

## Some Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy

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The following papers treat different aspects of Shakespearean tragedy: the former is concerned with the interplay of fate and choice in *Julius Caesar* and the latter with the Aristotelian idea of "hamartia" in *King Lear*.

### I. Fate and Choice in *Julius Caesar*

The interplay of fate and choice is clearly presented in *Julius Caesar*. In Shakespeare's time, common people believed in the idea of fate—the stars predict and influence the future of a man's fortune. Shakespeare's application of astronomical prediction is an effective device in this play. The main figures are surrounded with superstitions and omens. The death of Caesar and the confusion which follows are prefigured in the long list of ill omens. The first evil omen comes from the Soothsayer: "Beware the ides of March" (I. ii. 18). Caesar does not listen to him: "He is a dreamer, let us leave him" (I. ii. 24). But the audience is prepared, by the cry of the Soothsayer, for some tragic incident to happen.

Next there are natural omens to be considered. In the first act, thunder and lightning are premonitions of the commotion of Rome.

Either there is a civil strife in heaven,  
Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,  
Incenses them to send destruction.

(I. iii. 11-3)

Casca continues to describe the ominous situation. Near the Capitol he met a lion who stared at him. On the street there huddled

together "a hundred ghastly women,/Transformed with their fear,  
who swore they saw/Men, all in fire, walk up and down the streets"  
(I. iii. 23-25). An owl, the bird of night, shrieks in broad daylight.

And yesterday the bird of night did sit  
Even at noon-day upon the market-place,  
Hooting and shrieking. When these prodigies  
Do so conjointly meet, let not men say,  
"These are their reasons, they are natural;"  
For I believe they are portentous things  
Unto the climate that they point upon.

(I. iii. 26-33.)

These prodigies are interpreted differently by various people. Casca is merely in fear and wonder. Cassius, however, thinks that all these strange happenings are "instruments of fear and warning/Unto some monstrous state"(I. iii. 70-1). For Cassius, Caesar is the cause of this fear. At this moment he rejects the idea of fate.

Men at some time are masters of their fates :  
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

(II. i. 51-2)

Cassius chooses to put an end to his fear. Rebellion germinates. Cassius attempts to seduce Brutus to his party. Brutus accepts false omens in the letter thrown at his window :

"Shall Rome, & c." Thus must I piece it out :  
Shall Rome stand under one man's awe ?

(II. i. 51-2)

And he chooses to join the conspiracy. Neither Brutus nor Cassius has enough evidence that Caesar is a tyrant. It is their fear of an imagined tyrant Caesar that makes them choose to assassinate him.

Cassius is doubtful whether Caesar will come forth to the Capitol

on the ides of March, for Caesar is “superstitious grown of late,/ Quite from the main opinion he held once/Of fantasy, of dreams, and ceremonies”(II. i. 195-7). Indeed Caesar consults the advice of the augurers before deciding to go to the Capitol. The augurers advise Caesar not to go forth today. Besides, Calpurnia dreamt an ominous dream the previous night.

When beggars die, there are no comets seen ;  
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.

(II. ii. 30-1)

She pleads Caesar not to go forth. She warns him that astrological signs are ill-forebodings. Her dream prefigures what is to happen in a very near future.

Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds  
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,  
Which drizzle blood upon the Capitol:  
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,  
Horses did neigh and dying men did groan,  
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.

(II. ii. 19-24)

Caesar wavers and is persuaded by Calpurnia and decides to stay at home. However, when Decius Brutus offers a good interpretation of Calpurnia's dream, Caesar chooses to go forth.

How foolish do your fears seem now, Calpurnia!  
I am ashamed I did yield to them.  
Give me my robe, for I will go.

(II. ii. 105-7)

Fate is on the side of the conspirators! On the way to the Capitol, Caesar speaks to the Soothsayer triumphantly: “The ides of March are come”(III. i. 1). He answers ominously: “Ay Caesar, but not gone”(III. i. 2). Then Caesar rejects the suit of Artemidorus on a

commendable reason: "What touches us ourselfe shall be last served" (III. i. 8). But this rejection is fatal to mighty Caesar. The audience remembers the warning of Artemidorus.

If thou read this, O Caesar, thou mayst live:  
If not, the Fates with traitors do contrive.

(II. iii. 14-5)

Caesar is blind to the reality of coming conspiracy. His pride dulls his perception of imminent assassination. It is ironic when he boastfully affirms:

I am constant as the Northern Star,  
Of whose true-fixed and resting quality  
There is no fellow in the firmament.

(III. i. 60-2)

The conspirators succeed in stabbing Caesar to death. It is significant that Brutus directly speaks to fate just after the assassination.

Fates, we will know your pleasures:  
That we shall die, we know; 'tis but the time,  
And drawing days out, that men stand upon.

(III. i. 98-100)

Though Brutus slew his best friend for the good of Rome, he seems to fear the act of assassination and its consequence.

The wheel of fortune turns around in Antony's speech in the Forum. Fate is now on the side of Antony, Lepidus and Octavius. Octavius and Lepidus have come back to Rome in good time for Antony.

He comes upon a wish. Fortune is merry,  
And in this mood will give us anything.

(III. ii. 269-70)

Romans in the Forum are instigated to mutiny. The act of revenge

is let loose and ruthless. Mischief is afoot on the street and the innocent victim of this Mischief is the poet Cinna. He is led to walk out on the street against his will.

I dreamt tonight that I did feast with Caesar,  
 And things unluckily charge my fantasy.  
 I have no will to wander forth of doors,  
 Yet something leads me forth.

(III. iii. 1-4)

Fate, something beyond his power, led the poet Cinna to his grim death. Cinna's death is absurd and irrational.

Though Caesar is dead, his Spirit influences Brutus who accepts the true portent of Caesar's ghost. When Caesar's ghost vanishes, Brutus says :

Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.  
 Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

(IV. iii. 286-7)

Brutus does not question the existence of the ghost. And he chooses to fight at Philippi as if he were under the ghost's spell: "Why, I will see thee at Philippi then" (IV. iii. 285). Even Cassius seems to change his opinions about fate.

You know that I held Epicurus strong,  
 And his opinion; now I challenge my mind,  
 And partly credit things that do presage.

(V. i. 76-8)

This attitude is a big change from his defying the stars in the beginning. Cassius now seems to believe in ill omens and the idea of fate.

... ravens, crows, and kites  
 Fly o'er our heads and downward look on us

As we were sickly prey: their shadows seem  
 A canopy most fatal, under which  
 Our army lies, ready to give up the ghost.

(V. i. 84-8)

Cassius and Brutus choose to kill themselves when they recognize that they are preys to the unfortunate fates. Thus the interplay of fate and choice has manifested a full circle of events.

## II. Aristotelian "Hamartia" and King Lear

There seems to be an apparent difficulty in attempting to apply the Aristotelian concept of "hamartia" to Shakespearean tragedy. The reason is that the meaning of this concept is ambiguous. In discussing a perfect tragedy in Chapter XIII of *Poetics*, Aristotle rejects three kinds of plot. These are: a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity, which merely shocks the audience; a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity, which is totally alien to the spirit of tragedy; and the downfall of the utter villain, which inspires neither pity nor fear. Tragedy should imitate actions which excite pity and fear. Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune and fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. It follows that, "there remains, then, the character between these two extremes, — that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous..." (J. H. Smith & E. W. Parks ed., *The Great Critics*, Third ed., New York, 1967, p.41). "Hamartia" is here translated as some error or frailty. This indicates the responsibility of the tragic hero for his misfortune and downfall. The "hamartia" means a human fault in its broadest sense and "this 'hamartia,' often called the 'tragic flaw,' may be caused by bad judgment, bad character, inherited weakness, or any of several other possible causes of error" (W. H. Thrall, A. Hibbard & C. H. Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, New York, 1960,

p.217). Thus the “hamartia” is a choice made by the tragic hero or his ignorance; “it must, however, express itself through a definite action, or failure to perform a definite action” (*Ibid*). So “hamartia” includes such notions as errors in choice of action, mistakes in judgment and tragic frailty in character.

Let us, then, apply this concept of “hamartia” to King Lear. Lear is “highly renowned and prosperous”; he is the King of Britain and has apparently enjoyed a life of prosperous sovereignty. He is neither a saint nor a villain; in other words, he is “not eminently good and just.” He has apparently human frailties and shares a common humanity with ourselves. In the first scene of the play, we are aware of Lear’s “hamartia,” his errors, mistakes in judgment and weakness in character. Lear seems to invite tragedy by three errors: he mistakes the nature of kingship; he establishes a wrong method for evaluating love; and he misinterprets the value of certain statements about love. Lear announces his “darker purpose” in the beginning of the play. In his old age, Lear chooses to give up the duties and cares of kingship. Thus the play begins with the division of the kingdom. Lear does not see the obvious dangers of this action. After a lifetime of autocratic power, Lear cannot imagine a world in which he would no longer be deferred to as a king. He does not know the horror of misused political power and authority. Once the authority in the kingdom is split into two, it is foolish and vain to assert that, “Only we shall retain/The name and all th’ addition to a king”(I. i. 135-36). This lack of insight or error in seeing the reality can be considered as his “hamartia.” He made a wrong choice of action. In dividing the kingdom among his three daughters, Lear establishes a method of evaluating their love by mere protestations of love: “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?”(I. i. 52). The whole tragedy of Lear springs from this strange and irrational love-test. This love-contest seems too transparently wrong, even if Lear was in his dotage. This is his second

error in this scene. The old king is easily flattered by the answers of the false Goneril and Regan. In comparison, Cordelia is true and honest in her reply regarding her love. Nevertheless, Lear becomes angry at Cordelia's answer: "I love your Majesty/According to my bond; no more nor less"(I. i. 92-3). Lear misinterprets this reply as an unloving statement. Here is his mistake in judgment. We see no adequate reasons for his fury. Lear banishes his joy in his wrath: "Let pride, which she calls plainness marry her"(I. i. 129). A jet of passion is let loose. Lear condemns Cordelia to brutal exile. He even banishes his faithful Earl of Kent, who protested against Lear's monstrous action. This unrestrained anger of Lear seems to be caused by his "hamartia," the weakness of not being able to control his fury or wrath. Irrational rage devours the whole body of the king. His judgment is completely out of joint.

Thus Lear's "hamartia" is the cause of his downfall. Reversal of fortune takes place. Lear's abdication has left him nothing but the shadow of his former self of the king and the father. The natural bond between father and daughter is cracked. The king-subject relationship is upturned. Here is the reversal of the true family relationship and of the normal king-subject relationship. From this turning of his fortune, Lear has to undergo a series of tortures: Goneril checks him like a babe, Regan treats him as a stranger and Cornwall proves a tyrant to him. Lear is not provided with food nor clothing. He has no shelter and has to wander into the storm. He finally succumbs to madness in the storm. In madness, Lear recognizes his faults and sees the true nature of his daughters. He identifies himself with the poor, the base and the naked and he finds himself no more than a mere human being. He recognizes himself as "a foolish and fond old man"(IV. vii. 60), and he finds true love in Cordelia. But does Lear deserve this suffering? His misfortune seems unmerited. We feel pity when Lear cries, "I am a man/More sinned against than sinning"(III. ii. 58-9). His suffering is too cruel.



Unmerited misfortune culminates in old Lear's appearing on the stage with the innocent Cordelia dead in his arms. His poor, cracked heart bursts on the rack of this tough world. Though Lear's "hamartia" is great, his misfortune is much greater. His tragedy excites pity and fear in the audience. In this way the Aristotelian concept of "hamartia" may be applicable in the explication of Lear's character and his misfortune.