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Representations of the Tragic Hero in *Othello* and *Macbeth*

According to Bradley, one of the engaging elements of Shakespeare's tragic heroes is that they are not monstrosities of virtue but rather people who are simultaneously accessible and elusive; they are made up of qualities and characteristics that we find within ourselves and other characters within the play while exhibiting an intensity that places them beyond our grasp. As Bradley writes, we come to realize that we have never known such a person (20). This quality of the tragedies and the heroic characters renders them accessible and sympathetic in a context of grandeur (the lives of powerful military leaders, kings and princes) that would otherwise be foreign to many of us. As a result, we can begin to understand and even in some cases empathize with the struggles and misfortunes that lead to the calamity, suffering and eventual death of the tragic hero that characterizes this genre. One such character is Othello. Unlike the demise of Macbeth that develops out of treasonous ambition, the tragedy of Othello is born out of a myriad of sources that makes the story of his reversal of fortune much more heart wrenching and tragic than that of Macbeth's.

In many aspects, the tragedies of *Macbeth* and *Othello* are very similar. They each open amidst political strife, setting a dark tone for the play. This is especially true of *Macbeth*. Both feature as central characters, enormously powerful generals whose accomplishments, bravery, and stature elicit a sense of power and dignity while evoking awe. Their bravery and commitment in the service of their respective countries brings

them to the attention their superiors and garners them the respect and admiration of their subordinates and superiors alike. In the case of Othello, this sense of accomplishment is heightened as a result of Othello's race and his status as a foreigner. He is also a very romantic character, whose hard fought victories and adventures in exotic countries make him a curious and compelling character to Brabantio and Desdemona.

Othello and Macbeth are first and foremost soldiers who are shaped and deeply influenced by their experiences in combat. The first mention of Macbeth is given during a rendering of the battle situation by the bloody captain who describes how Macbeth killed Macdonwald by slicing him open from "the nave to th'chops (1.2.22)." Othello's courage is seen when Brabantio confronts him about the "theft" of his daughter and Othello confidently replies by suggesting to Brabantio he accompany him to talk with the Duke about the matter. These experiences on the battleground and their lives as warriors, in their molding of Othello and Macbeth's personality and character, contribute to their downfall.

One factor that heightens our sense of sympathy for Othello and Macbeth unlike Hamlet and King Lear, is that they are both influenced and goaded into actions that precipitate their fall by other people. As tragic figures, both Macbeth and Othello have the quintessential tragic flaw, as Bradley writes, "a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction; a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction (20)." Considering the tendency of the tragic flaw to be overpowering under the right conditions, other external influences would have brought the power of these flaws to eventually manifest themselves. In the case of Othello and Macbeth, this movement to demise is hastened by Iago and Lady

Macbeth; they both capitalize on the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of Macbeth and Othello from which actions issue that beget other actions leading to the tragic conclusion.

When Macbeth returns to Inverness, the casualness and immediacy with which the Macbeths begin discussing the murder of Duncan, suggests as critics have asserted, that they may have talked of something like the plot to kill Duncan, before. When Lady Macbeth replies to Macbeth upon learning that Duncan is due to leave tomorrow with: “O! never shall sun that morrow see! (1.5.60-61.), it foreshadows the beginning of dark days in Scotland. The expression on Macbeth’s face also betrays (as Lady Macbeth points out) that he has also begun to plot Duncan’s murder, but is feeling a sense of guilt which will generate some attention from his guests during this otherwise auspicious moment. In 1.7, Macbeth meditates on the moral implications of murdering Duncan and expresses some reservations. Although by the end of the soliloquy, he realizes that nothing is pushing him towards murder other than his “overleaping” ambition, he does not want to proceed any further “in this business” when Lady Macbeth enters and wants to discuss it. Seeing that Macbeth is hesitant, Lady Macbeth begins chastising Macbeth in an insidious way for a man and a soldier, she suggests that he’s lost his courage and asks if he wants to live like a “coward” (1.7.40-45). After some additional incitement from Lady Macbeth, Macbeth is seduced by her plan and is whole heartedly committed to killing Duncan.

Othello, it could be argued, would never have killed Desdemona without Iago coaxing him with his poisonous stream of deception. Iago’s deftness at manipulating Othello is why he is a character of intrigue and loathing and there is nothing evident in

Othello's character or behavior up until the temptation scene that would indicate that Othello is a jealous man or husband. He is very decisive as in the scene in which Cassio is removed from his position, but this is consistent with his experience as a soldier and his position as a general; this decisiveness is an essential attribute needed to stay alive and prevent the deaths of soldiers unnecessarily. He is also passionate, but unlike other Shakespearean characters, he does not act rashly and it takes additional effort from Iago and the "evidence" of the handkerchief to finally sway Othello.

Like Lady Macbeth, Iago knows Othello's character and uses this as to further his cause. Othello is noble and honorable and so it is reasonable to assume that he expects the same of the people around him. When in the first scene Brabantio accuses of him duplicitous means to seduce his daughter, Othello has faith in the judgment and integrity of the court. Even as a foreigner, someone who would be somewhat wary of "the system" this confidence in others is a reflection of his integrity and honesty. What other transgression could be so caustic as to compel Othello to kill the woman that he loves so dearly than a breach of loyalty and deception?

Two contrasting elements of these two plays highlight essential differences that contribute enormously to a greater feeling of sympathy for Othello than Macbeth, the role of the supernatural vs. chance and the nature of their respective tragic flaws. The supernatural weighs significantly in Macbeth. Although as Bradley points out, the witches do not represent the overriding force that drives Macbeth, once he is convinced that their prophecies, (although seemingly paradoxical), are worth trusting, they contribute to Macbeth's overwhelming sense of ambition and his decision to kill Duncan (340-343). The imaginative influence on the audience may have been designed to liken

Macbeth's aggressive ambition to something more powerful and evil like the dark underground of the witches and Hecate, but when the two are coupled, the effect is that Macbeth's actions issue along a deliberate, predictable path that will eventually lead to his death. In *Othello*, it is chance in the form of Desdemona accidentally dropping the handkerchief that works against Othello. It convinces Othello of her supposed infidelity and forces him to act. For a man of integrity, there is no greater insult that can be overlooked without an appropriate answer than deception in the form of adultery. This chance, unlike the supernatural elements of *Macbeth*, contribute to our growing sympathy for Othello because of its randomness. It is beyond the control of Othello, providing another element that closely links us with Othello because we can all empathize with the seeming randomness and arbitrary nature of misfortune. Hamlet's lines of the world conspiring against him, are better suited for Othello because indeed, it seems that all things are working against him and his marriage to Desdemona-his ethnicity, his age, and now seemingly fate.

Macbeth's treasonous ambition expectedly initiates the series of events that lead to his demise whereas Othello's willingness to believe Iago, is a trait born out of his experiences both as a soldier and someone who has fought in presumably many battles with Iago. Excessive ambition as in the case of Macbeth, is by itself dangerous and sinister. Othello readily trusting and believing Iago is natural and expected. Iago has not given Othello any reason to doubt him or be wary of his suggestion of Desdemona's infidelity. Rather, his indignation at being passed over for the lieutenantcy suggests that Iago has been a committed and faithful ancient to Othello.

Naturally we marvel at characters like Othello whose accomplishments are great and are the result, in part, of journey that has been arduous; Othello's climb to the rank of General and the respect he receives has been earned by his successful negotiation of a process replete with daunting challenges that would prove too difficult for the rest of us. This is especially true considering the cultural and historical context of *Othello*. Also taking his virtues into account, the fall of Othello becomes difficult to accept because unlike Macbeth, whose fall stems from a trait that is well within his ability to control, Othello has been deceived and is destroyed because of something as petty and trivial as the suspicion of adultery.

Works Cited

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