



Studies in Literature and Language
Vol. 12, No. 1, 2016, pp. 19-26
DOI:10.3968/8127

ISSN 1923-1555[Print]
ISSN 1923-1563[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

The Will Not in Bondage: An Interpretation of Free Will in Shakespeare's Pure Tragedies¹

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Received 8 October 2015; accepted 11 December 2015

Published online 26 January 2016

Abstract

The tension between Christian Predestination and Free Will is the theme Shakespearean tragedy frequently deals with. As it is the tragedy that often masterly generalizes the playwright's ultimate concerns, the paper, based on a re-examination of the fates of the heroes and themes revealed in Shakespeare's pure tragedies from the perspectives of Free Will as the gift of grace and that in man's exertion and judgments, suggests that Shakespeare, though living and writing under Anglican circumstances, shows in great measure an anti-Calvinistic view of Free Will, to be elaborated clearly, that man's will can be reconciled with God's will, that the path toward eternity and redemption is neither simple nor clear, and that man is not saved by good works, but by grace through faith that works well. However, his lack of strong confidence in the infinite has constantly aroused controversies on the adherence of his Christian faith.

Key words: Shakespeare; Tragedies; Free will; John Calvin; Predestination; The Church of England

¹ In A. C. Bradley's definition, beside *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's Pure Tragedies include *Richard III*, *Richard II*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. This paper then covers these nine plays, leaving out *Romeo and Juliet*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Timon of Athens* for, in the words of Bradley, these three were either cooperative work with other writer, or was written before Shakespeare had "a style of his own or any characteristic tragic conception". (Bradley, 1937, pp.3-4)

Zhang, X. M. (2016). The Will Not in Bondage: An Interpretation of Free Will in Shakespeare's Pure Tragedies. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 12(1), 19-26. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/8127>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8127>

INTRODUCTION

The year of 1571 saw the establishment of Anglicanism with *Thirty-nine Articles* proclaimed by the English parliament as the official Christian doctrine, which marked the end of the religious Reformation lasting nearly forty years from Henry VIII's separation of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534 to a series of ups and downs while England had been under the reigns of Edward VI, Queen Mary and Elizabeth I in sequence. As recorded by the Holy Trinity Church of Stratford-upon-Avon, the rites of the Church of England were practiced at both Shakespeare's baptism and funeral (Schoenbaum, 1987, pp.20-24), and *The Book of Common Prayer*, the outstanding achievement of the English Reformation, has proved a remarkable impact on Shakespeare in terms of Christian thoughts, liturgy and wording and phrasing, cases of which can be found in almost every play of his. In fact, it was, to a large extent, in the form of religious reformation that the Renaissance in England was started and advanced; as a result, *The Bible* and other church doctrines in Latin, used to be read and interpreted only by the clergymen, now became familiar to the general public in the version of everyday English, thanks to the efforts of William Tyndale, Thomas Cramer and other leading pioneers of the Reformation. Therefore, "without them, without the great English translation of the New Testament and the sonorous, deeply resonant Book of Common Prayer, it is difficult to imagine William Shakespeare" (Greenblatt, 2004, p.91). Nevertheless, the debate on Shakespeare's identity as a conformed member of the Church of England

has never ceased; scholars have drawn varied conclusions like atheist, fatalist, skeptic and so on, among whom quite a few even contended that he was a hidden Catholic. With a history of over 100 years, the study on the Bard's Christian orientation has been conducted mainly in the areas of background examination and parallel comparison between *The Bible* and Shakespeare's plays, thus, due to the recurring study, in addition to little knowledge of Shakespeare's life, the truth of his spiritual world is still unknown.

The heated religious arguments during the Elizabethan era, especially those focused on Catholic Free Will² and Protestant Predestination, were inevitably reflected in Shakespeare's writing. In the western cultural tradition, Free Will as a significant Christian concept, is closely correlated with "freedom" and "liberty" in the fields of philosophy, ethics and in general sense; furthermore, the debate on Free Will, beginning from the days of St. Augustine, through those of Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and Erasmus, to Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, has continued for over 1500 years, covering both the Christian and De-Christian eras and domains of theology, philosophy and ethics. As a pair of opposing concepts in the context of Christianity, the varying interpretations of Free Will and Predestination have aroused the famous debates between St. Augustine and the Manichaeans and Pelagius, defined the inheritance of theological thoughts from St. Augustine, Aquinas to Luther and Calvin, and built a wild gap between the teachings of the Protestantism (the Anglicanism) and the Roman Catholicism. Then to which concept Shakespeare, who wrote in the circumstances of the Church of England, was inclined to believe? To what extent the hidden Christian identity of his would this inclination suggest? This paper, from the perspective of the disagreement of the Protestant thoughts and the Roman Catholic thoughts, based on the dimensions of Free Will as the gift of grace (God-Man), its exertion (Man) and judgments (Man-God), reinterprets the fates of the heroes and themes of his pure tragedies with an aim to provide some further thoughts on Shakespeare and his spiritual world.

1. FREE WILL AS THE GIFT OF GRACE

According to Christian doctrine, only man, among all creatures, is given Free Will by God, hence, the freedom to choose between doing good and doing evil. As the first Church Father to illustrate the concept of Free Will fully and systematically, St. Augustine holds that man's Free Will is capable of doing good before Adam's fall

² Free Will discussed in this paper is a Christian conception, so interpretations of free will in philosophy, ethics and other non-Christian contexts are not going to be dealt with. Therefore, Free Will, the term, always starts with a capital wherever referred to so as to be separated from free will, a general concept, in other senses.

and after that, with a totally corrupted will, he loses capacity for good (Augustine, p.xxvi, 78). However, a contradiction is found in the illustration of Free Will by Augustine, which is revealed in his over-emphasis of Free Will as the gift of grace and its existence while debating with the Manichaeans and his negation of Free Will in the arguments with Pelagius and his followers. In brief, Augustine in his early years believes the effect of Free Will and in his late years, in fighting Pelagius, he went further to neglect Free Will by asserting Predestination. Thomas Aquinas, epitomizer of the medieval scholasticism, holds that God's foreknowledge existed before predestination, thus the latter is limited (Wang, p.79). His notion prepares room for the existence of Free Will. During the religious Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, advocates of Justification of Faith, insisting on the total depravity of human nature and salvation by faith endowed by God, both contend that the sinner cannot be saved until he gains the faith of Jesus Christ by rendering his sin to Christ. Both also believe that upon God's creation, some are predestined to be saved while others to fall, however, Calvin views "Double Predestination" as the core of his teaching which then emphasizes more God's grace while for Luther, laying stress on man's salvation, Justification of Faith is more crucial. In short, in terms of the notion of Christian liturgy and adherence to Predestination, Calvin goes further than Luther away from the Roman Catholic Church (Liu, 2011, p.169). As Calvinism exerts a deep influence on the doctrines of the Church of England, *Thirty-Nine Articles* highlight the grace of God, which provides a striking contrast to *The Council of Trent*. Roman Catholicism shows greater confidence in man's cooperation with the grace of God whereas the Anglicanism expresses a negative attitude toward man's capability of shunning evil and doing good (Buckley, 1851, p.15).

Since Free Will proves the grace, love and generosity of God, it is endowed to man to help him live a just life and follow God whole-heartedly, who Himself is supreme truth and goodness; in another word, there is no existence of evil for evil is purely the absence or betrayal of goodness. So the cause and intention of endowing Free Will to man in Christian teaching are both just. Epicurean Paradox, the question on how to reconcile the existence of evil with that of a deity who is, in either absolute or relative terms, omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, cannot baffle Augustine as the father of theodicy and Luther and Calvin as bearers of his thoughts as they all view it nothing but a heretic challenge to God's justice and goodness. It is pride that results in the credulity of Adam and Eve, which then tempts them to eat Forbidden Fruit and to betray God and goodness. God's justice is shown in His awarding goodness and punishing evil, thus as the punishment of their Original Sin, the first man and the first woman are driven out of the Eden, and they and their descendants are destined to suffer pains,

hunger, arduous labor and fear to die. Death then follows Original Sin. Since men are all sinners, they will not be rid of fear of death until they are determined to love and revere God with unwavering faith, and eventually the selection will rise up to heaven and attain eternity.

Then how does Shakespeare understand and interpret Free Will as the God-man gift of grace? With His foreknowledge, does God predestine man's fate entirely or partly? At the beginning of both *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, there appears a spokesman of the fate: The Soothsayer and the Witches, whose prophetic words, with the supernatural mystery and high accuracy, builds the most mystical suspense, sets the full-tasting tragic tone and introduces two opposing forces into God-man conflicts, that is, the Soothsayer as God who keeps earnestly warning and the Witches as Satan who repeat viciously luring. Hearing the paradoxical predictions, the opposite responses of Caesar and Macbeth reflect the opposite attitudes toward puzzling inspiration. When Caesar and his supporters—and enemies as well—are marching through the streets watching the ceremonial to celebrate the feast of Lupercal, the Soothsayer tries to warn Caesar of the conspiracy plot, telling him: "Beware the ides of March (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.18)."³ (The same warning is repeated later.) Caesar brushes the warning aside, replying, "He is a dreamer. Let us leave him. Pass! (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.24)" In dismissing the Soothsayer, "immortal Caesar" (in the words of Cassius) demonstrates his confidence and fearlessness in confronting with the superstitious power, his unwillingness to follow gods' caution and his unpreparedness to defend himself against attack by both overt and covert means. Later in the Senate, when surrounded by the conspirators, Caesar is stabbed repeatedly. It is Brutus, the one Caesar used to have every confidence in, who stabs him last, which crushes him both in body and spirit. In dying, Caesar cries out, "Et tu, Brute? Then fall, Caesar! (*Julius Caesar*, 3.1.77)" The preposterous chant in the pattern of climax of three Witches, from "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis." to "All Hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor." and to "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter! (*Macbeth*, 1.3.47-52)" immediately throw Macbeth and Banquo into awe, panic and suspicion with an irresistibly terrifying tone. They vanish at once, ignoring the inquiry of Macbeth and Banquo, after they foretell the fate of Banquo with the same pattern and tone. But Macbeth, tempted by these amphibious words, shows his eagerness to find out the truth: "Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more. Speak, I charge you. (*Macbeth*, 1.3.70-79)" Then Ross and Angus appear

with word from King Duncan that the king will bestow the title of the Thane of Cawdor on Macbeth, who, under the spell of the Witches, secretly releases the most vicious hidden desire: "Glamis, the Thane of Cawdor. / The greatest is behind. (*Macbeth*, 1.3.117-118)" Thus Macbeth, used to be extolled as a hero, begins to fall into the abyss of sin and to condemn himself to eternal damnation. Backward to the fall of Adam, God gives him a straightforward command: ".....but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when eat of it you will surely die. (*Genesis*, 2.16)"⁴ Man betrays God regardless of the fact that God has shown him clearly that faith is identical with goodness, and since Man's betrayal, in the view of Luther and Calvin, human nature is then totally depraved. Men, from innocent Adam to mighty Caesar and much-adored Macbeth, vie with each other to sink into vice for they share the same weakness – pride, which drives them to folly. Upon predicting their fall, God, the soothsayer and the Witches all give them the freedom to choose at the same time. The freedom, or the possibility to reconcile man's will with God's will, can be interpreted as Limited Predestination which offers man an opportunity to change his doomed fate, nevertheless, Adam, Caesar and Macbeth, with an absence of faith, do not choose to cooperate with the grace of God and eventually embrace the exile, death and sin in succession.

In terms of the possibility of reconciling God's will with man's will, *King Lear* provides us with the Earl of Kent and Edmund, a pair of positive and negative examples, who happen to show opposing views of the relationship of the supernatural force and man's fate. Kent, humble and obedient, laments King Lear's suffering and Cordelia's filial piety:

"It is the stars,
The stars above us, govern our conditions;
Else one self mate and make could not beget
Such different issues. (*King Lear*, 4.3.34-37)"

And Edmund, cunning and glib-tongued, keeps angry about his identity as an illegitimate son:

"Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
Lag of a brother? (*King Lear*, 1.2.2-6)"

and is determined to change his destiny at all costs:

³ All quotations of Shakespeare's plays, including the numbers of acts, scenes and lines, are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare (The Norton Shakespeare)*. In S. Greenblatt (Ed.). New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.). Each quotation is marked in the paper with the title of the play and the corresponding numbers of the act, scene and line.

⁴ All quoted biblical texts are taken from *New International Version of The Holy Bible (New International Version of The Holy Bible)*. East Brunswick, New Jersey: International Bible Society, 1984.) Each quotation is marked in the paper with the title of the book and the corresponding numbers of the chapter and sentence.

“And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate: —I grow, I prosper;
Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (*King Lear*, 1.2.20-22)”

Though holding reverence toward the gods and serving the king faithfully, Kent is banished by King Lear for he insists on opposing Lear's furious and hasty banishment of Cordelia, whereas Edmund, impious, selfish and unconscionable, has his way and rights in his hand for a time as he manages to set his father against his elder brother and pledges himself to both Goneril and Regan. As for the words of his father that “these late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us” (*King Lear*, 1.2.115-116), Edmund comments in disdain behind his back:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, —often the surfeit of our own behavior, —we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on: an admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! (*King Lear*, 2.1.132-143)

However, as readers of dramatic works, we cannot help feeling an inclination to ask which one of them, Kent and Edmund, proves more constructive in developing dramatic conflicts? Or, is faith fully identical with goodness? Is disbelief fully identical with evil? These are the questions worth asking frequently. Although the story of *King Lear* is set in the age 800 years before Shakespeare's day, the belief of Kent and disbelief of Edmund do reflect the image of the Protestants, humble and introspective in front of God, and that of the Machiavellians, who held that the end justifies the means, or that of the secular Humanists, who rioted in excessive self-indulgence. Thanks to the power of literary esthetics, the creation of these two characters manages to reveal the playwright's intention to confuse the Earthly World and the Spiritual World. From the perspective of the reader's experience, Kent who never forgets “the call of my master” (*King Lear*, 5.3.324) appears flat and boring while Edmund who defines himself as “rough and lecherous” (*King Lear*, 2.1.146-147) proves more round and convincing, hence, the former departing in sorrowful loneliness and the latter stung by conscience before dying.

The intentional confusion of the two worlds is also implied in *Antony and Cleopatra* as the end of this moral tragedy shows a transcendental holiness. The illusion Antony has before dying about his reunion with his love in Hades echoes the soliloquy of Cleopatra before committing suicide unflinchingly: “husband, I come: / Now to that name my courage proves my title! (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2. 289-290)” Death consecrates the

couple not only in each other's mind but in that of Octavius, a principal author of the tragedy: “No grave upon the earth shall clip in it / A pair so famous. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.360-361)” Antony and Cleopatra meet their demise due to recklessness, selfishness and irresponsibility, though, their ruined reputation is consummated by death and their will reaches a reconciliation with God's will in a way “that is beyond the ability of the prosaic Roman world to understand. (Hacht, 2007, p.48)” God the creator endows man with Free Will out of kindness, which is misinterpreted by man the creature for his limited horizons, thus man begins to turn away from God the supreme good. However, as God never abandons the unbelievers, men in sin are still able to worship and follow God. The view of Shakespeare's then does not agree with that of Augustine in his late years and that of Calvin as well, who contends “Double Predestinations”, and leaves room for a reconciliation of man's will with God's will.

2. FREE WILL IN MAN'S EXERTION

Since Free Will is endowed out of God's kindness, how does the abuse of Free Will come into being? Steadfast in the faith as Paul is, he exclaims: “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (*Romans*, 7.18), let alone men in general who are enmeshed in the struggle with “sin living in them”. Speaking of the tragedy of will, *Macbeth* seems to be the one that has been quoted more regularly than other tragedies of Shakespeare. True, there would never occur the tragedy of *Macbeth* without his abuse of Free Will. To probe into the cause of *Macbeth*'s fall, a reexamination of this tragedy, which has often been interpreted as one carrying a theme of Predestination, suggests that the explanation Shakespeare gives is indeed a Catholic one from the perspective of Free Will in man's exertion.

As chanted by the Witches at the beginning of *Macbeth*, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air (*Macbeth*, 1.1.11-12)”, the world troubled by the confusion of right and wrong mirrors that after the fall of Adam, the first man. With all kinds of sins—gluttony, greed, coveting, adultery, murder and so on – incessantly committed, men's blasphemy even goes as badly as to make idols for themselves. Men's abuse of Free Will eventually arouses the wrath of God, who imposes on them a series of stiff penalties and who seeks a series of reconciliations with them by promulgating laws given through Moses and by the teaching and sacrifice of His Son completed through Jesus' ministry and Passion. Nevertheless, so far as man is concerned, the path toward eternity is neither simple nor clear, and the total sovereignty Calvin proclaims is questioned from time to time, rather than being believed in, due to the existence of chaos in which man's action keeps going

against his will. In accordance with the interpretation of Luther and Calvin, those who choose to disobey God lose simultaneously their judgment between “fair” and “foul”, or good and evil, but the mind of the sinners in *Macbeth* remains conscious, which can be exemplified by Macbeth’s awareness that he cannot resist the temptation of the sin although he has known perfectly well that regicide he is planning, once fulfilled, will result in double tortures of others’ condemnation and his own sense of guilt:

“I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o’er-leaps itself
And falls on the other. — (*Macbeth*, 1.7.25-28)”

Bewitched deeply, Macbeth does not lose his judgment, and his incapability of resisting the temptation of the sin reminds us of Paul’s sighing: “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing” (*Romans*, 7.19), which implies that the corruption of man’s action occurs even before that of man’s nature and that Free Will becomes Evil Will once man has lost the ability to do good. After they sin, instead of being contended with the success of usurpation, the Macbeths find them trapped in the struggle with memory, repentance and illusion day and night:

“Nought’s had, all’s spent,
Where our desire is got without content:
‘Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (*Macbeth*,
3.2.4-7)”

So the sin committed in one’s consciousness brings double disastrous effects: the disturbance of both the inner world of the Macbeths and the outside world – collapse of the state institutions, indignation of the subjects and social turbulence. The microcosm and macrocosm are disintegrated at the same time, everything in disorder and peace broken. Trying to cover up one sin with another, the Macbeths finally fall into a never-ending vicious circle and set forth on a path to self-destruction.

One man’s righteousness honors the whole state while his sin alone humiliates all people. Like Macbeth, Coriolanus used to be a national hero who conquers cities and scores signal successes and who takes a death-end path by the abuse of Free Will; but unlike Macbeth, who consciously and soberly devotes himself to eternal damnation after suffering those inner and outer conflicts between good and evil, righteousness and sin, Coriolanus, blinded by pride, is never able to introspect and gets his future and life ruined insensibly. Another moral tragedy like *Antony and Cleopatra*, the impact of supernatural power can hardly be seen and felt in the story of *Coriolanus*. The characterization of Coriolanus,

the profane and self-conceited general worth admiring and rejecting as well for his bravery and nobility, and his recklessness and treason, proves so penetrating that his destruction is very likely to be viewed as a typical case of man’s abuse of Free Will. What’s more, compared with the tragedy of Macbeth, which results partly from vicious witchcraft, that of Coriolanus is a consequence of man’s self-indulgence with the absence of God’s concern. As a general in heretic Rome, Coriolanus actually is not a pure unbeliever, for at every moment of life and death, he is used to praying gods for bless. But his spirituality is comparatively more secular and of practical utility, accordingly he fails to attain salvation when Shakespeare leaves the Earthly World with this earthly hero once and for all. Christians believe that only man’s soul is endowed with reasoning power, or as Augustine contends, anything tangible, including the body, can be lost against one’s will (Augustine, 2010, p.77), then evil can also be defined as the pursuit of worldly things while ignoring spiritual and eternal things (Augustine, 2010, p.97). Trapped by limited knowledge, both Macbeth and Coriolanus commit themselves to worldly pursuits with their mind blinded. Thus, the door to eternity is closed to him for good and all once man’s worldly nature overwhelms his spiritual nature.

Shakespeare then stresses man’s exertion of Free Will, that is, the freedom to choose between following the peaceful order of macrocosm and the evil temptation of microcosm, via ups and downs of both Macbeth, whose story is set in religious background, and Coriolanus, whose set in secular background. From the perspectives of worldly justice and Godly justice, man need not hold responsibility for his actions unless he is endowed with real freedom. So Shakespeare tends to advocate man’s free exertion of Free Will, which means that man is totally responsible for his salvation and damnation; furthermore, man is likely to make choices against his will in the course of exerting Free Will, which can be interpreted as a negation of the premise of Calvin’s Predestination, or a blending of Catholic confidence in man’s cooperation with God’s grace and Humanist faith in showing off man’s capabilities. In spite of the confidence and faith, Shakespeare’s doubt in man’s born weaknesses and the chance to be saved is revealed as the struggle between good and evil represented by self-introspection and repentance, thirst for blood and temptation of sinning runs through the plot of *Macbeth*, and the unsolved dilemma in *Coriolanus* the hero is placed in by his self-indulgence and malicious attack of his colleagues and citizens. The path toward eternity and redemption is neither simple nor clear.

3. FREE WILL IN MAN’S JUDGMENTS

Since Free Will God gives man is righteous and just and within the scope of man’s capacity to manage and exert,

how can man, after living an impermanent life, make fair judgments of the birth and death of his body and Free Will? In another word, how can man uphold his faith in God in his limited earthly life?

Like Macbeth, Richard III attempts to seize the throne by abusing his will, the course of which is full of plots and intrigue, violence and vices, and the end of which – their destruction, complying with both God's and subjects' will – represents the victory of traditional values of monarchical morals and demonstrates God's justice to repay evil for evil. Though Richard III quotes *The Bible* from time to time, he is in fact a ruthless mob and a baseman who commits all sins, including regicide, murdering his own brother, sowing discord, flattery, framing, bribery and breach of trust, while trying to remove all hindrances on his way to the throne and cultivating his own forces. In terms of biblical metaphors, if the imagery of Macbeth combines Adam tempted by his woman and Satan puffed with ambition, that of Richard III is purely Lucifer who, by insisting on setting himself against God and breeding enmity with all women⁵ (Lady Anne, Queen Elizabeth and Queen Margaret), goes further and further away from God and eventually, cursed by all, does not manage to escape God's punishment. On the night before his decisive battle with Richmond, Richard lies unconscious, the ghosts of his many victims – including King Henry VI, Henry's son Edward, Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, the young Princes Edward and York, Lady Anne, and Buckingham – pay him visits, all telling Richard to despair and die and predicting that Richmond should take heart and be victorious. Richard wakes up from his nightmare and makes the first heartfelt confession – also the last one – for his lifetime:

“Have mercy, Jesus! ...
O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
...
What! Do I fear myself? There's none else by:
...
O! no: alas! I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself.
I am a villain. Yet I lie; I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter.
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree:
Murder, stern murder, in the dir'st degree;
All several sins, all us'd in each degree,

⁵ (The Lord God said to the serpent)

“And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel. (*Genesis*, 3.15)”

Throng to the bar, crying all, ‘Guilty! Guilty!’
I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;
And if I die, no soul will pity me:
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself? (*Richard III*, 5.3.179-204)”

The curses and predictions of the ghosts, as messengers of God, endows Richmond's accession with divine brilliance meanwhile they make Richard, the fake believer, feel God's grace, which has been never felt and which inspires him to confess, though already too late to change anything, in a mood of hating and abandoning himself. Therefore, the life of Richard III reflects how man in general, proud and ungovernable, lives his hasty and worthless life in front of God the perfect goodness and proves that true faith comes from one's introspection of his sinful nature. Though the introspection sometimes is only the last radiance of the setting sun (with Edmund in *King Lear* as another example), human nature defiled by sins attains the care of God, which suggests, as illustrated by Luther, that the will to repent, though rarely found, is a remarkable endowment of God's grace (Luther, 2005, p.526). The ability of the anti-heroes to introspect in Shakespeare's pure tragedies—Macbeth, Richard III, Edmund and Claudius—is like a shimmer of faith shedding on a dark and gloomy mire of unbelief, thus different from “saved by good works” advocated by Catholics, Shakespeare tends to believe the power of faith itself, in another word, faith is the precondition for the salvation while faith exerted justly assures man of salvation. Shakespeare seems then to have chosen a path between Roman Catholicism and Calvinistic Protestantism, a compromise of the principles of both, in that rather than contending the doomed fate of being predestined and being selected, he is more willing to call on laypeople to uphold their faith by means of exerting it justly based on their fair judgment of Free Will, which appears more practical for Englishmen to live their spiritual lives after the Reformation.

Compared with Richard III the sinful villain whose destruction is his own creation, the fall of Richard II should be attributed for the most part to his dereliction of duty as a monarch caused by his cognitive errors and character flaws. As a young king who is hard-hearted, wayward, strong-headed and opinionated, Richard refuses to accept corrections, keeps frequent changes in policy, and bleeds the people white with ruthless taxation while pushing them around. In his definition, the divine Free Will is the force that crowns him as “born to command” (*Richard II*, 1.1.195). For instance, with just a “breath of kings” (*Richard II*, 1.3.215), Richard commutes Bolingbroke's sentence to six years from ten years, and at the same time, with a groundless word “never to return” (*Richard II*, 1.3.152), Mowbray, the other party of the duel, is banished for life unfairly. The reason why Richard

indulges in playing politics is his ignorance of his own finiteness, in addition to lack of piety and awe of God, as remarked by Duke of York, uncle of Richard, “Where will doth munity with wit’s regard. (*Richard II*, 2.1.28)” Accordingly, Richard’s tragedy is predictable. His sin roots in his pride, as defined by Augustine, the beginning of evil will (Augustine, 2010, p.14, 13), or the will oriented to man himself. While Richard III betrays God in pursuit of worldly things, Richard II turns away from God by concentrating the will on himself, thus he exists simply for himself; his existence becomes one with deficiency and he turns a fallen man.

The cause of both angel and man is pride, which results in all sins. A proud man loses faith and gets enmeshed in sins, let alone exerting faith justly. Othello, the proud Moor, as if processed by a devil, walks right into the trap set by Iago and brutally smothers innocent Desdemona to death; after the truth is revealed, with his sense resuming, he commits suicide with a dagger in sorrow, agony and repentance. He dies for love and atonement, or, suicide is his only choice and most aristocratic way to end his life, for a proud heart like Othello, he will not accept the fate of being on trial and convicted by others. Then Othello the Christian resembles Adam before his fall in that he misjudges God and himself out of credulity (Iago-Eve) and pride (self-centeredness – self-elevation), in another word, misinterprets the precondition of the endowment of Free Will: love God and do good. Therefore, Othello, like Adam, loses his Eden of eternal happiness God has put him in and falls into the mortal world, consciously suffering the eternal curse:

“Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire! (*Othello*,
5.2.276-279)”

So all sins occur when Free Will is orientated to the creatures, including angels, men and other physical and spiritual creations. As man loves the creatures more than God, he betrays God while his faith endowed by the grace strays from the right path and turns less pure, firm and devoted. Man thus loses eternally the hope of being saved. Then, how can man, indecisive as wandering between belief and disbelief, continue to seek the guidance of the grace of God by resisting the temptation of evils? Shakespeare disagrees on Double Predestinations of Calvin for he tends to admit man’s capability of saving himself. As suggested in *Hamlet* full of Christian metaphors, Ophelia and Hamlet fulfill the self-redemption through suspicious drowning and suicidal duel, which seems to be led to the same ultimate destination, but the difference lies in their contrasting states of mind, that is, Ophelia, delirious and faint, is not worth a Christian’s burial as she “willfully seeks her own

salvation” (*Hamlet*, 5.1.2) while well-prepared, Hamlet is composed of embracing his end as exclaimed by him before the duel: “There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. (*Hamlet*, 5.2.232-236)” Since Hamlet willfully seeks the death with a clear knowledge of man’s mortality and finiteness, with his worldly life put to an end, his clarified will is liberated for Free Will of those who are humble and self-conscious is the will not in bondage. The remark “let be” said twice by Hamlet to Horatio in the last scene of the play shows his indifference to almost all worldly things—throne, honor, love, life—and his calmness to face the necessity and fairness of death, therefore, Hamlet has spiritually fulfilled his prayer and confession before dying with his will totally under the jurisdiction of eternity and God the supreme good. In the famous soliloquy of “to be or not to be”, the hesitation of Hamlet is displayed as to whether or not he should accomplish the mission of avenging his father by violating the spiritual norms of a Christian, hence the delay of his suicide and revenge for his fear of the dream after dying, or, for his lack of judgment of the belongingness of man’s Free Will after the destruction of his earthly life. The lack is rooted in the insufficiency of firmness of man’s faith. Thus man is saved by grace through faith that works well so far as Shakespeare and other rationalistic Humanists are concerned while salvation by good works is just a loosely grounded, or even fallacious, consolation.

In Shakespeare’s pure tragedies, whatever background each of them is set: heretic Rome, mediaeval Scotland, or Christianized England, Venice and Cyprus, it is the universal, eternal human nature, or the Elizabethan age he lived and wrote that the playwright is concerned about and endeavors to portray. A solid national strength though England had at the second half of the 16th century, it saw a lack of firm and conformed faith deeply-rooted in people’s mind after undergoing a series of religious transformation, reform and oppression of nearly 40 years, despite its glorious military achievements, booming economy and stable social order under the highly centralized leadership of Queen Elizabeth. Except the “awakened minority”, most Englishmen could not define accurately their faith among Catholicism, Protestantism and Anglicanism though they were compelled to participate in the rituals of the Church of England. Then the Christian identity of Shakespeare, as one of these undecided citizens, has remained obscure in addition to the limited knowledge of his life. Fortunately, his works survive and speak for him. Exemplified by his pure tragedies that blend serious ultimate concerns and mature dramatic techniques, an anti-Calvinistic tendency is perceived with the fates of the heroes interpreted from the perspective of Free Will, that is, an emphasized confidence in cooperating with the grace of God and a partial, even total negation of Double Predestinations. However, as to the motif of “will vs.

fate" revealed in the literary creation from time of ancient Greece to the Renaissance, and the possibility for man to pursue spiritual immortality, there still exists doubts in the religious thoughts of Shakespeare, reflected in particular in the self-contradictory expressions of his pure tragedies. The question, which puzzled Aeschylus and Sophocles, still remains baffling to Thomas Marlowe, Ben Johnson and Shakespeare.

Thus he exclaims satirically in the famous "play within play" with the mouth of Player King:

"Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices till are overthrown,
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of your own:
(*Hamlet*, 3.2.223-225)"...

Deeply affected, we often muse on the mishaps of the heroes struggling in all inscrutable forces and uncontrolled sufferings. Based on incomprehensible grace of God and unpredictable Providence, God's select and salvation is found the most puzzling ultimate mystery, which proves a question so challenging that it goes beyond the capability of Shakespeare, lost from time to time between the propaganda of Catholic teaching and of Anglican teaching, to judge and settle demonstrably. With an intention to add vagueness to the dramatic interpretation of his spiritual world, or, simply because he has aged and experienced more, the devoutness of Shakespeare as a Christian in his late years becomes more limited especially when he begins to purposefully and skillfully confuse his earthly world and spiritual world in the writing of his plays. In view of his suspicion of the submissiveness of man's will to God's will, palpable or veiled, we are inclined to Shakespeare's belief in man's freedom and ability to

exert and judge his will, hence, in contrast with Luther's argument on the bondage of human will, it is the will not in bondage that the heroes in his tragedies are portrayed to highlight.

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