizabethan era. Hence the concept of fate in Sophocles' *King Oedipus* which creates despair, in *King Lear*, there is hope and faith when at the end of it all the forces of evil are absolutely destroyed.

Previous studies on the tragic heroes of the classical and neo-classical periods have shown the metamorphosis of the tragic hero and differences in definitions for the two eras. There is scant information on the post-

classical renaissance portrayal of the tragic hero. This paper, therefore, fills this gap and also provides a cursory comparison of the tragic conception of the different eras.

1. APPROACH

The study of Shakespearean work of art reveals at least two levels of reading; where the theatre student will read (the plays) for situation, the literature student will read for symbolic significance, for thematic strands, for intellectual nuance (Brown, 1990). This paper delves into the selected plays, using the method of close reading which is best found in previously described textual analysis approach (Adade-Yeboah & Ahenkora, 2012; Adade-Yeboah, Ahenkora & Amankwah, 2012; Termizi & Ching, 2012; McCaw, 2008; Atkins, 1983).

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 The Renaissance Story and the Hero

The drama *King Lear* (1670), is one of the tragic plays heavily saturated with cruelty and untold sufferings. But there is also relief and mitigating effects brought about by love and sympathy sincerely offered which in turn, bring about sincere repentance. These untold sufferings are equally encountered in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *King Lear* begins with a prose "exposition", an idle conversation about the partition of a kingdom and the bastardy of a son. Its tone is casual jocular and polite. Everything is initially patterned – one making obvious errors which he obviously will rue, these others emerging as the good and the evil in almost geometrical symmetry, with the inevitable sisters – three, the two elders chosen though wicked, the younger rejected though virtuous. King Lear as a tragic protagonist is cast in the mould of the Aristotelian principle. He is a man of noble birth with normal frailties possessed by heroes like Hamlet or Ceasar.

Shakespeare conceives King Lear in the context of original sin rather than the "hamartia" of king Oedipus. King Oedipus has no tragic flaw; any flaw he may have in his character is not tragic in the sense that it is not made directly responsible for the tragic situation. The tragic flaw is a common feature of most Elizabethan protagonists. Hence in *King Lear*, we see Cordelia return to England just in time to arrest her father's slide into disease and unhappiness. In the post-classical period of the Renaissance, tragedy still tells the story of a fall of a Prince like King Lear. The difference here is that the Renaissance story is without hamartia and an element of fate (moira) which are crucial in the case of Sophocles' Oedipus. King Lear is therefore portrayed as being personally responsible for his fall. As noted by Roche (1981), the play is meant to show the plight of man in pre-Christian times and that Shakespeare has had to make changes in the play to give its required shape. Roche's

contention is that without the Christian dimension to the pagan tragedy, the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia cannot be possible. In dividing his kingdom, Lear hopes for the best but he finds this to be impossible. He is deceived, and in death he is deluded by something he cannot hope for.

2.2 The Tragic Source

The tragic source of the play is the tragic flaw of King Lear who represents human frailty. Thus even though the classical Greek structure gives it the appearance of a pagan tragedy, *King Lear* is Christian in spirit. As the play opens, Lear sets in motion that which leads to his tragedy. His first action as the play opens is his demand that his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia prove their filial, fidelity and love:

Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty, may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge (l.i. 51-53)

The reward for acceptable declaration is an equal portion of their father's kingdom as their inheritance. This unusual demand looks like an attempt to wrestle from his daughters something they withhold from him. Regan and Goneril pledge their strongest love and loyalty, Cordelia answers only in modest and in honest terms:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty.
According to my Lord, no more nor less (l.i. 91-93)

King Lear proves to be a gullible parent eager to believe any show of affection and is thus taken in by flattery of Goneril who says to her father,

Sir, I love you more than world can wield the matter;
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty...
No less than life... (l. 55-57).

In the same sugar – coated words Regan pours out her heart in flattery:

I am made of that self mettle as my sister,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find her names my very deed of love;
Only she comes too short, that I profess. (l.1 69-72)

King Lear who shows gullibility is easily deceived by these false declarations of Goneril and Regan. This is shown by the king's immediate response:

To that and thine hereditary ever
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom.
No less space, validity, and pleasure (l. 79-81)

On the contrary, the king spurns the honest declaration of Cordelia. Her attempts at rationality go sorely against the grain and therefore she loses her inheritance to her two elder sisters. He openly tells Cordelia:

Here I disclaim all my paternal care
Propinquity and property of blood
And as a stranger to my heart and me (l.i. 113-115)

Cordelia is thus given to marriage without a dowry against Cordelia's honest declarations.

2.3 Moral Flaws of the Elizabethan Heroes

This element of anger portrayed by Lear, which is a moral

flaw, is typical of Elizabethan heroes. Such anger makes them hubristic. In *Othello* (1670), the moment Othello learns from Iago that his wife Desdemona has something to hide from him, his countenance changes. His noble speech which he uses to woo Desdemona deserts him and his fury betrays his emotional imbalance. King Lear confuses his role as father with his role as monarch. This is a situation which leads to the fallacy of assuming that power and love are not only one and the same thing, but also interchangeable. He places too much importance on the answers from Regan and Goneril. He quarrels with them and this quarrel marks the beginning of his suffering. Goneril insists that Lear prunes down his retinue and consequently Lear considers this to be a profound affront to his dignity and his authority. As a king he must not be ordered about. He therefore leaves the household of Goneril in a towering rage for Regan's abode only to be met with the same demand. Apart from his anger, small irritation like Kent's little insults accumulate so that growing tension in him leads to his frustrated cry:

...O Fool! I shall go mad (2. iv. 281)

What Lear suffers seems bound up with his guilt. Similarly, throughout the play *Macbeth*, the hero, Macbeth continues to give serious thought to the moral aspects of his actions, and he is in no sense an unfeeling villain without conscience or sense of nobility. This is shown when he wants to talk over with Banquo about the prophecy of the witches.

2.4 The Heroes' Mental Torture

King Lear's mental torture, frustration and his unspecified hatred against those who have led him to acquiesce to his imprisonment are clearly shown in his speech:

He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,
And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes,
The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
Ere they shall make us weep. We'll see 'em starved first.
Come. (5.iii. 22-26)

In much the same way, Hamlet's tragedy lies in the fact that despite his efforts, he is frustrated in proving his uncle's (Claudius) guilt to the world as he plans the punishment for his uncle. His uncle is too much of a match for him; and too noble and intelligent to make it easier for Hamlet to take one opportunity he has and murder him like a common assassin. Another tragic aspect of King Lear is his hot temper. He fails to appreciate the fact that young people have their own lives to lead. Even though Goneril and Regan are his daughters, it is best to try and accommodate some of their wishes. Lear's refusal to see this clearly shows the egoistic tendencies in him. His rash decision to rush in anger into the wilderness makes him hubristic. Lear therefore rejects shelter, and this rejection starts the decline in his fortunes. In this state he undergoes a spiritual "pathé" due to the mental torture, as well as physical passion due to physical deprivation.

These moments of awareness and tenderness become an important motif in the play as Lear directs his new

capacity for close attention to the naked wretches in the storm, to Edgar and later, to Gloucester and Cordelia. The denouement therefore takes place in the wilderness. He gains an understanding of the flattery and wickedness of his elder daughters and this actually structures the move from ignorance to knowledge. He suddenly appreciates what is reality and what lies beneath appearances. Lear realises he has been taking the semblance of love for the real thing and what is real love he sees it as indifference. This is Lear's tragic suffering and it brings about his insanity.

Hamlet in *Hamlet* (1990) can be seen from the opening lines of the most familiar of his soliloquies

*To be, or not to be, that is the question
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms yet against a sea of troubles
And by opposing the end. To die, to sleep
No more, and by a sleep to say we end.
...The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
that flesh is heir to ...* (3.1 63-70)

The "question" is formally stated, then defined in terms of soliloquies which associate the agonies of the spirit with those of the flesh. Thus, by combining antithesis, parallelism and paradox, Hamlet enables the reader to come back to the association of physical and spiritual torment, in which the heart of the hero physically "aches" and the flesh is subject to "shock". Lear's inordinate anger only intensifies the tragedy. Even when he is sound in mind, he is not able to control his temper judging from his utterances and actions. For examples, Kent is banished for taking the side of Cordelia, and Cordelia is given off in marriage without a dowry. King Lear's foolishness in giving up his kingdom and his authority is revealed by the wise cracks of the Fool. He says:

Thou shouldest not have been old till thou has been wise (1.v. 37)

What is more pathetic is when Lear is humbled by Cordelia's love and acknowledges the fact to her that he is

a, "*Foolish fond old man*" (4. iii. 60)

Lear's tender concentration on the facts of pain takes on a special strength when we reach the play's final scene. Lear is ready to make amends and therefore Cordelia's undisguised love is enough to soothe Lear on waking up from his slumber. Lear whose character trait reveals light – heartedness is portrayed in his anguish and crisis. He cries,

my poor fool is hanged (5. iii.306)

He dies immediately after the death of Cordelia but he dies a man clothed in the forgiveness of one whom he has wronged so grievously. Hamlet also dies as a victim who is glued to his purpose which has made him "follow the king's pleasure". Therefore Hamlet declares: "if this fitness speaks mine is ready". Fluchere (1953) previously noted that the personal tragedy of Lear and Cordelia, profoundly human though it still is, rises to the universal

plane. Intolerable suffering first undermines reason and the abyss into which it can fall seems even deeper. Lear may die after Cordelia but it is a serene death which the dramatist opposes to intolerable injustices.

2.5 Terror, Pity and Fear

Furthermore, Lear, like a god simultaneously creating a world and giving it away, as though it were his to give, says to Goneril,

*Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,
With shadowy forests, and with champains riched,
With plenteous rivers, and wide - skirted meads,
We make thee lady. (1. 163-66)*

Full of pomp and sway of his office at the moment of surrendering it, Lear takes pleasure in leaving his daughters to vie in public for his affection. He expects them to “perform”. He is thus conducting a battering contest: the strongest bidder will win the largest price. Words are to be taken at their face value. From the outset we find Lear forbidding in the wanton indulgence of his age. But our sympathy for him as the play unfolds cannot be hidden. If we at first fear for him because of his age, since he is like one of us, we are soon astonished by the strength of his feelings and by his endurance. In fact, we take heart and reassurance from him. Nevertheless, terror and pity also thrive in our response. Terror, because this can confront an ancient king who, living in a terrestrial paradise, seemed resilient to the trials to the rest of us. Our pity because such suffering can be extracted from him. Yet, in spite of the horror Lear shows that hope exists for us all till the day we die. Destined to being King, Lear must submit to the terrible situation that tears from his role. Lear, a king who is supposed to establish and maintain order, rather releases the forces that destroy it, and must seek out the centre of the chaos, grapple with it to death. He has the nobility to do so. At the time he must discover the chaos and the madness of the human world, the savagery lurking under words, manners and clothes. “Nothing” obedient to his early command, comes between this dragon and his wrath; in his own person he must experience that entire wrath to discover what treasure, if any, lies buried within and around him. Lear’s loneliness is as a result of his abuse of power – his kingship.

2.6 Lear and Oedipus Compared

In the play, even though the causes of the tragedy are due to Lear’s inability to see through flattery and his hubris, there is also the suggestion of hamartia. This is because his first act, the decision to divide and share out the kingdom is a wrong act, though his character plays a major role in this. However, this action is not the dominant of a tragic situation. Unlike king Oedipus, the source of the tragic situation is clearly traceable to Lear’s moral flaw. Despite the basic differences in their characterization, King Oedipus and King Lear have similarities. Their suffering is both physical and mental attended by torture and deprivation as well as exposure to

the vagaries of the weather after their unilateral rejection of shelter. The two characters are united in their spiritual blindness until they move from ignorance into knowledge in both cases. The poignancy of King Lear is heightened not only by the insanity of the king but also the exposure to the ferocious elements of the stormy night. Though he is partly to blame for this, it is a trying experience for such an old man.

2.7 Lear’s Uncanny Vulnerability

The two provocative statements earlier made in the play that lead us beyond the immediate dramatic ambience are very pertinent. The first is Gloucester asking to kiss the hand of Lear, and the answer Lear gives is.

Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality (4.vi.132)
To this Gloucester replies,
*O ruined piece of Nature! This great world
shall so wear out to nought. (4.vi.133-134)*

From the above we see Lear’s display of an uncanny vulnerability in emphasizing his mortality, Gloucester generalizes on a fallen (ruined) nature betraying itself to nought (with a pun on naughtiness). The essential elements of the established order are portrayed in king Lear, every inch a king, a man who has in his countenance that authority which his followers would feign call master. Indeed, Lear is a kingly personage in his own right, a “natural ruler”, powerful; strong-willed; commanding; courageous; aristocratic in every way; and possessed of a natural right to rule which is reinforced by custom and legitimacy. He attracts to himself the ceremonies, the values, the trappings, and the extended family of the old social order – the court Fool, the private army of knights and the faithful servants. In king Lear and his court, Shakespeare characteristically blends elements of “British mythology, medieval Feudalism, and Renaissance benevolent despotism to create a composite image of an older order which exists in mystic communion with God and with the order of the cosmos” (Kerman, 1981).

The spectacular tragedy here is derived from Lear’s endurance and resistance, both so mighty that they summon forth ultimate force or violence. He experiences the universe at a depth and height that sweeps away all lesser considerations. Weiss (2008) view of the tragedy of Lear is that while force is on our side, it is delectable but once it cannot make use of us, it tosses us aside; patience or resignation seems to be the only resort.

CONCLUSION

This study identified the need to understand the portrayal of the tragic hero of the Shakespearean post-classical era. As a post-classical tragic hero, Lear is portrayed as being personally responsible for his fall. In both the classical and post-classical Renaissance periods, tragedy still tells the story of a fall of a prince. The difference is that the Renaissance story is without hamartia and an element of

fate (moira) but these are very crucial in Greek tragedy. The concept of fate (moira) in the Greek classical period gives way to Christian faith in the post classical period. Shakespeare conceives of King Lear in the context of original sin rather than the hamartia.

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