



Analysis of the Three Protagonists from Shakespeare's Three Tragedies Against the Background of Ideological Education in China Discussion from the EFL Teachers View

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Abstract. Three protagonists are Lear, Othello and Macbeth respectively from the *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Macbeth* by Shakespeare, belonging to the royal family with their shared weakness. Three leading characters have different shortcomings displayed on them. Lear is a flattery lover, Othello is a jealousy lover and Macbeth is an ambition lover. They all become the victims of their own favorite desires. Luckily, they confess and repent over their wrong decisions and actions. Unfortunately, nobody among them escapes the unnatural death finally. The saying "To err is human" means that it's very hard for people to avoid making mistakes, but it doesn't mean that human being lack the ability to shunt the gate for severe error due to their own different desires. Despite the objective conditions, a real person never or seldom makes a wrong decision or fatalistic mistake. An awareness to reduce or avoid mistake through improving one's own qualities (for example, by controlling one's some certain desire, especially evil desire) is more important to oneself and the people around and even his kingdom or country. In China, EFL teachers have responsibility to introduce Lear, Othello and Macbeth to their students. Facing all kinds of desires, the three characters may teach the students something such as the value of improving their qualities.

Keywords: Lear · Othello · Macbeth · Desires

1 Introduction

The following is the brief introduction to Elizabethan dramas and Shakespeare's tragedies. Elizabethan dramatists broke away from classical models, abandoning formal restrictions and conventions. They complicated their plays by including rapid shifts of time and place

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and multiple plots and subplots. At the same time, they absorbed many other forms — both old and new—into their dramas, including medieval morality plays¹, popular songs, prose works of legend and history, and the courtly entertainments known as masques and interludes.

English dramatists produced some of the greatest masterpieces in the s reign (1603–1625). They often emphasized themes that related to current issues in English politics, so that many of the history plays had much to say about the present as about the past. They offered English language between the 1590s and the early years of King Jame's serious consideration of such topics as morality, leadership, kingship, duty, and nationhood [4].

Perhaps because of their somber subjects and severe conclusions, tragedies are considered by many to be the masterpieces of Elizabethan and Jacobean² literature. The tragedies usually focus on a main character whose greatness, or potential greatness, is undermined by personal flaw such as pride or jealousy. Marlowe, Jonson, and Cyril Tourneur, who wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy*, all produced impressive tragedies, but none reached the summits Shakespeare achieved in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, plays that placed his reputation above those of all his contemporaries. The following will mainly focus on the analysis of the three protagonists — Lear, Othello and Macbeth, their fate and their personal flaw — desire.

2 An Analysis of Lear — Flattery Lover from King Lear

This part consists of three subparts. They are comment on the King Lear, summary of the plot of it and the analysis of Lear respectively.

2.1 Comment on the King Lear

King Lear's two plots, paralleling and contrasting with each other, brilliantly develop the dramatist's themes as they carry the action forward. The characters are vividly portrayed. King Lear is a dramatic poem (The Divine Tragedy) and a tone poem which emphasizes on sound — yelling, shouting, cursing, thunder, lighting, etc. These varied sounds serve the characters' development. The play is extremely pessimistic and fatalistic. "It is the stars, /The stars above us, govern our conditions." (IV, iii, 34) and "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport." (IV, iii, 36). It is also puritanical and stoical: "Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither: / Ripeness is all." (V, ii, 9) [1].

2.2 The Summary of the Plot of King Lear

The story opens in ancient Britain, where the elderly King Lear is deciding to give up his power and divide his realm amongst his three daughters, Cordelia, Regan, and Goneril. Lear's plan is to give the largest piece of his kingdom to the child who professes to love

¹ Morality play: religious dramatic work that teaches a moral lesson through the use of symbolic characters.

² Jacobean: refers to the reign of the James I, king of England from 1603 to 1625.

him the most, certain that his favorite daughter, Cordelia, will win the challenge. Goneril and Regan, corrupt and deceitful, lie to their father with sappy and excessive declarations of affection. Cordelia, however, refuses to engage in Lear's game, and replies simply that she loves him as a daughter should. Her lackluster retort, despite its sincerity, enrages Lear, and he disowns Cordelia completely. When Lear's dear friend, the Earl of Kent, tries to speak on Cordelia's behalf, Lear banishes him from the kingdom.

Meanwhile, the King of France, present at court and overwhelmed by Cordelia's honesty and virtue, asks for her hand in marriage, despite her loss of a sizable dowry. Cordelia accepts the King of France's proposal, and reluctantly leaves Lear with her two cunning sisters. Kent, although banished by Lear, remains to try to protect the unwitting King from the evils of his two remaining children. He disguises himself and takes a job as Lear's servant. Now that Lear has turned over all his wealth and land to Regan and Goneril, their true natures surface at once. Lear and his few companions, including some knights, a fool, and the disguised Kent, go to live with Goneril, but she finds the behavior of her father and his knights intolerable and insists on reducing his train of the knights from 100 to 50. Meanwhile, she has her servants treat Lear with such disrespect that he leaves in outrage for Regan's place. So Lear decides to stay instead with his other daughter, and he sends Kent ahead to deliver a letter to Regan, preparing her for his arrival. However, when Lear arrives at Regan's castle, he is horrified to see that Kent has been placed in stocks. Kent is soon set free, but before Lear can uncover who placed his servant in the stocks, Goneril arrives, and Lear realizes that Regan is conspiring with her sister against him. Gloucester arrives back at Regan's castle in time to hear that the two sisters are planning to murder the King. He rushes away immediately to warn Kent to send Lear to Dover, where they will find protection. Kent, Lear, and the Fool leave at once, while Edgar remains behind in the shadows. Sadly, Regan and Goneril discover Gloucester has warned Lear of their plot, and Cornwall, Regan's husband, gouges out Gloucester's eyes. A servant tries to help Gloucester and attacks Cornwall with a sword — a blow later to prove fatal. News arrives that Cordelia has raised an army of French troops that have landed at Dover. Regan and Goneril ready their troops to fight and they head to Dover. Meanwhile, Kent has heard the news of Cordelia's return, and sets off with Lear hoping that father and daughter can be reunited. Gloucester too tries to make his way to Dover, and on the way, finds his own lost son, Edgar. Tired from his ordeal, Lear sleeps through the battle between Cordelia and her sisters. When Lear awakes he is told that Cordelia has been defeated. Lear takes the news well, thinking that he will be jailed with his beloved Cordelia away from his evil offspring. However, the orders have come, not for Cordelia's imprisonment, but for her death.

2.3 Analysis of Lear

AS for the theme itself, according to Coleridge, Lear's daughters are "the instruments of Fate [cf. The Three Fates, the Three Furies] in the re-education of a man who had reached old age without achieving the wisdom-and the humility- that maturity and experience should bring" As late as Act III, Lear still refers to himself self-pitying as "A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man" (ii, 20) "I am a man/More sinn'd against than sinning." (ii, 59) [5]. But by Act IV, he has regained his dignity and self-esteem, he describes himself to Gloucester as "Ay, every inch a king." (vi, 110) "Old age, like infancy," Coleridge

concludes, "is itself a character. In *Lear* the natural imperfections are increased by life-long habits of being promptly obeyed." Thus the trial at the beginning of the play is "but a trick; and ... the greatness of the old king's rage is in part the natural result of a silly trick suddenly ad most unexpectedly baffled and disappointed." (Coleridge) [1].

"No happy ending," says Mark Van Doren, "was thinkable for a hero who had learned so much so late" [1]. In the end, the play is powerful and important because it concludes that the responsibility for human action lies not in nature or God or the supernatural, but in man himself. It is a most humanistic work. *Lear* is not "a wounded animal [who] may be pitied in a sick silence," concludes Van Doren, "but an eloquent man [who] can soar beyond sympathy" [1].

Samuel Johnson, one of the great 18th-century editors of Shakespeare, confessed that he could not bear to reread the ending of *King Lear*, it so violated his sense of morality and so overwhelmingly tore at his heartstrings [3]. Author of this paper thinks Samuel Johnson's response is reasonable, but she holds that may be the saddest end impresses its readers most and teaches them deeply.

Poetic justice which punishes the wicked and rewards the virtuous is a subtle and unmistakable force in *King Lear*. The sufferings of *Lear* are easily to be found. When he goes for help from Regan, unwitting *Lear* faces two sisters who have formed a conspiracy against him. Informed by Goneril, Regan and her husband leave their palace and go to Gloucester's instead. *Lear* and his men riding through the dark night trying to find Regan; finally, they too end up at Gloucester's palace. A terrible event occurs, and when Goneril arrives the two sisters strip their father of his whole knights, a severe blow to the old king's dignity and self-image. He cries in response to their ingratitude. Realizing how unwise he has been and in dividing his kingdom and banishing Cordelia, *Lear* rightly fears that he is losing his mind. He runs out in a storm, which has been growing in intensity as these events have occurred. Fighting against the elements, he cries "Pour on, I will endure" [2]. *Lear*'s gathering madness becomes evident when he meets Edgar in disguise. All attempts by the Fool and Kent to restore *Lear* to his right mind fail, and seeing Edgar as a madman pushes *Lear* over the edge to insanity. The end is that *Lear* dies of ordeal. All of the above proves *Lear* pays heavily for his previous personal desire. Only from this course, does he touch his mistake and teaches himself well. At least, he understands the average wretched subjects around him from his own experience and sufferings.

3 An Analysis of Othello — Jealousy Lover

Part 3 is made up with two small contents. They are the plot summary of the *Othello* and the analysis of him.

3.1 Plot Summary of Othello

Most of Shakespeare's tragedies focus on characters of noble or royal rank. These plays tend to be political and personal, combined into one. Because the events that affect the main characters can determine the fate of themselves and an entire kingdom. *Othello*, by contrast, is more personal than political. However, the author says that even *Othello*

belongs to personal tragedy, because Othello has a high position, he has a long-lasting influence among the people around him. Othello, a Moorish general, is tricked into believing that his wife is unfaithful to him. He murders her, then learns of her innocence, and kills himself in a fit of grief and shame. His ensign — Iago is taken away to be tortured and executed. Deeply personal and intently dramatic, Othello is recognized as one of Shakespeare's most powerful tragedies.

3.2 Analysis of Othello

Othello, a noble general, is admired and praised for his courage. By the end of play, however, this heroic figure becomes so brutal in his language and actions that he is almost unrecognizable to those who once loved and admired him.

His wife, Desdemona, thinks highly of her husband. Her devotion to Othello is almost superhuman. She marries him despite the objections of her father. As a result, her elopement with Othello has her father die of a broken heart. He parts from Othello with the warning, "Look to her, Moor... She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee" [3]. Brabantio's warning foretells the play's ending, possibly planting the first seeds of suspicion in Othello's mind.

Iago, this worst villain in the play altered most significantly. He is motivated primarily by hatred. He deeply hates both the Othello and his lieutenant, Cassio, who has been promoted in Iago's place. He plans to persuade Othello that Desdemona had betrayed him with Cassio, which satisfies Othello's desire to kill them. Cassio is an innocent guy who is used as a medium by Iago. Roderigo is a foolish young person due to his blind obedience of Iago. He trusts Iago because Iago tells him how to get Desdemona's love. Finally, Roderigo is persuaded to help Iago kill Cassio. When this attempt fails, he stabs Roderigo to keep him silent.

Tragic flaw in Othello, jealousy, changes him totally. Like the words in the play "O! beware, my lord, of jealousy; It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on". (III, iii, 165) [1]. His jealousy is from his lack of confidence. He is a rare exotic — a Moor (was he a blank or a negro? It didn't matter), he is a dark, swarthy man from a foreign country. Before his white wife, he is short of courage. Another factor is from his old age. He is much older than his wife, which makes him hard to satisfy his wife's sexual needs. He admits that "I am declin'd into the vale of years". (III, iii, 265) [1]. All the above appears reasonable, the outmost reason is from his subjective and blind judgment. He has a narrow mind, he believes the wrong people, conversely, he can't trust his closest wife. It is possible that he neglects his wife for his high rank in the army. The conclusion is that he doesn't keep a clear mind all the time. His overjealousy finally destroys himself.

4 Analysis of Macbeth - Ambition Lover Analysis of Macbeth

Like part 3, part 4 also has two subparts: one is the plot summary of *Macbeth* and the other is the analysis of him.

4.1 Plot Summary of Macbeth

One of the Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, *Macbeth* tells the story of a medieval lord who usurp the throne of Scotland. Driven by his aggressive wife and his own ambition, Macbeth murders his king to gain the crown. His life spirals downward into a nightmare of violence, and he is eventually killed by those whom he has injured.

4.2 Analysis of the Macbeth

Macbeth has excessive ambition. It is connected the struggle "between good and evil angels for the soul of man" (as in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*); Many readers have speculated that Macbeth's tragedy is driven by supernatural forces rather by conscious, human choice [4]. The question of whether Macbeth's characters act or are acted upon depends to some extent on whether the three witches influence the future or only predicted. Whether human life is controlled by fate or by free will? Whether Lady Macbeth is an evil figure or a kind of fourth witch? She pushed her husband beyond the limits of legality and morality out of love for him. Moreover, Macbeth kills the guest in his house.

The play is actually all of the above, as well as the story of a noble, respectable hero who yields to evil out of impatience with anticipated advancement. The play is also the story of Lady Macbeth, who for a chooses the course of evil to expedite her husband's advancement, only to be stricken with serious remorse later on, as shown by her self-accusatory sleepwalking scene and her subsequent suicide. She is no ordinary unsexed female monster, as Macbeth is no ordinary, feckless villain.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has on the very human level told the story of two middle-aged people who are very much in love with others, but who have also chosen to pursue a course of evil to advance their shared ambition. The conflict in the play is not between Macbeth and the three Witches, who chose to advise him in ambiguous terms, but between Macbeth and his conscience. The knocking at the gate (II, ii, 66) is Macbeth's very own conscience. "To know my deeds were best not know myself," says Macbeth. "Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" [5]. After that, the road for Macbeth can lead only downward.

On its surface the plot of *Macbeth* seems like a straightforward moral fable about a good man who yields to the temptations of evil and suffers the appropriate punishment. But closer examination reveals much more complex and uncertain morality. The "tragic hero" is a murderer but not a cold-blooded one. Macbeth cannot escape his guilt over his evil deeds. He and his wife's crime appears to reflect ambition, but Macbeth never shows much pleasure or even interest in political power. It almost seems as if the protagonists do not know what they really want or why they want it.

5 Conclusion

From the three protagonists — Lear, Othello and Macbeth, an important lesson is that everyone has his personal flaw, and this flaw is likely to make a fatal function at the critical moment in a person's whole life. Shakespeare's great contribution is to probe

human being's weakpoints. To find out one's flaw and try to improve one's qualities by reading Shakespeare's is one wise shortcut for EFL learners in China. Of course, learning from others and consulting wise people are also ways to get this purpose. However, refreshing one's spirit by reading English great works by famous writers such as Shakespeare is a better way for them. Nobody would refuse the way not only used to confound the tragedies or villains appeared in life and improve his English for an EFL learner.

Nowadays, President Xi Jinping calls young people in China to study hard Chinese culture, spreading it and being proud of it [6]. This is due to the great value of Chinese present and traditional culture. However, EFL learners in China are engaged in reading the famous works by great playwrights such as Shakespeare. Their reading may widen their world cultural horizon. It is certain that they learn about the characters in the works by enjoying reading. They develop their critical thinking and know more clearly human nature and human flaw. What is most important is that they know how powerful a person's flaw is. Therefore, it just meets President Xi's needs for any culture has the value of education and its sparkling part in the world. Any excellent culture is welcomed in China for ever. Lear, Othello and Macbeth are the characters in Shakespeare's works, but they make contributions to the people in the world. They tell the people of the world not to repeat their wrong doing. A stitch in time saves nine. It is not only a good proverb; it is also a good lesson for everyone. This good lesson needs EFL teachers in China to spread among their students. Shakespeare has his country, while his works' value and contribution belong to all the people in the world. To some degree, his works are and will be limitless in influence.

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