

Role of Male Characters in the Major Shakespearean Tragedies

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Abstract: A Shakespearean tragedy, critics say, is a five storey mansion marked by exposition, the rising action, the crisis the falling action and the catastrophe. Its hero rises from scene to scene on the currents of passion and imagination, having at last, reached the heights of tragedy; he disappears through death but only after highlighting the inherent greatness of man. Shakespeare has written a large number of tragedies of which the four, Hamlet, Macbeth Othello and King Lear are considered to be standard works for purposes of analyzing his conception of tragedy. These tragedies have, no doubt, different designs, but there is a family likeness in their heroes who have common traits and humours that constitute their characters. Some critics believe that character is destiny in a Shakespearean tragedy. That is, the character of the hero determines his fate and destiny. In the latter, the hero is merely an agent of fate, and not the master of his destiny. In a Greek tragedy, there are the gods who punish the hero; in a Shakespearean tragedy the hero is punished by his self-willed actions. The former works through fate, the latter through free will. There is fate but this does not control the actions of the heroes. Man is free, in the world of Shakespearean tragedy to choose, but having chosen once he cannot retract or retrace.

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I. IN MACBETH

Macbeth's 'gift' for bloodshed, his 'overvaulting' ambition are: 'floating' qualities. But these get set in a predictable direction after the encounter with the witches. The witches hold up a mirror in which Macbeth sees his powers fulfilled in a strange way. He is "possessed" by the image of himself that the witches show. The chance to play host to the king comes soon enough but Lady Macbeth has to 'will' Macbeth to go ahead; though the actual performance is Macbeth's, the impulse comes from the wife. Henceforth 'to know my deed' were best not known myself", says Macbeth to himself. The deed is done but the rest of Macbeth's life would be an attempt to live with its implications. Macbeth still thinks himself to be in quest of the social good that only needs the deaths of Banquo and Fleance to make it click into place. Even the flight of Fleance does not seem to matter to him. Macbeth operates all through by incessant falsehood or prevarication. He does not trust the assassins he sends to murder Banquo, for he sends a third murderer in their midst. He does not trust even his accomplice, his wife whom he asks to wait for and applaud the deed in Act III; scene (ii), lines 45-46. It is not irrelevant to remind oneself at this juncture that it is again the witches who have 'exploited' Macbeth's vulnerability to evil by suggesting to him indirectly the way to ensure the continued enjoyment of his ambition. But the pretended social order soon breaks down as the ghost of Banquo enters and the show breaks into a rout of order

"Stand not upon the order of young going; But go at once" (Shakespeare, 2001: 28)

Banquo is a military commander who fights side by side with Macbeth and distinguishes himself by his valour in the battle which they both wage in the service of King Duncan against the traitors who are helped by outside forces. When the bleeding sergeant gives to King Duncan on account of the brave explains of Macbeth, he also mentions the brave fighting of Banquo. Accordingly, when the two commanders return from the battle, they are both received affectionately by Duncan. Duncan words to Banquo on this occasion are:

Noble Banquo
That hast no less deserved, nor must be known

No less to have done so let me, in bold thee,
And hold thee to my heart.

And to this Banquo gives an appropriate, though very brief reply: "There if I grow! The harvest is your own". Thus Banquo is not only a valiant soldier, but a loyal and devoted soldier, and it must be said to his credit that his loyalty and devotion do not waver at any stage. It is Banquo who first sees and speaks to the three witches when he and Macbeth are returning from the battle field. On seeing them, Banquo wonders who these creatures are, "so withered and so wild in their attire" they are creatures "who look not like the inhabitants of earth" he says. He then addresses the three witches and asks them whether they are actually living beings and whether they can speak to human beings. He also says that though by their look they appear to be women; yet their beards prevent them from thinking them to be women. When the witches have made their prophecies about Macbeth, Banquo, preserves Macbeth starting and asks him why he seem to bear things that do sound so fair. He then again speaks to the witches and this time asks them if they can tell him something about his future also, adding that he neither, begs favours nor fears their hatred. The witches then tell him that he will be the founder of a royal dynasty. When the witches have vanished, Banquo's comment is:

The earth hath bobbles, as the water has
And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?"

He then doubts whether those creatures were actually present a moment ago or whether he and Macbeth have taken Hemlock which has the effect of paralyzing the reason of a human being. Banquo's subsequent comment on the witches a little later is that the creatures whom they have met were the agents of the devil whom mislead human beings by telling them certain trivial truths and then betraying them in matters of vital importance (Shakespeare, 2001).

II. IN HAMLET

Hamlet possesses a philosophical nature and intellectual depth. His soliloquies show him to be a man of deeply reflective and meditative nature. He meditates deeply on his mother's remarriage with a villain. Then he reflects on the Ghost's revelations. His uncle Claudius invited everyone to celebrate his marriage to Queen Gertrude. Hamlet, still grieving and dressed in black, does not completely hide his unhappiness of his union. "She marriage, O. Most wicked speed, to post with such dexterity to incestuous sheets (Shakespeare, 2001: 208-209). Hamlet feels suspicious of his uncle as he also believes that his mother's grief is not sincere if she remarried within two months. A dark suspicion had filled his mind after his father's mysterious death. He suspected his uncle of killing his father for the crown and the Queen. He had, however, no way of proving this because the people were quite unaware of the real cause of the death of King Hamlet. In Act 1 Scene 1, the Ghost told Hamlet that he was murdered by his own brother Claudius who poured poison into his ear while he slept peacefully which caused his death. The ghost also apprised him that his mother was also a party to his murder. He tries to show her the wickedness she has done in marrying the king and tries to dissuade her from living as his wife. In the three spheres, then, they are most important to him with Ophelia in relation to the King, and now with his mother, Hamlet had recovered from his earlier despair and moves towards action grounded in the only sure, the divine order (Sachdev, 2012: 124). Hamlet has another woman in his life, who he uses in his plan for revenge. Ophelia loves Hamlet and he loves her, but he is unsure of how to deal with his feelings since the confusion he feels regarding his mother and Claudius. We learn from Ophelia that Hamlet has gone "mad" offstage he grabs her wrist and stares at her for a long time. His "madness" is his search for the truth about what happened to his father. He also uses his madness to speak truthfully without being punished. Hamlet gets angry at Ophelia when they meet and he expresses that all women are liars and should not be able to marry. "Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" He does not trust Ophelia, just as he no longer trusts his mother. He knows that Polonius, Ophelia's father and Claudius were listening as he knows his mother has played a part in his scheme. He projects all of his anger for his mother. Hamlet has written a play in which he will show his mother and uncle that he knows the truth about what happened to his father. At the play, Gertrude asks for Hamlet to sit next to her. Hamlet rejects his mother and sits with Ophelia. He makes comments about how quickly his mother's grief has ended. Ophelia defends Gertrude; this concludes Hamlet's grief that all women are the same. He believes that they are inconsistent with their behaviour and untrustworthy. The player Queen of the play "The Mousetrap" is now Hamlet feels his mother should have conducted herself. (Hazlitt, 1972: 292).

Claudius was a criminal. He enjoyed incestuous love with the Queen even when her first husband was alive. He made her a party in poisoning the king to death. Thereafter he stole the crown and married Gertrude. He wished to prove himself father-like to Hamlet to wipe the frown off his face and attend to the country and its people, in the capacity of the prince. He felt offended at Hamlet's long spell of mourning. He develops the attitude of enmity and hostility towards Hamlet after the play "The Murder of Gonzago" is staged. He is drawn

as a poetic, wise and gentle king in all the early scenes. He shows a genuine anguish at Polonius's death and Ophelia's subsequent madness. As a king he earnestly longs for peace and order in Denmark. He performs his ceremonial duties efficiently and in the interest of the nation when Fortinbras demanded the return of the territory lost by his father to the late king of Denmark, Claudius sends two courtiers to the king of Norway and gets Fortinbras restrained from embarking upon his reckless adventure. In this way, he averts an eventuality. Claudius was a dead drunkard with a mean appearance. He was not a tragic character. He had not a tragic character. He had the inclination of physically weak and morally small nature towards intrigue and crooked dealing. Poisons are his instinctive tool. He was quick-witted and adroit, not stupid by any means. He was the master of the witchcraft of the intellect. He is soft spoken annoyance, irritation or resentment on hearing repudiating and scornful words from Hamlet.

III. IN KING LEAR

Lear plays the male character role in the Shakespeare's tragedy. Lear is an old man on the verge of "dotage". His self knowledge has never been strong, and infirmity of years has made bad discrimination worse. Further, the decay of age renders him all the more liable to attacks of cholera and thereby to the over clouding of reason. Lear meets his first opposition in Cordelia. Lear goes with his hundred knights to his eldest daughter's. Our next news of him is Goneril's account of how he is spending his holiday from kingship.

By day and night, he wrongs me, every hour
He flashes into one gross crime, or other,
That sets us all at odds; I will not endure it;
His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
On every trifle.

Lear can find some comfort and gratification of soul in his cruelty; but the treatment of Cordelia does not outweigh, as it does not moderate, the reality of the grief to which her seemingly loveless answer has subjected him. The tyranny of that grief is to have a profounder effect upon him than the slight either to his authority or to his self-esteem. Lear may be accused of an incompetence of character or even a blindness of soul to goodness and right. The power both to recognize and to effect what is good, further may be held to have been diminished in him by the harshnesses of regal office; and the passionate nature of his responses may be regarded as an ultimately questionable indulgence in the very means of imperceptions. The perverse soul desires to be something more than a man, a cosmos in itself; but Lear can speak in consciousness of "the power that made me", even finds his true self obscured and hindered by the every means of the power in which he takes pride. Though a "will to self-assertion" may readily be seen to operate in Lear, therefore, it is by no means the will "to unlimited selfhood" of the definition which A.P. Rossiter applied to Macbeth nor is it possible to regard him as endeavouring to impose upon the threatening incongruities of his situation the pattern of an order peculiarly his own. If his concern is to exact himself, his desire of eminence admits a conscious will to use it in the service of a purpose whose mercies to mankind are manifested to him in the orbs from whom we do exist and cease to be. Those who take Lear most strictly to task for selfishness are yet obliged to say him that.

He naturally and invariably sees himself both in relation to large natural forces and to the gods that control them (Morris. 1972: 357)

Gloster and Albany are the two neutral characters of the tragedy. The parallel between Lear and Gloster marked that it cannot possibly be accidental. Both are old white-haired men; both it would seem, widowers, with children comparatively young. Like Lear, Gloster is tormented, and his life is sought, by the child whom he favours; he is tended and healed by the child whom he has wronged. His sufferings, like Lear's, are partly traceable to his own extreme folly and injustice. His sufferings, again, like Lear's purify and enlighten him he dies a better and wiser man than he showed himself at first. They even learn the same lesson, and Gloster's repetition of the thought in a famous speech of Lear's is surely international. And. Finally, Gloster dies almost as Lear dies. Edgar reveals himself to him and asks his blessings (as Cordelia asks Lear's).

But his flaw's heart
Alack, too weak the conflict to support
"Twist two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly. (Kurup, 2003: 160)

IV. IN OTHELLO

Othello is one of the male characters in the Shakespeare's tragedy. He is a Moor (a Negro) and according to Elizabethan sense a barbarian as all Negroes were regarded as mere savages in Shakespeare's days. He is essentially a soldier. It is by chance that he is thrown into the role of a lover. His cherished occupation in life is fighting in the battle field. His soldierly occupation began "since these arms of mine had seven years (pith (I.ii, 83); he has found seven years"; he has found in the "flinty and steel couch of war" his "thrice driven bed of down", and Montano, who served under him tells us that "the man commands like a full soldier". His intrepid

calmness, his bland modesty, his manly frankness and considerable firmness, are all displayed in the battlefield to great advantage, marking his character as one up of the most solid and gentle qualities.

Othello is “at once simple and stately in bearing”. Iago’s remarks that he can “as tenderly be led by the nose” can be accepted, but it is precisely on his victims trusting nature that he goes to work. He is full of dignity and self control. In spite of all his wicked efforts Iago fails to incite him against Brabantio and Roderigo. He is fully conscious of his lofty position in the state. He makes on us the impression that he is a great man with a noble soul, thrust by fate into the clutches of a demy-devil and succumbing to his machinations not for any fault of his but on account of the excess of his noble virtues. His complete faith in the honesty of a man and his lofty ideal of the honour of woman and his ignorance of the world of affairs due to a lifelong absorption in his own chosen world of military action are responsible for his catastrophe. Iago works successfully on Othello not only because he was an idealist, great and noble in his mind and spirit, but also because he was a misfit in the world of scheming villainy. Of course the roots of Othello’s fate lie in his character, for it is a perilous to be so totally ignorant of the working of the human mind and of the ways of the world. An idealism that has little relation to the facts of life is bound to founder on the rocks of reality. Othello’s tragedy, therefore, is the result of an interaction of his own character and the circumstances in which he is placed (Jain, 2012: 45).

Othello approaches love with a feeling of complacency resulting from the independent satisfactions of his personal power, and his acceptance of Desdemona is due “in no small part because she ministered to his self-esteem. It is this egoism that makes him vulnerable to Iago’s temptation and causes him to seek revenge. Iago makes him visualize the sin by which Desdemona is offending his self-esteem thwarted in love, his egoism will be consisted in revenge. It can be seen that the nature and progress of Othello’s love closely parallels that of Dido. (Traverse, 1956: 131). Othello and Desdemona are no sooner wed than separated, and the consummation of their wedding is twice prevented by external conflicts. This external disunity is accompanied, moreover, by indications of internal conflict which suggest a symbolic interpretation of the action, namely that Othello and Desdemona are not married in spirit.

Another male character in “Othello” is Iago. He is a young Venetian soldier who has “looked upon the world for four times seven years”. His character is highly complex and enigmatical and his motives inscrutable. In general he is regarded as the spirit of Evil, acting as he does through simple hatred of good and delight in causing pain – a terrible and very enjoyable game he plays as he says “pleasure and action make the hours seen short”. He is a man who suffers from a sense of injured merit as he has been slighted by Othello in the promotion of Cassio and revenges himself; or a husband who believes he has been cuckolded by Othello and Cassio, and will make his enemies suffer a jealousy and torture worse than his own. He is a man in the process of becoming a Devil by a denial of basic facts of his humanity. He is a master of the ways of men and reads character with extreme penetration.

V. CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that the male characters in William Shakespeare’s tragedies shows the currents of passion and imagination having at last reached the heights of tragedy. Macbeth is a brave soldier and effective soldier, but also a passionate and imaginative soul, devoted to his wife, his mind is a Cauldron of contradictory impulses, bubbling and spewing forth. Even in “Hamlet” the lack of adequacy to the situation is partly cognitive, because Hamlet is slow to see that his position is untenable unless he deals decisively with his uncle; it is only a matter of time before Claudius will seek to have him removed too. It is chance that makes Hamlet come across Claudius alone at his prayers. Lear, for all his folly, is a man of towering emotion, of scaring eloquence, of enormous wounds; he is a lightning storm of intense feeling. It is Cordelia’s death that pulls most powerfully at the heartstrings; indeed, without it, the tragedy would not have an ingredient to the full Shakespearean effect. Othello makes a huge error of judgment and has totally false beliefs about the situation he is in : he is ignorant and to some extent culpably so. His belief fails to match the truth of his circumstances. His emotional makeup permits his cognitive flaw, but it is the cognitive mismatch that drives the tragedy.

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