

The Purgation Of The Hero In Shakespearean Tragedy

Paul Epstein
pde7229@okway.okstate.edu

The career of the hero in the great tragedies of Shakespeare reveals to the audience not only the limits of a self-assertion that would make itself master of an earthly realm that includes the state, family, and private friendships, but also the utter dependence on a primary Good of these institutions and any individual who would live rightly through them. The hero begins by attempting to make himself master of this realm through one of the great subjective passions, love, honour, ambition, revenge or the like; various sub-plots trace the same theme, although less comprehensively. The failure of this attempt in the hero and lesser characters then shows the dependence of the individual and of nature on a primary Good. Then the latter part of the play shows the hero or other characters making the great institutions actual or being destroyed in their incapacity to do this. Finally the death of the central characters indicates that only the transition from these instantiations of the Good to the Good is adequate to describe human individuality.

All the great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, begin with the hero's attempt to make himself the measure of his political and social world. This occurs with the greatest clarity in *King Lear*, where the King proposes to divide his kingdom amongst his daughters, in accord with their several expressions of love to himself. Macbeth's ambition leads him to kill the reigning King Malcolm and govern in his stead. Othello has such confidence in his virtue and position that he can venture to marry the daughter of a Venetian aristocrat. Hamlet, disgusted at his mother's hasty remarriage, hopes to flee Denmark, to enjoy the philosophic isolation and independence of Wittenberg. Whether it be love, ambition, honour or melancholy, each hero wishes to live through a subjective passion of his own.

This then reaches a certain completion. The result of King Lear's giving away his kingdom is his daughters' expelling him from home, into the storm. Hamlet contemplates taking his own life in the "to be or not to be" speech. Having killed his wife, Othello imagines the Last Judgement and his damnation. Macbeth, after having shed much innocent blood, realizes that a rule founded on the predictions of witches can have no stability.

In each play, when the hero has seen the failure of his subjective passion, the nature of the universal Good, upon which all goods, natural and human depend, begins to appear. Hamlet fears the punishment of God and gives up thoughts of suicide. Lear's madness and his buffeting by the storm show that a ruling reason lies not in him but

above. Othello sees that God as Judge is the measure of human behaviour, not his own love and honour. As Macbeth begins to fall, the rightful king and his supporters understand the providential ordering of the state. After this showing of the hero's dependence on a universal and stable Good, comes the hero's participation in this good, in a variety of forms. These forms range from a knowledge of the human dependence on the divine for felicity, to proper participation in the several communities of the state, family, and friendship. Thus Hamlet comes to know "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will. "(5.2.10-11) He exchanges forgiveness with Laertes, kills the corrupt king, gives his vote to Fortinbras as the new king, and prevents Horatio from committing suicide. For his part, Lear realizes that he is not the absolute fount of Justice but that this belongs properly only to the gods. Thus he can acknowledge, in his journey from madness to restored kingship, that he has not cared properly for the poor committed to his kingly care, that he must ask his daughter's forgiveness. Even when he has killed Cordelia's murderer and shown himself both a true father and true King, he experiences the finitude of these relationships, as death elevates him to their true source.

Othello rights his relation somewhat to the state when he kills himself; he recalls a time when he had killed an enemy of the state who had insulted a Venetian in Aleppo, and he says that in killing himself he repeats this earlier act. He can no longer live in the institutions of the Venetian state, and in his own act he acknowledges this and makes it real. Macbeth's defeat and the victory of the rightful heir to the throne accomplish together what was shown in the other plays through the hero alone. The stages are these: Macbeth realizes the falsity of the Weird Sisters and is thrown back only on his own self-assertiveness. This self-reliance proves deficient against the actions of those who know themselves as under a divine law and acting as God's vice-regents; thus Macduff, fighting for the true king, kills Macbeth in single combat and restores Malcolm to the throne.

Although each of the four tragedies has elements of the general pattern lacking in the others, *King Lear* most clearly exemplifies it. The King himself destroys his own kingship, and the remainder of the play shows the restoration of that kingship in him. Therefore, a consideration of this play will be the centre of this article, and the other plays will be treated less extensively, the main pattern having already been shown in *King Lear*.

While only the analysis below can show the adequacy of the general outline of the plays, two preliminary considerations can also illuminate the reasonableness of the proposed pattern. First, a comparison with the Tragedy of Sophocles can bring the salient points of Shakespearean Tragedy into sharper relief. Second, the deficiencies of certain prominent views of each play can also indicate how the pattern proposed is their necessary correction, a discussion which will precede the analysis of each play.

Like the Tragedy of Shakespeare, the Tragedy of Sophocles shows a discovery of the Good through the career of a tragic hero or of tragic heroes. In Sophocles, however, this collision can occur only through a certain division in Greek religion whereby the family and the gods whom it incarnates and the state together with the gods who underlie it are both deserving of equal respect, both civically and religiously. Tragedy shows through

human characters the collision between these equal realities, and only through this appears the unified Good of which the collision represents the division. Thus a Sophoclean tragedy can often have two equal heroes, as in *Antigone* both Creon and Antigone are equally necessary to the action. Even in the most far-reaching of Sophoclean dramas, *Oedipus at Colonus*, this radical unification occurs only with the death of Oedipus and at the end of the drama. The hero has been struggling with his family and state in the course of the play. At the end of the drama, when Oedipus is called to the gods, Theseus is seen to reverence both the gods above and the gods below in one prayer. Thus the spectator sees the radical unity of the gods and a unity of human ends prior to the division between State and Family.

Greek Tragedy, then, begins from a world where polytheism is assumed in religion, and an equality between family and state in the civic sphere. Shakespearean Tragedy, on the other hand, begins with an assumed monotheism in religion and a sovereignty beginning to be unified in the king; and for this reason, one main hero bears the central action.

An examination of some of the views held about *King Lear* will help to indicate the reasonableness of the view proposed here. Three views are of interest here: (1) that the play presents aspects of transcendent experience, (2) that the play reveals a non-transcendent but triumphant humanity, and (3) that the play subverts the genre of tragedy by offering a promise of fulfilment and yet delivering the opposite.

Until thirty years ago it was not uncommon for critics to find in the play a presentation of a transcendent humanity.¹ This view rightly saw the attainment of an eternal human individuality as essential to the drama. However, such a view does not ground this individuality either in an absolute good or in the kingship and other institutions. The King, however, both begins and ends his career as king and father. Only when he acknowledges the "justicers" above can he discover his true individuality.

In reaction to this view arose one that could find no transcendent humanity but only a humanity that triumphed in its very endurance of suffering.² This view reasonably sees the terrible loss suffered by both Cordelia and Lear. But it has two main limits. It cannot fully recognize the positive events just before the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, the fact that they die reconciled, and that Lear dies only after he has avenged his daughter's death and also received his kingdom back. Further, this view treats death only as a catastrophe and cannot see in it the rising to a deeper existence.

A contemporary view argues that *King Lear* designedly moves from "the ordered, ritually stylized, word-dominated world of its opening scene... and subtracts from it

¹ e.g. Harold C. Goddard, *King Lear in Modern Critical Interpretations King Lear*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), pp. 9-43, taken from *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, vol. 2. (University of Chicago Press, 1951)

² Such views are discussed by Jonathan Dollimore in *King Lear and Essentialist Humanism*, *Modern Critical Interpretations King Lear*, pp.73-76, taken from his *Radical Tragedy: Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Harvester Press, 1984)

towards nature as the chaotic immediate."³ The beginning of the play had implied, like its source *King Lear* "a just and satisfying conclusion."⁴ Instead we have the deaths of Lear and Cordelia at the end, returning us to the world of unordered nature. This view rightly presents a movement towards nature as essential to the play. However, it wrongly makes this the whole of the play, and not its first part. After *King Lear* has been exposed to the storm, he begins his return out of it by acknowledging the justicers above (3.6.56). Further, the deaths of Lear and Cordelia are only partially an assertion of mere nature and immediacy. Coming as they do after the reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia, they show not that this reconciliation is false but that in this world the relation between father and daughter is subject to contingency and ruin. Death is rather the limit of the earthly and the moment of ascent to the transcendent.

The pattern of the play proposed above can thus find an important truth in these widely different views. It can agree with the first that the play is a search for a transcendent human nature. With the second and third views, it can affirm the importance of encountering nature, suffering and death. The proposed view, however, also recognizes that the political and institutional roles of the main characters are essential, which none of the views discussed could do. Let us look then at *King Lear* in greater detail.

King Lear

At the beginning of the play we have the marvellous spectacle of a king who overthrows his own kingdom. He has resolved to "retire" from being King, while retaining the title; he proposes to divide the kingdom amongst his three daughters in accord with their declarations of their love for him. Lear thereby treats the kingdom as private property; while he keeps the property within the family, he does not leave it to his daughters according to an objective family bond, but he makes their stated regard for him the measure of what he owes them. Thus Lear makes both the political order and the family order dependent on his own private measure.

His daughters' reaction to Lear's decree marks both the further downfall of the kingdom and the beginning, in principle, of the undoing of that downfall. The first is the work of Goneril and Regan, the second that of his most beloved daughter, Cordelia. The two daughters cynically acquiesce in their father's request, and declare their love for him in terms perhaps better reserved for the love of an absolute Good. They receive their apportioned shares of the kingdom, thereby aiding their father in accomplishing his perverse plan. Cordelia, however, refuses to state that she loves her father above the bond that unites her to him. She loves him as a father, but asks what love her sisters have for their husbands if they love their father so entirely. As a result of her refusal her father deprives her of her share of the kingdom and declares that she is not his daughter.

³ James L. Calderwood, *Creative Uncreation, in King Lear, Modern Critical Interpretations King Lear*, pp.121 -137, from *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no.1.

⁴ *op. cit.*, p.135.

Cordelia's taking her stand on the objective bond between herself and her father, and her adhering to that despite her father's action, marks not only her real alienation from her father, but her relation to a universal measure more stable than the kingly passion of her father. The discovery of this measure is the *telos* underlying the whole action; Cordelia is simply the first to arrive at this standpoint. She has attained it, however, only as a familial relation. The path by which Lear himself attains it politically and as a king determines the nature of the whole drama. His plan for dividing the kingdom according to his private measure is the beginning of the movement toward this end for all the characters.

Kent experiences an analogous alienation from the King and adheres to him in the same way that Cordelia does. When he tells Lear that the division of the kingdom and disinheritance of Cordelia are great errors, Lear banishes him from the kingdom. Then, just as Cordelia adheres to her father according to the objective bond of the family, Kent adheres to the King according to the objective bond that ties a subject to his sovereign, and a nobleman to his lord.

Thus the King and the two daughters' obedience to his perverse command make both the political order and the familial order dependent on subjective passion. Against this, both Cordelia and Kent, having suffered Lear's disowning of them, adhere rather to the objective bond that unites them to respectively father and king. This brings into view what Kantorowicz has called in another context, the King's two bodies, both the empirical King, who blusters, and disowns, and divides the kingdom against itself, and the King's political body, which is unchangeable, to which Cordelia and Kent both adhere. Only the whole action of the drama can re-unite these two bodies.

A sub-plot, introduced at the beginning of the play, just before the action above described, illustrates the same theme. The duke of Gloucester introduces his illegitimate son Edmund, speaking lightly of his being born out-of-wedlock, to the Earl of Kent. Gloucester mentions also a legitimate son, Edgar, but in such a manner as to imply that the difference between legitimacy and illegitimacy is primarily customary; Gloucester moreover, does not acknowledge any guilt or sin in his having begotten an illegitimate son. Like Lear, he is divided within himself between the bond of fatherhood and his own modification of that bond in a subjective and passionate way. Unlike Lear who has knowingly and deliberately divided the kingdom, Gloucester has been moved only by his passions to divide his being a father into legitimate and illegitimate parts. The further reaction of his two sons is not indicated at this stage of the action.

The further action of the main plot now shows Cordelia facing her two suitors, the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France, who had both come expecting that she would have a third of a kingdom as her marriage portion. Burgundy cannot imagine her as a wife without her dowry, while this very condition moves France to love and an offer of marriage. France has thus embarked on the highest form of friendship, one based neither on utility nor pleasure but a knowledge of the good present in the friend.

The first scene of *King Lear* thus sets forth both in the central action, that of Lear, and in the sub-plot revolving around the Duke of Gloucester, the essential collision of the

play between the institutions of the state and family, on the one hand, and subjective appropriation of these on the other. The King does not understand the nature of a kingdom and thus acts as if he were the true centre of that kingdom. While as sovereign he is indeed that centre, he acts as if he were king according to his private personality. Lear acts in relation to the family in a similar way; he mistakes his patriarchal autocracy for the true headship of a family. As a father and the head of an aristocratic house, Gloucester speaks slightly of the difference between a legitimate and illegitimate child; he thereby disregards the nature of the family and looks rather to his own headship.

In the next scene, the development of the sub-plot is presented. Edmund announces that Nature is his goddess, and he inveighs against the distinction that makes him a bastard. While rejecting a distinction that civilization necessarily makes between a natural and a legal family, he nevertheless thinks himself entitled to his father's property, the inheritance of which also belongs to civilization and not to nature. Not conscious of this contradiction, he decides to embark on a plan to estrange his legitimate brother from their common father. To this end, he lets his father find him reading a forged letter from Edgar, in which he asks Edmund to join him in parricide, as a means swifter than nature by which they can share his lands. Gloucester, without thinking, grows enraged at Edgar; to complete his plot, Edmund, when Gloucester has left and Edgar appeared, tells the latter that Gloucester is angry at him and advises him to stay at a distance from him. Edgar accepts this advice without doubting its sincerity.

The first two scenes have shown us the central characters and their place in the collision between institutions and the subjective passions that animate the dramatic action. Lear experiences this collision most comprehensively, since he proposes to divide the kingdom amongst his children according to a private measure. Goneril and Regan acquiesce in this plan by giving fraudulent speeches of love. Edmund has his own plan to make Nature the measure of his relation to the social order as it defines inheritance. Gloucester has allowed his passions to define his fatherhood; he feels no guilt in having done so. Cordelia, Kent, the King of France and Edgar adhere to objective institutional bonds when confronted by the attempts of others to exercise their subjective passions. Cordelia adheres to her father, Kent to the King, France to marriage, and Edgar to the ties that bind him to his father and brother.

The consequences of this collision hereinafter determine the dramatic action as a whole. Since the collision is most comprehensive in Lear, his career determines the action. He experiences first the self-expulsion from civilization that results from his assertion of his subjective passion. Gradually, thereafter, he returns to a knowledge of kingship dependent on a knowledge of the absolute Good. The other characters experience their own collisions within the context of Lear's total career. Some move like him to a recovery of an objective order. Others, such as Cordelia, who have begun with the assertion of an objective bond, move toward the discovery of a subjective passion.

The next scene (1.3) shows how ill Lear has decided in trying to maintain the title of a king while planning to live first with one daughter, and then another. In Goneril's conversation with her steward, she shows that she is determined to be mistress in her own

household, while her account of the King's striking her gentleman in a dispute about his servant, the Fool, indicates that he is determined to rule as well. Goneril is determined to show less attention to her father, and more ominously, to his hundred knights; Lear had expressly stipulated that he would keep these, and his daughter here shows her disregard of that stipulation. Moreover, she would not at all be unhappy if he chose the only alternative to his current situation, removal to her sister's house.

This conflict between Lear and his daughter results from Goneril's criminal response to her father's monstrous contract. Having agreed to it in words, without the slightest regard to her father, but devoted only to what he can give her, she is now incapable of fulfilling it in fact. Unlike Cordelia and Kent, who answer Lear's wilfulness by serving what is objective and eternal in him, Goneril can answer her father's wilfulness only with her own. Just as her father has treated the kingdom as his property, she now treats what he has given to her as her own, and she treats her father as a tenant on it.

The scene immediately following (1.4) brings this sharp contrast into focus. Kent, in disguise, presents himself to Lear as his servant, telling the King that he can see authority in him. Lear accepts him, and even in the midst of Lear's decline into the savagery of nature, we see the re-formation of his kingdom. Kent, although banished, knows that he can serve the King in Lear despite his express commands. Lear finds in Kent not an hereditary supporter of the Throne, but a man whom he has consciously accepted.

After the appointment of Kent, the remainder of the fourth scene shows the developing contest between Lear and Goneril. After her steward Oswald has insulted Lear to his face as 'my lady's father,' the King and Kent treat him roughly. This incenses Goneril, who asks of Lear that he reduce his train of knights from one hundred to fifty and threatens that if Lear not do this himself, she will do it of her own motion. Lear, sensing that his daughter no longer treats him as a father, explodes. He speaks to her as if he does not know her and decides to leave, to stay instead with the woman he regards as still a true daughter, Regan. Sick at Goneril's ingratitude, he curses her and appeals to the goddess Nature that she not be allowed offspring. The fifth scene shows the confirmation of Lear's thoughts, as he sets out for Regan's residence.

Having surrendered the kingship, Lear has now almost totally deprived himself of fatherhood; first he has called Cordelia no child, and now Goneril. He has completed much of the journey toward that isolation in the world of unadorned Nature, which alone can mark his turning-point. That Lear above should appeal to Nature as a goddess indicates also the direction he is headed in.

The second Act shows the continued disintegration of the bonds that unite the various characters. Through a ruse, Edmund persuades his father that Edgar, having suggested parricide, and enraged by his protestations, has wounded him; in fact, Edmund, with the recklessness of a criminal, has wounded himself. Gloucester, without any evidence other than the word of Edmund, has had Edgar banished and announces that he will have Edmund legitimized and made capable of inheriting. Thus Edmund's criminal plan seems on the verge of success.

Then Lear's alienation from his daughters becomes complete. The Duke of Cornwall has Kent put into the stocks for assailing Oswald, the steward of Goneril, and the dishonouring of Lear continues. Worse, when Lear appeals to Regan to receive him at her house instead of Goneril's, she rebuffs him and directs him instead to return there and ask her forgiveness. Lear's remonstrances lead only to a declaration from both daughters that they will receive him only with gladness but not one of his followers; they allege that he has not need of any of his followers. Thus they treat Lear not as king nor as father, but as a kind of nursing-home patient whom they feel bound by previous ties to care for.

When Regan informs Lear that he has no need of any attendant, he bursts forth in a speech that shows his sense of his condition:

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs
Man's life is cheap as beast's. (2.4.266-269)

While he realizes that he is on the brink of being thrust out of civilization, he had earlier said that he would prefer to live in the air than under the roof of an ungrateful daughter. Nature has begun to seem for him the solution to the complications of human relations.

The third act is the turning point for all the characters. Lear reaches the greatest alienation from his kingdom and begins to understand that dependence on an absolute Good that can alone restore him to kingship. Edmund's betrayal of his father makes him Earl of Gloucester in the new regime. Gloucester's adherence to the King leads to his blinding at the hands of this regime; he also learns that Edgar is his true son and Edmund his false. Edgar, while pretending to be mad, begins, through associating with Lear, to return out of his despair. The forces of France, Cordelia's husband, have landed in England to restore the King; Cordelia's love for her father has moved her to beseech her husband for him.

The situation of the King is of course central. At the very moment when Lear is least a king, when he invokes the storm to destroy the whole world, is also the beginning of the movement which will lead him to be "every inch a King." This turning occurs both in the external realm and in the soul of the King. Thus as the third act begins, Kent, still in disguise, relates to a gentleman belonging to the King that the two Dukes are divided, and that the forces of France, favourable to the King, have landed. The political structure that had earlier divided the kingdom is beginning to crumble.

When the King invokes the storm to utterly destroy the world, both nature and man, he has of course no thought of a return to kingship. Rather, the ingratitude of his daughters has brought him to the point where he wishes for the obliteration of nature and consciousness:

Blow, winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
 You sulfurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-carriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
 Crack nature's mold, all germens spill at once
 That makes ingrateful man! (3.2.1-9)

That this moment of nihilism is not final, however, but rather a turning-point for Lear is shown in two invocations that follow quickly upon this last. First he speaks to the elements as beings who while not owing him anything have joined with his ungrateful daughters to oppose him. Then he addresses the gods, who he says have caused the storm, and speaks of the storm as the means whereby they can find out malefactors. (3.2.49-51) His change of perspective here is significant. First, Lear regards the elements as supreme. Next he thinks of the elements and human action together as what govern. Then, however, he looks to the gods as the source of the storm and human action as subject to this judgement. He has thereby discovered the Good as the cause both of the sensible and intelligible worlds.

Shortly thereafter Lear says that his wits have begun to turn. He is beginning to be insane, because he has indeed lost the earthly and personal measure by which he has judged heretofore. He was King, and he had judged himself and his daughters by this relation to him. Now through his loss of that world, his assumption first of the primacy of nature, and then in the discovery of a Good which is the source both of nature and humanity, he has become radically disoriented. He must now ground the world he had earlier assumed to be self-sufficient in relation to the absolute Good he has discovered. Until he can do this, he is not in his right mind.

This wandering of mind shows itself in Lear's lack of fixity in his views. First, he reflects on his daughters' ingratitude (3.4.19-21), but he dismisses this as leading to madness. Then just before entering the hovel proposed to him as shelter, he considers the state of the poor, and his responsibility as king for this:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
 Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
 From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
 Too little cares of this! Take physic, pomp;
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
 And show the heavens more just. (3.4.28-36)

Here for the first time Lear brings himself, the natural world and human society under the absolute measure he has just discovered. The commonwealth, in its raising man above the

level of the beast through the development of nature's bounty, has an obligation to heaven to distribute some of that bounty to all its subjects.

Soon thereafter, however, upon meeting Edgar disguised as a madman out of Bedlam, he looks to nature as the measure of human equality. He calls Tom 'unaccommodated man' and in desperate sympathy with him, he begins to tear off his clothes. As united with Tom he can leave behind all the difficulties that a 'sophisticated' man such as himself suffers.

Both Gloucester and Kent attempt to persuade Lear that he should leave his current circumstances, and in doing so, the former expressly disobeys his master, the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany, together with their wives. Lear, however, will not leave unless accompanied by the disguised Edgar whom Lear calls a philosopher. Finally the two others allow Edgar to accompany them and thus gain Lear's acquiescence.

That Lear should call Tom a philosopher is in one way a proof of his madness, and in another of new insight. In his self-description, Tom has moved from having a position in society to his current situation as an outcast. Edgar has of course undergone a similar totality of experience. The man who has experienced both society and the natural world is the man capable of a general view of the whole, in brief, a philosopher. Lear recognizes in Tom-Edgar a soul-mate, just as he found a bond with the fool, who having no position in society at all, is capable of deep, if riddling, insight into it.

Gloucester has also, without knowing it, taken the first steps that will lead to his expulsion from society. Having depended on Edmund and the Dukes for protection from the alleged malefactions of Edgar, he now befriends the King despite their orders. The contradiction involved in looking to two sovereigns as the centre of the social order does not occur to the not altogether thoughtful mind of a man who commits fornication in a jolly spirit; the results of his imprudence will soon be brought home to him in a frightful manner.

When Lear and his friends have gone into the house on Gloucester's property, the King in his deepening madness decides to try his daughters Goneril and Regan. He selects Tom and the fool as the judges, and when Kent appears he makes him too part of the "commission." His madness, however, reveals Lear's beginning to develop into a true king. Even in a case that touches him so closely, he does not presume to try the case himself. He now imagines that an objective order of justice exists in this world, and he will rely on it. As before, his madness does not allow him to stay fixed on one subject, and he falls asleep. Gloucester, having heard a plot against Lear's life, arranges for the King to be carried away. Edgar, moved by the sufferings of the King which are similar yet deeper than his own, begins to take heart again.

As the King, both in himself and through his friends, moves toward restoration, Cornwall begins his ineluctable fall to destruction. In one scene, he both learns of the arrival of the forces of France and brutally punishes Gloucester for his alleged treason in helping Lear to escape despite express orders. It is of course a contradiction, not present

to Cornwall's consciousness, that he should punish someone for disloyalty to himself, while not showing even a shred of humanity to the real king.

He indulges his anger by blinding Gloucester in his own house despite the latter's plea reminding him that he is their host. The collapse of the political order is further shown in a servant's severe wounding of Cornwall, and the servant's death at the hand of his wife. This destruction of Cornwall is accompanied by Gloucester's reaching a turning-point. Although he has suffered terribly, he also learns of Edmund's treachery to him, and that Edgar has been abused. His repentance and prayer for Edgar's well-being are part of the same return to order as the beginnings of the restoration of the King.

After the third act's turning point, the fourth act shows the continuing restoration of those capable of it, and the further disintegration of others. Albany has now been awakened to his wife's cruelty; he openly denounces her as a fiend and hopes to avenge Gloucester. This latter, thrilled with remorse, and led by Edgar in disguise attempts suicide out of despair; when his attempted suicide leaves him still alive, he realizes that an acceptance of the finitude of this world is necessary to his well-being.

The King is gradually being restored to sanity, after his friends have moved him to Dover, where Cordelia and the French forces have landed. He has gained in insight from his experience; he feels such guilt for what he had done to Cordelia that initially he cannot meet her. When they first see each other, he describes their relation as that of a soul in bliss to one in hell. For Lear at this point, his relations to his daughter are regulated by the universal heavenly measure of virtue and not by any earthly tie. Cordelia, however, regards the tie that binds her to her father and king as decisive, and thus a profound disagreement divides them. When the King seeks to kneel to her, as a penitent to one whom he has harmed, she does not allow him. She looks to the universal reason present in a king; he thinks of himself as a man who has sinned against his daughter.

This disagreement is a transformation of the collision that divided them at the beginning of the play. There Lear wished to extract from his daughter a declaration of love beyond her bond. Now he wishes to express a love that in a certain way transcends the bond that unites them. His subjective spirit has been so purged of mere self-assertion that he can occupy a ground more radically comprehensive than his dutiful daughter. Cordelia too has advanced beyond her original position. Originally she has held to an emotionless duty and even when she has seen her father's madness, she hoped to restrain her passions. Her direct encounter with him has brought forth tears. "Be your tears wet?" (4.7.73) asks her father as he comforts her. Like her father, she has attained a fullness of being that she had lacked before.

The beginning of the disintegration of those who plan to displace the King shows itself in various marital discords. Goneril and Regan have both become infatuated with Edmund, and each intends to make him her lover. Edmund, having inspired this attraction, does nothing to dispel it and thus contributes to the destruction of marriage as

an institution. Moreover, Edgar intercepts a letter from Goneril to Edmund plotting Albany's death and Goneril's marriage to Edmund.

The fifth act shows the destruction of the forces opposed to the King, and the restoration of those attached to him. Mutual jealousies destroy Goneril and Regan. The remainder are restored to the various communities of family and state from which they had been alienated. For Lear, Cordelia, and Kent, this earthly restoration is insufficient, and their deaths, catastrophic from an earthly standpoint, mark a deeper return to the Good. The fifth act sees Albany still willing to fight but only because the King of France has joined the forces favourable to Lear. Nevertheless, before the decisive battle, he receives a letter from Edgar's own hand, exposing Edmund's and his wife's treachery. As if to confirm this, Edmund, in a soliloquy, indicates that contrary to Albany's will he intends to have Lear and Cordelia murdered after the battle; moreover, he has accepted the attentions of both Goneril and Regan, nor is he opposed to Goneril's marrying him by arranging the death of Albany.

The victory of Albany's forces begins the final catastrophe. Lear and Cordelia, though about to be led to prison, are ecstatic in their restored relation; Lear looks forward to their contemplative enjoyment as "God's spies." Edmund, however, has given orders for the murder of Cordelia. Albany charges Edmund with treason, and he declares that if no other champion arises to prove it, he will himself fight Edmund. The latter accepts the challenge, and the still-disguised Edgar enters to fight him. Their combat having resulted in Edmund's being mortally wounded, Edgar reveals himself. They exchange forgiveness, and Edgar declares to Edmund that the cause of his father's losing his eyes lies in his dalliance outside of marriage; his punishment thus shows the justice of the gods. Edgar then goes on to speak, however, of his recent reconciliation with his father, which brought at once joy and death to the old man.

Edmund, suffering remorse, now reveals his order for Cordelia's death, but it is too late to successfully countermand it. Lear, however, has killed the man who killed his daughter, and Albany now resigns the kingdom to the old King. Lear, having acted to avenge his daughter, and restored to kingship, can live no longer. Kent cannot accept the offer of the throne to Edgar and himself, and the latter is left to govern.

Each character experiences true individuality to the extent that he has contributed to the proper restoration of King Lear. Goneril and Regan cannot play a role here and so perish through their mutual jealousies; Edmund can wish to do good only when mortally wounded by Edgar. The King experiences this most comprehensively, and then Cordelia and Kent to the extent that they have adhered to Lear.

The King has experienced first his self-alienation from kingship and even humanity. Then he recovers them both as known to be dependent on an absolute Good. His new spirit allows him both to fulfil his office as king and father, and to know as well a deeper spirit that transcends station, as when he asks his daughter's forgiveness. His death, therefore, represents not simply the loss of earthly good, but the overcoming of the difference between family and state as earthly presences of the Good and the Good itself.

Cordelia's heart-breaking death is necessary according to a similar logic. She has always served the king and father in Lear despite his personal deviation from these stations. She has not been able to know the division within her father sufficiently, and in her death she experiences the contingency belonging to his rule, which is the difference between his station and his particularity.

Kent must refuse the office of governing. He has identified himself not with the Crown but with Lear insofar as he is king. To surrender that relation and himself become king is not possible for him; he must follow his master.(5.3.328) The office that Lear holds, the kingship, is in principle a definition of human individuality, uniting as it does the universal reason of the office with a particular person. The action shows first the division of these elements and then their re-unification. When Lear dies, he is not only "every inch a King" but every inch a man as well.

Hamlet

If we now turn to *Hamlet*, a look at some of the critics will show the need for a more comprehensive view. Three critics of *Hamlet* each touch on a different aspect of the play. One sees Hamlet as acting under God's Providence while another sees him as moved ultimately by evil impulses. A third sees a humanistic Hamlet, a man who learns to confront the world as it is.

The first view⁵ relies in large part on Act 5, where Hamlet says that there is a divinity which shapes our ends, and makes other similar observations. This view is of course accurate in seeing Hamlet as acting under providence. It does not properly understand how the whole dramatic action prepares Hamlet for this recognition. Hamlet must first lose confidence in himself, a process that ends with the speech, "to be or not to be." Nor does it see how Hamlet learns to act under providence through his relation to his mother and the King.

Another view⁶ sees Hamlet as acting wrongly when he finally kills the King, as acting under the influence of immediate impulse, and thus falling under the temptations of evil. In one way Hamlet does act under impulse to kill the King, after he has learned that the King has aimed at his life and accidentally taken his mother's. In another, this enables Hamlet, however, to finally unite thought and impulse properly. The King, whom he has earlier in Act 5 discovered to be a complete criminal, he can now legitimately kill. In so doing, he purges the kingdom of its cancer and thus dies in doing his political duty.

⁵ Bertram Joseph, *The Theme in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington.(Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J....., 1968) pp.93-103, taken from *Conscience and the King* (London: Chatto & Windus, Ltd., 1953).

⁶ Harold Goddard, *Hamlet: His Own Falstaff in Modern Critical Interpretations Hamlet* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp.11-28, taken from *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1951)

The humanist Hamlet⁷ discovers himself only in the graveyard scene in Act 5. Here he meets the mysteries of human life, that of evil, that of reality, that of human limitations. Now Hamlet "accepts the world as it is, the world as a duel, in which...evil holds the poisoned rapier and the poisoned chalice waits; and in which, if we win at all, it costs not less than everything."⁸ Thus Maynard Mack describes Hamlet before he confronts the King.

Mack is right that the confrontation with death is central to the play. Yet death is not simply the place of mysteries. Rather it shows the limits of a merely natural humanity. In the scenes that follow the graveyard scene, we see the transcendence of a natural humanity. We see the characters confronting the prospect of salvation and damnation, and we see Laertes exchanging forgiveness with Hamlet, though the latter has killed the former's father. Death is the portal to a deeper life, and a limit only to a natural life.

The view proposed here will show with the first critic that Hamlet indeed acts under the divine Providence. With the second critic it will show that not only does Hamlet act on impulse to kill the King but that he must be educated to join impulse to reason. With the third critic, the view proposed will show a Hamlet prepared to confront the real world, one defined by the bonds that unite him to his family and state.

In *Hamlet*, the title character confronts the usurpation of the kingship by his father's murderer and the consequent disintegration of all the forms of community that fall within it, family, marriage, and friendship. This leads initially to great despair and the contemplation of suicide. Only the fear of God prevents his doing this. Then through his acceptance of a divine order Hamlet gradually becomes capable of being the providential agent in the removal of the usurping king. He kills the King, gives his voice to the selection of a suitable replacement, and as he dies, his friend Horatio can say, "Good night sweet prince and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." While Hamlet cannot enjoy the order that he has restored, he returns to the absolute ground of that order.

The play begins with the indications of danger to the state both within and without. An invasion is feared, led by Fortinbras, nephew of the King of Norway, who wishes to regain lands earlier lost to Denmark. Internally, the ghost of the newly dead King walks the battlements at night, refusing to talk to anyone.

Prince Hamlet, son of the dead king and nephew to the new king, has sunk into melancholy. He is disgusted at the marriage of his mother to Claudius within two months of the old king's death, and when his friends have brought him to see the Ghost, he learns from his father, in private conversation, that Claudius has murdered him; the ghost implores Hamlet to avenge his death. Not only are the realms of state and family ruined for Hamlet. Polonius has ordered his daughter Ophelia to refuse all communication with him, and while the audience knows this as the cause of her sudden coldness, to Hamlet her sudden breaking-off of relation seems only to prove the caprice of women and the

⁷ Maynard Mack, *The World of Hamlet in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, pp.47-63, from *The Yale Review*, XL (1952).

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 63.

impossibility of stable marriage. Finally, after the King has sent his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on him, the ruin of all community seems complete.

Simultaneous with this is the arrival of a company of players. The ability of one of these actors to feel deep pity for Hecuba while he recites a speech from a play about the Trojan War causes Hamlet to despise himself. The actor can simulate deep emotion for a mythical character while he himself cannot summon up sufficient feeling to avenge a murder forcibly impressed upon his consciousness by the ghost of his father. Thinking about both his delay and the actors rouses him to the possibility of action. The ghost might be an appearance of the devil, and he must therefore test it. If he present a play depicting a murder similar to that of his father's, he can judge truly whether the current king have done it.

Now that he has a means to combat the evils confronting him, Hamlet must confront his total crisis. In the famous speech beginning "to be or not to be," Hamlet looks at the evils from every sphere of life that seem to make it intolerable; he asks whether it be nobler to oppose them or simply to remove oneself from this realm of woes. Only a fear of divine punishment after death dissuades him, he implies. (3.1.79-83). This is the turning point of the play. Now that he has reached this limit of his alienation Hamlet must find a kind of action compatible with the divine ground of all action. The remainder of the dramatic action shows his search for this kind of action, which he can attain only when he knows the necessity of cleansing Denmark both of its crimes and of the author of those crimes.

This development begins when Ophelia is sent by her father and the King to spy on Hamlet, to see if he is sane. He urges her to confine herself to a nunnery. This is the only way he can imagine that the changeability of women, especially as he has seen it in Ophelia, can be brought under the providential measure he has begun to make his own. Of course his advice to Ophelia is limited by his knowledge of Ophelia: he knows her mutability but not its cause.

This development continues in Hamlet's new relation to the King. In accord with his earlier plan, Hamlet presents a play that shows the murder of a king and the murderer's subsequent marriage with the king's wife; when Claudius disrupts the play, Hamlet concludes that the Ghost has spoken rightly and that the King is guilty. Although thoroughly convinced of this, Hamlet finds that it cannot lead to the revenge that the Ghost had demanded. After the play, although he is determined to kill the King, he comes upon him at prayer. The audience has just seen that the King cannot pray truly because he is not willing to give up the fruits of his crime, his throne and his wife. Hamlet thinks him, however, to be in a state of grace, and knows that he will not gain revenge by dispatching his uncle to heaven. His wrong view of the King's soul makes impossible for him action based on revenge.

Hamlet blunders again about the King during his interview with his mother in her apartments whither she has summoned him; Polonius has hidden behind an arras that he might hear their conversation. Gertrude misconceives Hamlet's way of talking and she

asks if he has come to murder her. Polonius cries out for help and Hamlet, mistaking him for the King, kills him. Hamlet repents when he discovers his error; he also says that God has appointed him to be their scourge and minister. Thus Hamlet knows both that he is God's agent and that he has erred in being so.

This movement towards ordering his actions to their divine origin also shows itself in the interview with his mother. 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, that are most important to him, with Ophelia, in relation to the King, and now with his mother, Hamlet has recovered from his earlier despair and moves toward action grounded in the only sure ground, the divine order.

As Hamlet moves toward concrete action, Claudius declines more and more into criminality. His turning-point occurred earlier when he attempted, and failed, to repent. His incapacity for action shows itself now both in his mania for indirectness and in his lack of justice. From fear of the mob, he determines to send Hamlet to England, rather than punishing him for his murder of Polonius. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are his guards, and they bear secret instructions to the King of England that Hamlet should be beheaded immediately.

As the King's criminality reaches closer to him, Hamlet becomes more capable of reasonable action. As he tells Horatio after his accidental escape from the guards and his return to Denmark, he discovered the orders that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were carrying and had their names inserted in the command directing immediate execution. He feels no remorse since he thinks that their unquestioning devotion to their job of spying for an unlawful king has reasonably brought their fate on them. Hamlet also sees in this attempt on his own life the final proof of the King's villainy; he realizes that he has a heaven-sent obligation to kill the king who "hath killed my king and whored my mother, Popped in between th'election and my hopes, Thrown out his angle for my proper life" (5.2.64-66).

The King for his part cannot respond directly to the return of Hamlet. Instead he makes a corrupt deal with the vengeful Laertes, who in defence of the family honour, is willing to kill Hamlet dishonestly in a duel. This pursuit of vengeance by Laertes highlights the development in Hamlet by which he has moved beyond it.

Ophelia's death seemingly by her own hand then sets the scene for Hamlet's ascent into immortality. Two humourous grave-diggers conclude that only her high birth allows her to be buried in Christian burial. Laertes imagines that family connection guarantees her salvation as well when he berates the priest for not granting her the full rights of Christian burial. Laertes's grief causes him to jump into the grave to declare a brother's love. Hamlet rightly thinks that the love he bore her as a potential husband exceeds this and rashly declares his own love to have been greater. An almost fight between the two spoils the burial service.

Hamlet, however, when he has accepted the King's invitation to duel with Laertes, follows his mother's advice that he be reconciled with Laertes. For the first time maternal authority and his own spirit agree. His affirmation of the objective bonds of institutions continues after the poison intended for Hamlet redounds on Laertes as well, and the drink poisoned by the King kills his mother rather than himself. Hamlet and a now repentant Laertes exchange expressions of forgiveness, and Hamlet, learning from Laertes the King's plot, finally kills him; he also pronounces the King to be damned. Hamlet then prevents Horatio from a wrongful suicide, to perform his final duty to his friend by telling his tale a-right. Hamlet gives his 'vote' to Fortinbras for the kingship and dies as Horatio says, "Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angel sing thee to thy rest." (5.2.361-362)

That this is not simply a pious hope is shown by Hamlet's having acted in accord with the divine providence in affirming the various institutions and friendships. He has cleansed the state of its usurping king and supported a valiant replacement. He can do so only in death, and Horatio's statement is a recognition of this. Only in leaving this world can Hamlet affirm its institutions. As in *King Lear* the hero finds his freedom in a career that includes his total alienation from the earthly kingdom, the discovery of an absolute ground of action, his acting in conformity with that ground and finally his death. Like Lear, Hamlet affirms the various bonds within the earthly kingdom as instantiations of that Good, and his death is the overcoming of the difference between the earthly kingdom and its source.

Unlike Lear, in *Hamlet* the disturber of the kingdom and its restorer are different. Claudius is a secret, not open, usurper of the Throne, and until the middle of the play, when he is seen at prayer, not even the audience can be sure. Hamlet's peculiar condition arises from his being a Prince confronting the actual possessor of the Throne.

Othello

We can begin to see that the career of Othello follows an analogous course, if we consider how the limits of certain views of Othello again help to indicate the need for a more comprehensive view. One of these views finds in the play the general limits of love. Another sees the play as representing the victory of a Venetian-Christian-Roman Othello over the Muslim Othello. A third view sees the play's centre psychologically, in Othello's hope to love Desdemona without committing adultery.

The first view finds in Othello "an acting out of the tragic implications in any love relationship."⁹ It is of course true that the instability of love is at the centre of Othello. However, the play cannot properly be seen as a treatment of love as its exclusive theme. In this play the treatment of love is inseparable from both that heroism out of which love arose, and that sense of honour that Othello brings with him from the military world, and

⁹ Susan Snyder, *Beyond Comedy: Othello*, in *Modern Critical Interpretations Othello*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), p.32, taken from *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Princeton University Press, 1979).

which, violated in Othello's eyes, demands violent satisfaction. Love is also considered as being in collision with the actual society of Venice. When Iago reminds Othello that Desdemona has deceived her father in marrying, this is Iago's opening to implant doubt in Othello. One cannot therefore limit to a discussion of love, a play that can treat love only in relation to a total spiritual and social universe.

A second view¹⁰ sees the play in terms of a trichotomy within Othello; he is at once a Roman, a Christian, and a Muslim; he is a Muslim by birth, a Roman as a general, and a Christian by conversion. At the end of the play, this view argues, the first two elements together triumph over the third. That Othello is a Christian of Muslim background is true enough. To posit, however, a Roman element in him because he is a general, adds nothing to the drama; Desdemona's love for him as a hero shows that his generalship is thoroughly compatible with late Medieval Christian civilization. Emphasis on his Muslim background seems in one way more valid, since it is of course true that at the end of the play, Othello in killing himself, says that he does what he did many years ago when he killed a Turk who had insulted a Venetian. At the end of the play, however, he is a remorseful sinner killing himself. His crimes are not "Muslim" but those of a lover within a Christian state. He kills himself, moreover, because, as a result of his crimes, he cannot live within that state. He wants his history rightfully reported to the Venetian state because he has lived within that state, and he kills himself because he has divided himself from that state.

In a third view, Othello kills Desdemona so that she might become a "being incapable of pleasure, ... so that he will at last be able to love her without the taint of adultery..."¹¹ On this view, Othello believes that sexual pleasure in marriage is wicked, and that this belief is the primary occasion for Iago's getting his hold on him. This view is right in seeing Othello's acceptance of Iago's deceit as perplexing. However, explanations of it lie nearer at hand. Iago plays on three realities. First, he persuades Othello that in marrying outside her nation, Desdemona has already shown a perverse will. Second, he intimates to Othello that as an outsider, he cannot understand the peculiar perversities of Venetian women. Third, he uses the fact of Desdemona's confirmed intercession for the cashiered Cassio as an indication of her excessive love for him. These indubitable realities are far more explanatory than a theory of psychology based on a horror of sexual pleasure that was never expressly stated by Othello.

This article acknowledges the valid aspects of all three views. With the first, it sees the limits of love as essential. It agrees with the second that there is a strong transcendent element. With the third, it finds Othello's being easily duped by Iago as in need of explanation. The view of this article, however, finds the fall of Othello in his relation both to the Venetian state and a higher Good.

¹⁰ Anthony Hecht, *Othello*, in *Modern Critical Interpretations Othello*, pp.123-141, taken from *Obbligati: Essays in Criticism* (Atheneum, 1986).

¹¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Improvisation of Power*, in *Modern Critical Interpretations Othello*, p.56, taken from *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Othello might seem initially not to agree with the pattern of the great tragedies indicated above: he is not a king, and the subjective passions of honour, love, and revenge that move him indicate more a man in a subordinate role than the all-encompassing dominion that a tragic hero seeks. Nevertheless, Othello has a position analogous to that of a king. As a Moor who has become an indispensable general in the Venetian state, he is a universal hero, generally admired, and his actions imply an individuality that would dominate his world.

Othello's heroic excellence has led a Venetian senator to invite him constantly to his house, there to hear the tales of his varied, dangerous and military past. The senator's daughter has also become his auditor, and moved by his tales has desired a similarly heroic life for herself. Her admiration and his love brought forth by it then lead to their marriage.

This brings on the first of several collisions with the various spheres of the Commonwealth's life that lead first to the overthrow and destruction of Othello's subjective self-assurance and then to a deeper grounding of it in the truly universal Good. Fearing disapproval, Othello and Desdemona have eloped, and her enraged father cannot imagine, in his bigotry, that his precious daughter could love a Moor; he hauls Othello before the Duke on charges of witchcraft. Although sufficient proofs of mutual consent lead to the dismissal of Brabantio's charges, his refusal to allow her in his house while Othello goes to Cyprus in defence of the state, means that their marriage begins with Desdemona's alienation from her father, and his from an important member of the Republic's government, on which together with his heroism he depends for his position.

Othello now lives both in the sphere of military honour and of love, and it is this duality that will lead to his catastrophe. The immediate occasion of it is through Iago, who hates Othello for promoting Cassio instead of himself to be his officer, and for the rumour that the Moor has been intimate with his wife. Despite the military obedience that he owes, he determines to ruin Othello by making him jealous and suspicious of his wife, and causing him to believe that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him with Michael Cassio. Othello's absolute trust in Iago arising from their respective place in the military hierarchy allows Iago to dupe him and make him believe the impossible.

The occasion for this is the cashiering of Cassio, which Iago engineers. He persuades him to drink too much, although Cassio knows himself to have a weak head. Then Iago arranges to have another of his dupes, Roderigo, pick a fight with Cassio, who, not in control of his senses, behaves very badly and is dismissed as officer by Othello. Iago then suggests that Cassio ask Desdemona to intervene for him with Othello.

Desdemona's agreeing to act for him, and the way in which she does it, alone make the further insinuations of Iago plausible to Othello. The fact that she has sailed from Venice to Cyprus under conditions of war has elicited from Othello the greeting of 'fair warrior' and an ecstatic declaration of love. His deep sense of their union in heroic action is thus greatly disturbed when Iago draws Othello's attention to Cassio's leaving Desdemona in an apparently guilty manner and then by her proclamation of having taken

Cassio's part and her further determination to give him no peace until he restore Cassio to office and favour.

Although Desdemona acts from the best of motives, this interference is the occasion for Othello's accepting Iago's insinuations. It does not belong to her as the wife of Othello to make decisions belonging to his high military rank. Further her principle of love is not sufficient to undo the real incompetence that Cassio has shown in his drunken brawling. This well-intentioned partiality for Cassio provides the only basis for Iago's programme of encouraging jealousy in Othello that could possibly succeed.

While dropping obscure hints, Iago seems loathe to discuss Desdemona and thus appears only to acquiesce in Othello's questioning of him. He begins by stating the Venetian custom in wifely infidelity, "In Venice they do let God see the pranks They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience Is not to leave 't undone, but keep 't unknown." (3.3.216-218) This assails Othello at his weak point, and that in two ways. Othello knows himself to be a foreigner, not thoroughly versed in the ways of Venetians. Second, as Iago says, "she did deceive her father, marrying you..." (3.3.220) Moreover, he argues, it did not seem to Brabantio that she loved Othello, but he imagined only witchcraft had won her.

These reflections throw Othello into a perplexity. He thinks Desdemona honest, but wonders "how nature erring from itself...". (3.3.243) This gives Iago his opening, and he alleges that her decision not to marry within "her own clime, complexion and degree" (3.3.246) has shown an unnatural and perverse will. This collision between the ecstatic love of Desdemona for her heroic husband and the 'natural' tendencies that belong to her defines the dramatic action. It does not belong to Desdemona's reflections, but given Othello's ambiguous position at Venice, it belongs to his reflections about her. She has entered the universal realm of heroism but he has entered, as the reaction of Brabantio indicates, the social world of Venice.

Othello has already seen Cassio leaving Desdemona after their conference; he thus has in mind the particular candidate for the position of which Iago has spelled out the general grounds. Cassio, moreover, thoroughly fits the description of the man Desdemona would turn to after repenting of her original 'unnatural' choice. He is an elegant handsome Florentine and thus more like a Venetian of course than Othello. As a military man of some valour, moreover, he has enough of the heroic in him to make Desdemona think that she has not much abandoned her original grounds for the choice of a husband but simply modified them in the direction of what is 'natural.'

Having shown Othello the general grounds for Desdemona's infidelity, Iago has thrown him into a state of the greatest perplexity. He is enough convinced that he can proclaim farewell to military might and pomp, since his mind is now preoccupied with his jealousy. On the other hand, he is sufficiently not convinced that he demands proof of Iago.

Iago provides 'proof' in two ways. First, he arranges for Cassio to find the fancy-work handkerchief that Othello had given Desdemona in the early days of their courtship as a token of their love. Desdemona's not being able to produce it throws Othello into a rage. Iago also tells of Cassio's talking in his sleep about his love for Desdemona and the accompanying amatory gestures to him as if he were Desdemona. The culmination of the proof occurs when Othello looks at Iago talking to Cassio about the latter's relation to his mistress Bianca and imagines it to be a discussion of his relations with Desdemona. The horror of this is multiplied for Othello as he sees Bianca with the handkerchief that he had given to Desdemona.

Othello's sense of honour demands that both Cassio and Desdemona be killed for this 'crime' against him. Those like Othello who live in the worlds of military honour and of ecstatic love are dependent on others for their recognition, and they can greet their being deprived of honour and love only by destroying those who thus deprived them. The satisfaction of his honour has dominated Othello from the moment when Iago aroused his jealousy. Once he has seen the 'proof' of Desdemona's infidelity, it dominates him progressively more completely. By determining on the deaths of Desdemona and Cassio, he lays claim to the spheres of marriage and the military, making himself their measure. Next, when Ludovico, an agent of the state, arrives with orders for Othello, he does not scruple to slap his wife in Ludovico's presence and pays no attention to the remonstrances this noble Venetian makes. Finally, when Othello is on the verge of killing his wife, he asks her to repent, announcing that he does not wish to kill her soul. Othello thereby makes himself an arbiter not only of earthly but of heavenly justice as well. His sense of his honour causes him to seek to be master of all things; he imagines that he justly kills his wife.

This pinnacle of self-assertion cannot of course last long. When it is revealed that he has been duped by Iago, so far is he imagining that he has executed divine justice that he now imagines that at the final Judgment, Desdemona's innocent face will dispatch him to the depths of hell. A universal objective order of justice has now presented itself to Othello's mind, and he knows the magnitude of his wickedness by this measure.

After reaching this point, Othello experiences a certain clarification. When Iago has been exposed and arrested Othello wishes to know why Iago has thus ensnared him, although he receives no answer. When Cassio indicates that he had given him no cause for wanting to kill him, Othello begs his pardon. Finally in a speech that ends with his kissing his dead wife and killing himself, Othello explains himself,

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know 't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,

Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinable gum Set you down this;
 And say besides that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
 And smote him, thus. (5.2.348-366)

He asks that there be an objective report of what he had done to the Venetian state, and he himself gives that report. He prefaces his speech by saying that he has done the state some service which it recognizes. This supplies the general context; he has been a heroic military servant of the state. Within that, he has entered into an excessive love, and sensing himself strongly wronged in that, he has proceeded to violence, out of his sense of honour.

Thus since he has recognized himself as having become an enemy of the state, he must act to remedy this criminal relation. Once he had punished with death an external enemy of the state. Now he is both the enemy of the state and its supreme defender and thereby stabs himself. Before he dies he kisses his dead wife. Thus acknowledging the authority both of the Venetian state and his marriage that falls within it, he also shows that he cannot enjoy that which he now knows as the ground of individual life.

The tragic career of Othello has its roots in his being a military hero. This has gained him an adoring bride who wishes to join him in his heroic world. This has also then lead him to catastrophe, as his sense of military order allows him to be duped by Iago, and his sense of honour allows him to kill Desdemona in imagined justice. This sense of honour even allows him to think of himself as the arbiter of salvation and to usurp the position of Almighty God. Only the revelation of his horrible error shows him that he is the subject of God's law and not the arbiter. He can in this light further acknowledge his failure to live within the institutions of the family and state. In suicide, he seeks to act as an agent of the state in punishing what he has done as its enemy. By arrogating the office of avenger to himself, he simultaneously falls short of, and transcends, the individuality that belongs to those within the state.

Macbeth

As with the previous plays, certain critical views of *Macbeth* indicate the need for a more comprehensive view. One view sees *Macbeth* as a play in which moral law is known as the law of life. Another view sees the play as a descent into hell, showing the

form of evil. A third view interprets the play psychologically, in which Duncan represents a universal father-figure.

The first view treats the play morally. "Macbeth defines a particular kind of evil - the evil that results from a lust for power."¹² While this view recognizes the deep concern for ambition that moves Macbeth, the limits of such a view lie in its neglect of the context in which the play treats ambition. We do not see ambition in general, but the ambition of a man who would wrongfully be king. Moreover, in the play, neither morality nor kingship is self-subsistent but is grounded in an idea of God. Those who primarily overthrow Macbeth, Malcolm and Macduff, know a total dependence on the divine will before they attempt a war against him.

A second view treats *Macbeth* as not only a descent into hell, but also a spring myth. "For what is the tyranny of Macbeth between the reigns of Duncan and Malcolm but winter come back after the promise of spring, only to be overcome in turn by spring itself?"¹³ Macbeth is surely a study in evil, and this evil is of course overturned at the end of the play. Yet the play is not concerned primarily with earthly conditions, but rather with their absolute ground. Macbeth fails not because of some ineluctable cycle, but rather because he has wrongly tried to make earthly kingship equal to an heavenly. The failure of his attempt shows that true kingship must be grounded in a knowledge of God and in fact, those who overthrow him are so grounded.

A third view treats the play as a kind of allegory of man, in which Duncan represents the father-figure.¹⁴ Such a view, of course, overlooks the political setting of the conflict and treats it directly as a symbol of the psychological. This destroys the actual movement and reality of the dramatic action.

The view of this article will correct the purely psychological approach by stressing the political setting of Macbeth's career. It will show that the vice of ambition is treated within a political and theological context: Macbeth is both a king who loses his kingdom and a man who loses his soul. Similarly, it will show that his descent into hell occurs and is corrected within that same context.

In *Macbeth*, the title-character, spurred to ambition by his own thoughts, his wife, and the predictions of the Weird Sisters, kills his king himself and mounts the throne. He knows that his ambition entails the loss of heavenly good but so desirous is he of an earthly kingdom that he wittingly chooses the latter at the expense of the former. He then aims at equalizing his earthly kingdom with the heavenly by murdering the man predicted to be a father of kings. The incompleteness of this attempt marks the reversal of his

¹² L.C. Knights, *Macbeth: A Lust for Power in Modern Critical Interpretations Macbeth*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), p.39 taken from *Some Shakespearean Themes* (Stanford University Press, 1959).

¹³ Harold C. Goddard, *Macbeth in Modern Critical Interpretations Macbeth*, p.36, taken from *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1951).

¹⁴ Robert N. Watson, "Thriftless Ambition," *Foolish Wishes and the Tragedy of Macbeth*, in *Modern Critical Interpretations Macbeth*, pp. 133-168, taken from *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition* (Harvard University Press, 1984).

fortune, as the oppressed people, convinced at first that his tyranny has an unopposable stability, gradually unite to oppose him. The rightful king, son of the murdered Duncan, knows that kingship cannot be self-sufficient but must be dependent on heaven's will and the possession of the Christian virtues. He leads the forces opposed to Macbeth. Gradually, Macbeth loses that for the sake of which he has sacrificed his soul's good. The very existence of a kingdom and a kingship held independent of heaven is proven illusory. Macbeth is slain in battle, and the rightful king is restored to the kingship that had earlier been usurped.

The play begins with a meeting of three witches, who plan to encounter Macbeth shortly. The fact that the audience sees them first and apart from any other character shows their objective reality, whose purpose appears not long after. News has reached Duncan, the King, that Macbeth has been one of his staunchest defenders in the recent battles against enemies foreign and domestic. The King orders the execution of the traitorous thane of Cawdor and the transfer of his title to Macbeth. Soon after this, Banquo and Macbeth encounter the three witches, who greet the men with surprising announcements. They hail Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and one who will be king hereafter. To Banquo's questioning, they answer that while he himself will not be king, his children will be kings.

The arrival of two messengers from the King confirms part of what Macbeth has just heard. Ross and Angus declare him in fact to be Thane of Cawdor. The reactions of Banquo and Macbeth are somewhat different. The first realizes that "the instruments of darkness tell us truths" (1.3.124) only to mislead us thereafter. Macbeth feels the truth that Banquo has enunciated as a general rule. He feels that the communication of the witches has been good insofar as it has told the truth about a fact already accomplished, but bad in that it has aroused the fantasy of murder in him as the means whereby to achieve what they have predicted. From the beginning Macbeth knows that the killing of a king is evil, however attractive it might seem.

Macbeth's receiving the congratulations and thanks of the King in person provides both motive and opportunity for his developing ideas. The King announces both that he will soon name his son heir-apparent and that he will now visit Macbeth's castle. The first rouses Macbeth's determination by putting an obstacle in the way of his ambition, while the second provides the occasion for his realizing that ambition.

The next scene shows Lady Macbeth's reaction to her husband's letter announcing the visit of the witches. Unlike her husband, who has partly shrunk from the imaginings that can fulfil their prophecies, Lady Macbeth has no doubts. She is determined that her husband achieve that which has been promised to him. She fears that her husband is not equal to what is necessary, "what thou wouldst highly, That would thou holily; would not play false, and yet wouldst wrongly win." (1.5.20-22) She knows that her encouragement is necessary if he will do the deed that shall make him king. Only the hyper-masculine cruelty that she prays for, as she also asks attending spirits to "unsex me here," (1.5.41) can supply sufficient ambition to carry the ambitious but divided Macbeth in its train.

We can see the division in Macbeth's soul when he considers whether to commit the deed that alone can lead to his being king. If it were a question of killing Duncan and no more, he says, "we'd jump the life to come." (1.7.7) That is, he knows the wrongness of killing the king and that it would result in his eternal damnation. If he could attain this finite end easily, he would choose it in place of eternal life. What he fears, however, is judgement in this life, by his fellows. Macbeth knows that the Scots will condemn him for killing a kinsman and a Sovereign, who is moreover his guest. Duncan has been such an excellent king that all shall despise his murderer. The murder of Duncan will redound on Macbeth, and it is this, not the fear of the loss of heaven, that moves Macbeth at this point.

These considerations all persuade Macbeth not to do the deed. Not only has Duncan honoured him but he has gained the respect of many. Only the intervention of Lady Macbeth who tells her husband that his being a man depends on killing Duncan persuades him. Relying on her planning and exhortation, he can declare that he is ready for the terrible deed. He does the deed, and Lady Macbeth puts blood on the King's servants, to cast the blame on them. Then when the murdered king is discovered, Macbeth murders these servants, pretending to be unable to contain his anger against them. The King's sons, utterly frightened, flee, acquiescing in Macbeth's regicide.

Even Banquo, who has deeper knowledge, does nothing. All Scotland imagines that it must live under King Macbeth. Yet the imagined stability of his rule first proves illusory not to his subjects but to Macbeth himself. He reflects on the promise of the witches to Banquo that kings will arise from him. This brings on the bitter consideration that he has risked eternal damnation to secure a kingdom not for his own heirs but those of Banquo. He resolves to be rid of him and engages murderers for the purpose.

In this resolve Macbeth not only extends the scope of his crimes but he also imagines that his actions can overreach the predictions of the Weird sisters. While they have accurately all-hail'd him as both Thane of Cawdor and as King, they have always from the beginning set a limit to his kingdom. While he will be King, Banquo will beget kings. Now Macbeth thinks that he can be master both of this world and the infernal world of the witches as well.

The failure of Macbeth's attempt to wipe out the line of Banquo is the turning-point of the play. For the first time, there begins to be resistance to Macbeth's rule. Not only does Fleance, unlike his father, escape the murderers; the ghost of Banquo also appears to Macbeth at a gathering of all the nobles, and this ghost's influence on Macbeth is sufficient to derange both Macbeth and the gathering about him. Further opposition to Macbeth's rule shows itself in a conversation between Lennox and another lord. The former speaks of Macbeth's doings as crimes and calls him a tyrant. He also indicates that Macduff has earned Macbeth's displeasure by refusing to attend the feast. The lord says also that the rightful King, Malcolm, son of Duncan, has taken refuge at the English court, being held in great respect by Edward. Macduff has gone to Malcolm to propose that under God's aegis he raise an army to overthrow Macbeth. Macduff has, moreover, directly refused Macbeth's request that he aid him against his enemies. Thus the

opposition to Macbeth is gathering, under the leadership of the rightful king, and trusting in God for the success of their enterprise.

When Macbeth soon thereafter visits the Weird Sisters, they have news both seemingly re-assuring and horrible for him. Although they warn him against Macduff, they tell him that no man of woman born can harm him, and that he shall be safe until Burnham wood be come to Dunsinane. This Macbeth wrongly receives as evidence of his own security. However, when at his insistence, he is shown the future, he learns that the line of Banquo will be kings almost to the end of time.

Macbeth is only partly stopped by this latest news. Although extremely agitated, he still determines to do what he can against his enemy Macduff, sure, as he imagines, in his own kingship. However, in his own mind, as well as for us, his visit to the Witches has resulted in a severe contraction of his earlier plan for endless dominion for both himself and his heirs. From now until his beheading, the play shows the progressive narrowing of the realm for which he fights.

The remainder of the act shows Macbeth's vengeance on Macduff and Macduff's response. Murderers surprise his castle and kill his wife and children. At the English court, he is trying to persuade Malcolm, the dead king's son, to lead an expedition against Macbeth. Malcolm at first is not encouraging. He maintains that he is full of vice and thus unworthy to be king. This brings Macduff to a cry of despair; only then can Malcolm indicate that he was testing Macduff. Now he knows that Macduff wants a virtuous king. Since Macduff had praised Duncan for being a religious man, Malcolm knows that Macduff wishes a king who knows his dependence on the divine order.

The fifth act shows the final contraction of Macbeth's intended earthly empire, until, with his beheading, its nothingness is revealed. He himself is conscious of this contraction. He contrasts the usual joys of old age, being surrounded with friends and heaped with honours, with what he experiences, being attacked and reviled on all sides. Further, in the middle of his preparations for battle, his wife dies, and in a well-known speech he reflects on the meaninglessness of life. In so far as one attempts to regard the realm of this life as complete in itself, it reveals its meaninglessness.

When finally, as the opposing soldiers carry branches cut from Burnham Wood, indeed it is come to Dunsinane, and one of Macbeth's last defences has vanished. Then in his encounter with Macduff, Macbeth learns that Macduff, born by Caesarean section, is not of woman born. Then he knows that the Weird Sisters have no truth in them, and that all the dreams of earthly splendour that they encourage are false. Nevertheless, he cannot accept doing homage to the rightful king and determines to fight; he does and is slain by Macduff.

With the complete overthrow of Macbeth, Malcolm determines to be crowned at Scone. The idea of a kingship founded on human ambition alone has been nullified. Only that kingship that knows itself as dependent on God can triumph.

Macbeth has known from the beginning that the ambitious pursuit of the kingship will entail damnation. His tragic career, then, indicates the radical instability of that pursuit. He can attain that kingship for a season, at the price of murder and tyranny, but he cannot pass it on to the heirs of his body; he cannot maintain it or even his own particular life against those who know the deep dependence of kingship upon an absolute Good. The death of Macbeth is at once his temporal and eternal destruction; having tried to equalize man's temporal with his eternal good, he can enjoy neither.

Conclusion

The great tragedies of Shakespeare show the clarification of human individuality through a clarification of ends. A king or similar figure lives in an assumed finite realm; this awakens in him a subjectivity that would possess this realm. This reveals rather the total dependence of individuality on an absolute Good. In *Hamlet* and *Lear*, the hero then can find himself through the affirmation of family and state as instances of this Good and then in a death that overcomes the difference between these instantiations and their ground. The incapacity of Othello and Macbeth to live in these finite forms shows also their destruction as individuals.

Oklahoma State University