

Ending in renaissance tragedy



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Among the various definitions of tragedy, the one most commonly proffered is: a play that treats – at the most uncompromising level – human suffering, or pathos, with death being the usual conclusion. According to Aristotle's Poetics, the purpose of tragedy is to show how humans are at the mercy of fate, and to cleanse the audience by provoking extreme emotions of pity and terror. The tragic actions on the dramatic stage cause the audience to experience these extreme feelings that eventually causes a catharsis or release of these emotions, to reduce these passions to a healthy, balanced proportion. However, the application of this definition to Renaissance tragedy is limited as it makes two over-reaching assumptions about the play, its protagonists and the audience. First, that the death of all protagonists contributing towards the drama is tragic to an equal degree, which prompts an equal level of catharsis in the audience. Does the self-purchased death of one simultaneously learned and overly ambitious Faustus solicit the same amount of catharsis and empathy as do the 'unnecessary' deaths of Cordelia, Gloucester, Lear, the Duke of Castile, Horatio, and Isabel among a host of other innocent characters whose corpses litter the sets of King Lear and The Spanish Tragedy? One is left with a terrifying uncertainty – although the iniquitous die, the good die along with them. Second, and perhaps most significant, that catharsis would pour forth in the audience if the play's dénouement – meaningful or not – contains fatal twists, surprise deaths and wide-scale massacre. Or in other words, though the play may itself may have physically ended, the repercussions of the deaths, its implied message on human fate and deeper unresolved, psychological issues that had plagued the protagonists' minds continue to trouble audiences long after they have left the theatres. The deaths of Lear and Cordelia in King Lear confront us

like a raw, fresh wound when our every instinct calls for healing and reconciliation. This problem, moreover, is as much one of philosophic order as of dramatic effect. In what sort of universe, we ask ourselves, can wasteful death follow suffering and torture? If characters such as Lear, Gloucester, and Edmund all go through a process of awakening, why then do they die? Even Iago, despite all his evil machinations, lives on to bear the fruit of his crimes. In other Shakespearean tragedies, such as Othello and Hamlet, the play ends with the reconciliation of the tragic hero and society. When Othello pleads “ Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate, /Nor set down aught in malice,” like Hamlet and Cleopatra he seeks immortality in his reputation and in his story. It is a final attempt to reconcile himself with society and his misdeeds, moments before he stabs himself. In Romeo and Juliet, there is a feeling of hope in the final scene because the Houses of Montague and Capulet are finally at peace with each other, and will erect monuments in remembrance of the two lovers. Peace and understanding is gained from the tragedy. But in The Spanish Tragedy the only monument we see is that of a pile of dead bodies slumped behind a curtain. It is difficult at the end, for the audience to feel whether anything has been gained other than a sense of remorse and misery. In a Christian framework, even the worst deed can be forgiven through the redemptive power of Christ. Thus, however terrible Faustus’ pact with Lucifer may be, the possibility of redemption is always open to him. But each time the play offers moments in which Faustus can choose to repent, he decides to remain loyal to Lucifer rather than seek heaven. “ Christ did call the thief upon the cross,” he comforts himself, referring to the New Testament story of the thief who was crucified alongside Jesus Christ, repented for his sins, and was promised a

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place in paradise. That he compares himself to this figure shows that Faustus assumes he can wait until the last moment and still escape hell. In other words, he wants to renounce Mephistopheles, but not just yet. One can easily anticipate that his willingness to delay will prove fatal. Only at the end of his life does Faustus desire to repent, and, in the final scene, he cries out to Christ to redeem him. But it is too late for him to repent. In creating this moment in which Faustus is still alive but incapable of being redeemed, Marlowe steps outside the Christian worldview in order to maximize the dramatic power of the final scene. Having inhabited a Christian world for the entire play, Faustus spends his final moments in a slightly different universe, where redemption is no longer possible and where certain sins can no longer be forgiven. The effect of inhabiting such an unforgiving universe before his death is however ameliorated in later versions of the text. The ending of the Doctor Faustus B text is vastly different to that of the A text. The latter simply ends with Faustus being dragged away by the devils, and a summarising epilogue. Nothing is revealed to the audience of what eventually becomes of his body. The B Text however is slightly more reassuring. Despite his self-aggrandisement, wavering, “hair-splitting, and sophomoric misquotations of the Scriptures,” Faustus gets a sympathetic ear to listen to his agonized confession of his pact with Lucifer, and subsequently “a due burial” from the scholars. His scattered limbs are gathered by the scholars, who promise him a burial in accordance with Christian rights, “though Faustus’ end be such.” Unlike Don Andreas in *The Spanish Tragedy*, proper burial rites will buy Faustus a ride in Charon’s boat across the Styx to Hades. King Lear’s death, in comparison, breaks all dramatic conventions. It is perhaps one of the few tragedies in which the tragic hero dies irreconciled

and indifferent to society. The last two acts of King Lear are constructed with a series of advances and repudiations of visions of hope. By choosing to set King Lear in a pre-Christian era, markedly before Christ's redemption, Shakespeare does not allow one the comfort of knowing that all evil, however bad, can be overcome. Nature seems to be mocking Edgar's confidence in justice, when he sees his brutally blinded father immediately after claiming that "the worst is not / So long as we can say 'this is the worst.'" In Hamlet, a play equally wrenched by a self-consuming family quarrel, Horatio bears witness to the ensuing tragedy. In the closing scene, he volunteers to go outside and narrate to the world the misfortunes that have befallen this once noble family. He will reveal all the "carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts" as well as the "accidental judgements" and "casual slaughters" so that men may learn from their mistakes. Hamlet's audience is thus awarded with some release after this gut-wrenching tragedy. The world will be informed that Hamlet was a just man. But what will the world think of Lear? Albeit a symbolic act, no one will tell his story, and in a way, purge oneself of further adversity. Hence, a strong sense of guilt and remorse, what in truth ought to have been the burden of the remaining characters, is instead passed onto the audience to bear. But that does not seem to be happening in King Lear, The Spanish Tragedy or Doctor Faustus. Not one steps forward to offer any words of closure or perhaps a glimpse of optimism. Kyd's decision to literally give Revenge the last word in his play reflects the thematic message of the final scenes of The Spanish Tragedy: revenge does have the last word, crowding out mercy and all other human emotions, seeking its inexorable satisfaction in an overdose bloodshed and violence. The final scene implies that Hieronimo's action serves as the

fulfillment of justice, but the blood, waste, and carnage of the penultimate scene works against this presumption, seeming to deny the possibility of justice in a world where the machinations of class and power determine the course of men's lives. In *King Lear*, Edgar simply offers, "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." Though sensible, his comment is untimely for indeed had this maxim been observed by everyone and not just by Cordelia and Kent, perhaps the tragedy could have been averted. It is perhaps for these reasons that Tolstoy refers to the plot of *King Lear* to be "stupid, verbose, unnatural, unintelligible, bombastic, vulgar, tedious, and full of incredible events, 'wild ravings', 'mirthless jokes', anachronisms, irrelevancies, obscenities, worn-out stage conventions and other faults both moral and aesthetic." This could well have been a view shared by Nahum Tate which made him revert closer to Shakespeare's sources, in terms of the dénouement. Texts such as Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which Shakespeare had at his elbow when he wrote his history-plays, end in the reconciliation of a father whom submits his daughters to a 'love-test'. Shakespeare's choice therefore, to end the play in such ghoulish bloodshed can be seen as a clear attempt to point out the weakness of humankind, and the evil it is capable of. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare does not merely adapt his sources, he consciously makes a violent and shocking alteration to them. He converts the folk-tales of medieval literature into a more complex account, where everything is obfuscated and questionable, in a manner similar to the dénouement itself. (Hieronimo is at least partly aware, and quick to exploit the inability of audiences to comprehend such large-scale tragedies when he chooses to perform his play in a medley of foreign languages, the effect of which Balthazar rightly notes, "...this will be a mere confusion/ And hardly

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shall we be all understood.”)The deaths in Hamlet are curiously unrelated to the demands of the Ghost. And the latter, unlike tradition, does not return to haunt the stage at the end to revel in the deaths not in the dubiously-gained revenge. Hamlet’s decision not to kill Claudius is indeed a thoughtful mistake, a missed opportunity that would not only have ended the play in less than half the time, preventing the deaths of so many people, but would have also earned him his revenge rightfully. While Hieronimo proceeds to his last rendezvous in as an agent of death in a deliberate manner (“ And princes, now behold Hieronimo, /Author and actor in this tragedy.”). Hamlet almost stumbles on his final best chance to kill Claudius as a consequence of a duel with Laertes and various plots of poison that he knew nothing of previously, so that his final act of killing is almost knee-jerk and prompted by self-defence rather than planned strategy. Unlike in Hamlet, in The Spanish Tragedy the choric Don Andreas is quick to take centre-stage and revel in the carnage. With only the promise of an afterlife presided over by Pluto and Proserpina, the dénouement has nakedly pagan overtones and no sign of completeness. Not only was Don Andreas able to destroy the lives of his enemies while they were living, but also after they are dead. In a frenzy of blood-lust, he demands and gets the authority to provide everlasting judgement for his rivals. Here, there is no end to the incessant pain – the revenge, and therefore the play, continues to perpetuity. Lorenzo has been confined eternally on Ixion’s wheel; Castile is to have his liver perpetually torn at by vultures, and Balthazar is to be hung about Chimaera’s neck. Hieronimo acknowledges the tragedian’s ‘ faked endings’ when he notes: To die today, for fashioning our scene, The death of Ajax, or some Roman peer, And in a minute starting up again, Revive to please tomorrow’s audience.

While a tragedy suggests a certain irreversible finality in the catastrophic events of the play – an irrevocability that is integral to the audience feeling the catharsis – at the end of the day, it is simply and subversively, a play. Dead actors rise up once more, wipe off the pig's blood, and reappear on stage again the following day. In real terms, for the audience, it perhaps wasn't such a 'tragic end' after all. Many critics have not just disapproved of the deaths of Lear and Cordelia, but have also expressed concerns with the implausibility in the plot. Among the host of 'dramatic defects' that Bradley points out in King Lear, the one that remains the most jarring of them all is Edmund's long delay in telling of his 'writ' on the lives of Cordelia and Lear even after he is mortally wounded and has nothing to gain. Stemming from it is yet the biggest war on the senses. Albany's most unbelievable forgetfulness ("Great thing of us forgot") is widely seen by critics as the greatest injustice in the play. For the "loving son of Albany" (who is soon also to take up the rein of power in Britain) to overlook, albeit in the midst of Goneril and Regan's deaths, the safety of the unwell King and Cordelia, is inexplicable. If we are to remind ourselves of Albany's prior knowledge of Edmund's diabolical capabilities and the latter's arrest "on capital treason," then to suggest that Albany did not suspect Lear and Cordelia's lives to be in danger, makes his forgetfulness seem even more implausible. Renaissance dramatists explore the limits of human justice and leave us with doubts about any other form of justice. One may feel that the dénouements with their varying degrees of penalties are not quite fair, even though all sinners have been punished. Goneril, Regan, Balthazar, Lorenzo and their collaborators are as dead as Macbeth or Richard III, but so are Cordelia and Bel-imperia, and with them, innocence and hope for the future. No number of

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slain villains can alleviate the accumulated devastation. Perhaps Horatio's fate ought to have been better than that of a low-life such as Pedringano, and perhaps Goneril and Regan ought to have remained alive in order to witness a happy reunion between Lear and Cordelia. In illustrating this unpredictable hand of justice, both human and divine, the dramatists illustrate the worst features of mankind at work, and in doing so, invite one to react and remain uncomfortable towards any suggestion of a resolution.

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