

Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Victims of Passion

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For hundreds of years now, critics have been trying to figure out and define the tragic flaw of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Many brilliant critics have been led astray either by focusing in on one point too intensely or by looking at things too broadly while ignoring the facts that do not back up their thesis. Victor Cahn claims that all tragic heroes "try to justify [their] actions in the name of 'honor'" (x). For an example he uses a scene in *Troilus and Cressida* in which Hector is resisting Achilles challenge to fight but ultimately gives in, saying, "Life every man holds dear, but the dear man / Holds honor far more precious-dear than life" (V, iii, 27-28). It is a fact, now, that in Shakespeare's time honor was very precious and important, particularly in a tragic hero; however, it is ridiculous to suggest that this "honor" is what caused the actions of their tragic downfalls. Shakespeare has one of his most beloved characters, Falstaff, in *Henry IV, Part I*, share with us his view of honor by saying, "What / is honor? A word. What is that word honor? / What is that honor? Air" (V, i, 133-135). Though Falstaff may not be known for his bravery or chivalry, what he states is true. Honor is but a word, nothing but air, and does not have the strength to overcome reason in order to guide men's actions towards their tragic ends. Harold S. Wilson tries to illustrate the order of faith and nature in Shakespearean tragedies. Muir disagrees, saying, "To produce this neo-Hegelian fantasy Wilson had to ignore the chronological order of the plays: There is something odd about a synthesis which actually precedes what it is supposed to synthesize. In this case, it can be easily seen that a respected critic has been seduced by a desire to find a significant relationship between all tragedies" (14).

To list some others who search in vain for one central theme, G. R. Elliot, in *Flaming Minister*, says Shakespearean tragedy is "the tragedy of pride" (xix-xxi). In saying so, though, he is choosing to put his total focus on one flaw, thus regarding "such characteristics as the credulity or jealousy of Othello, Macbeth's overweening ambition or Antony's sexual passion" as not as important as the flaw of their pride. Muir quotes A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* saying, "We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact, or no less the inexplicable appearance, of a world traveling for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste. And this fact or appearance is tragedy" (13). At the end of many Shakespearean tragedies, though, it does not seem as though good has prevailed or that we are in a world traveling towards perfection. Where is the good in Desdemona's dead body? Where is the good in all the bodies the dying Hamlet is stepping over to finish his task and add one more by killing Claudius? As Muir says, "The world does not seem to be traveling for perfection. . . but rather bent on substituting the ordinary for the exceptional" (13). In *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Lilly B. Campbell criticizes Bradley's methods, and Muir says, "The criticism has a good deal of validity." He then goes on to say, "Professor Campbell herself expertly deploys her wide knowledge of Elizabethan theories of psychology so as to demonstrate that Shakespeare's tragic heroes are slaves of passion." This is a theory that is backed up by Aristotle, mentioned in Christian theological discussions and essays, and will be the theory used to support the ideas in this paper, that prince Hamlet, as well as other characters in the play, are overcome by different forms of passion that diminishes their reason and becomes the driving force of their appalling actions.

Aristotle, in *Poetics*, states, "Tragedy, then is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude...Again, without action there can not be a tragedy" (VI).

This action must invoke "pity and fear" to the audience (XIII). Thus, it seems ridiculous that honor or nobility alone could inspire in men such actions that would be void of reason and invoke pity and fear in the audience. Aristotle's opinion was that **men were full of self-control** and were, therefore, responsible for their own actions. It was the tragic heroes own actions, then, that brought about the chaos and tragic events. Aristotle went on, though, in his *Ethics*, saying that men were not always responsible for their actions, that the "human ability to choose wisely could deteriorate" (1.239ff). He went further, viewing "human failure as a breakdown in ethical reasoning"(Kenny 57). Plutarch agreed, saying, "Neither do I think it impossible also but that men's good wills and gentle natures being injured without cause may peradventure change their natural disposition"(Wardman 4). In essence, both are saying that humans are in control of their actions, and that generally "good," noble men could have their ability to reason robbed of them by something horrible or unforeseen occurring in their lives, invoking too much passion. When one is overcome with passion, his ability to think or act rationally or reasonably is erased, as the Peripatetics taught: "passions were evil if they were not governed by reason" (Campbell 70). St. Thomas Aquinas made divisions for the certain types of passions: "Love and Hatred, Hope and Despair, Desire and Aversion, Courage and Fear, Joy (or Pleasure) and Sadness (or Grief), and Anger" (Campbell 69). Shakespeare's plays and tragic heroes are **immersed with** these characteristics of passion, from Macbeth's desires combined with his fears to King Lear's wrath and despair; from Hamlet's grief transforming to anger to Othello's love turning to hatred and jealousy. Though many subdivisions were later created, these divisions will suffice in demonstrating the passions aroused in Hamlet, as well as some of the other characters surrounding him.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, numerous characters are overwhelmed with many of the different forms of passion. When the Player King says during the play within the play, "What to ourselves passion we propose, / The passion ending, doth the purpose lose. / The violence of either grief or joy / Their own enactures with themselves destroy: / Where joy most revels, grief doth most lament; / Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident" (III, ii, 200-205), he summarizes most of the passions that entwine Hamlet, at least those felt by Prince Hamlet, as well as Fortinbras, Laertes, and Ophelia. The grief felt by the three men, due to the loss of their fathers, is acted out in three different ways, though: Hamlet's grief initially causes him to become so melancholic that he is inactive, Laertes' grief causes his passion to overcome his reason, and though young Fortinbras is full of grief he has not allowed passion to engulf him and is still led by reason. Ophelia, on the other hand, becomes swallowed up by grief with the loss of her father compounded by the loss of her lover-when Hamlet claims that he loves her no more and is sent to England, she becomes utterly insane, ultimately allowing her passion of grief to drive her to suicide. The fundamental passion of grief is divided into two sorts by Sir Thomas More: "The grief that seeks for consolation is thus put on the one side; on the other is the grief that does not seek for consolation; and this latter inconsolable grief may result either in dullness and loss of memory and in the sin of sloth, or in hasty anger and rashness, and in the sin of ire" (Campbell, 114). Evidence of this theory is seen in *Macbeth* when Malcolm tells Macduff, "let grief / Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it" (IV, iii, 228-229). Laertes is not to be consoled or appeased at the death of his father, as well of his sister, and his grief transforms into anger. Hamlet is inconsolable; throughout most of the play he is dull and slothful. However, from Act III on, he begins sporadically behaving rashly and as though he is full of anger. In his earliest soliloquies he moans and complains constantly of his grief, such as, "O that this too too sullied

flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew, / Or that the Everlasting had not fixed/His cannon 'gainst self slaughter" (I, ii, 129-132). Here, full of melancholy, he complains of wanting to die but not being able to kill himself due to Christian law. He does show sparks of motivating passion, though, as when he sees his father's Ghost and is told of King Hamlet's murder, he proclaims, "Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love, / May sweep to my revenge" (I, iv, 29-31). All Hamlets' claims to swift action are nothing but claims, though, for Hamlet lets his grief cause sloth and delay throughout the entire play.

In Act III, his passion of grief turns to anger when he goes to talk to Gertrude. Before he goes in, he is so angry that he thinks he may kill her, saying in a soliloquy, "Soft, now to my mother. / O heart lose not thy nature: let not ever / The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom. / Let me be cruel, not unnatural; / I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (III, iii, 400-404). He is indeed full of passionate anger when he enters her room, and he performs his first act of rash violence by stabbing Polonius, who was hiding behind the curtain, thinking it was King Claudius. Another change occurs in Hamlet in Scene III: his passion has overcome his reason as well as his conscience, and possibly his sanity. The ghost appears to him after he stabs Polonius, but Gertrude cannot see it. This causes doubt to the ghost's existence and gives cause to doubt that Hamlet is merely acting crazy anymore. He is in a violent rage while talking to Gertrude and it is her fear that he is going to kill her that causes her to cry out and for Polonius to react behind the curtain. When Hamlet lifts the curtain and sees that it is not Claudius but Polonius, instead of showing remorse at his mistake he spits out, "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better. Take thy fortune" (III, iv, 32-33). He has become cold and lacking of

conscience as he remains for the rest of the play, though his slothfulness does not dissipate as it still takes him two more Acts to enact his father's revenge.

That passion has removed his conscience and made him callous is revealed in two different actions by the prince. First, when the King sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to find Hamlet and retrieve the body, Hamlet will not tell them where it is and asks to be taken to Claudius, saying, "...Bring me to him. Hide fox and all after" (IV, iii, 30). Hamlet is acting like finding the corpse is a game of hide and seek, one which he is eager to play. When Claudius asks him where the body is, Hamlet first replies, "At supper. / . . . Not where he eats, but where 'a is eaten. A / certain convocation politic worms are e'en at/him" (IV, iii, 17, 19-21). When asked again, he crudely replies to the King, "In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger / find him not there, seek him i' th' other / place yourself" (IV, iii, 33-35). He is cold and remorseless with his words, even brave (or arrogant) when he tells Claudius to go to hell; nonetheless, he is still only using words against the King, still lacking in action. His second action that shows a removal of his conscience is his sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be executed in England. This was not a rash act of anger, but a pre-meditated murder. When Horatio asks him of it Hamlet replies coolly, "Without debatement further, more or less, / He should those bearers put to sudden death, / Not shriving time allowed" (V, ii, 45-47). Knowing that they did not know what was in the letters they were carrying, Hamlet sent them to their deaths without delay, not giving it a second thought. The only thing that remains still in Hamlet's conscience is his regret for getting Laertes involved, displayed when he states, "But I am very sorry, good Horatio, / That to Laertes I forgot myself, / For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his. I'll court his favors, / But sure the bravery of his grief did put me/Into a tow'ring passion" (V, ii, 76-79)

and the only reason he feels bad about it is that he sees himself in Laertes in that their circumstances, losses, and causes are the same.

In Act V, Scene II, the play's last, Hamlet's passion finally drives him into a rash and angry action. Directly before this action, he is still idle in carrying out the murder of Claudius. He is actually fencing with Laertes, seemingly for sport and the entertainment of the King, for of course Hamlet is unaware of the poisonous blade, as well as the poisoned goblet of wine. Only does Hamlet react to the passion of anger when his mother falls down and cries, "No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet! / The drink, the drink! I am poisoned" (V, ii, 309-310), and then Laertes confesses to him, "Hamlet, thou art slain; / ...In thee there is not half an hour's life. / The treacherous instrument is in thy hand, / Unbated and envenomed. The foul practice / Hath turned itself on me. Lo, here I lie, / Never to rise again. Thy mother's poisoned. / I can no more. The King, the King's to blame" (V, ii, 314, 316-321). Immediately upon hearing this, Hamlet rashly thrusts the sword into Claudius, declaring, "Then, venom, to thy work" (V, ii, 323). It seems almost as though the demands from the ghost to get revenge for him and restore order to Denmark were not enough and never would have happened had it been left totally up to Hamlet. In fact, when Hamlet kills Claudius, his dead father seems to be the last thing on his mind. What ignited the passion of rash anger in him was the poisoning of his mother, and that led directly to the killing of Claudius. The only action that may display that Hamlet, as well as Laertes, may have some remaining reason is when they forgive each other for their sins, both possibly realizing, as Hamlet did earlier, that both are foils of each other and both are victims of passion.

In the deep exploration and analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is clearly shown that all of the characters, aside from the antagonists, are victims of passion. Though the tragic heroes in Shakespeare's plays have passion to motivate and direct their actions, the antagonists never do. If

you think about Claudius in *Hamlet*, Iago in *Othello*, Goneril, Regan, Edmund, and the Duke of Cornwall in *King Lear*, and the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, all of them possess a kind of evil that they are proud of and use it to hurt others and better themselves. None of them are driven beyond reason by passion to carry out acts of murder and destruction; they each possess the free will and human choice that Aristotle wrote about and they each use their reason to make the choices that they know are wrong. Campbell notes:

Thomas Aquinas defined the difference between venial and mortal sin: 'Now the difference between venial and mortal sin is consequent to the diversity of that inordinateness which constitutes the notion of sin. For inordinateness is two-fold, one that destroys the principle of order, and another which, without destroying the principle of order, implies inordinateness in the things which follow the principle.

(99)

So it can be understood that the tragic heroes are committing venial, or forgivable, sins due to their passion removing their reason and ability to choose while the antagonists are committing mortal, or fatal sins that are unforgivable in their resolute excessiveness. It can truly be concluded then that Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth, all being robbed of their reason are truly victims-victims of passion.

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Dr. Walter's Comments: *While sorting out some confusion on the issue among Shakespeare scholars, Shane makes a good case for his own interpretation on the flaw that dooms Shakespeare's greatest tragic heroes.*