

Renaissance heroes

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Renaissance heroes are different from classical tragic heroes for several reasons.

First of all, classical tragic heroes operated in a completely different religious context than Renaissance heroes, necessitating differences in the heroes' characteristics and actions as well. Even when Renaissance literature was set in the context of the pagan past, the audience viewing the play or reading the book was Christian and had morals and expectations born of living within a Christian context—and Renaissance authors knew this and wrote accordingly. Secondly, Renaissance heroes were not necessarily of noble birth or descended from higher powers the way classical tragic heroes were. Additionally, classical tragic heroes had one fatal flaw and followed a rather linear path toward demise; Renaissance heroes were of more mixed moral stature and their demise was more complex. Antony from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* and Faustus from Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* are examples of Renaissance heroes. The Renaissance was a time when classical ideas were revived for the first time in centuries, yet it was not a repeat of the classical era of Greece and Rome.

There are many reasons for this, of course, but one of the preeminent differences between the two times is the difference in religion. While the classical thinking that the Renaissance wished so deeply to emulate took place in a polytheistic context, the world of the Renaissance was strongly Christian. This difference, among many other social and cultural distinctions, makes inevitable the gap between the characterization of classical tragic heroes versus Renaissance heroes. As Renaissance artists tried very hard to emulate their classical counterparts, the archetypal characters are, of

course, similar. However, Renaissance heroes are distinct from classical tragic heroes. Some claim that the difference between a classical tragic hero and a Renaissance hero is one of morality and status, with the Renaissance hero being the morally superior (though socially inferior) character.

“ The classical hero was of noble birth or even godlike, he often suffered some fatal character flaw and his ambition was personal and selfish. By contrast, the medieval and Renaissance hero could be a commoner, he existed within the Christian and feudal chivalric tradition where loyalty was due primarily to his lord and he had to be seen to be of good moral character” (Raybould). This interpretation of the difference between a classical tragic hero and a Renaissance hero highlights the difference in the religious contexts the characters inhabited. It also points out that Renaissance heroes no longer had to be supernatural or socially important, signifying the more liberal social thought that was emerging during the Renaissance. Additionally, the morality of the Renaissance hero is emphasized and contrasted with the immorality that causes the tragic downfall of the classical tragic hero.

Another explanation of the difference between tragic heroes and Renaissance heroes takes both a broader and narrower view, contrasting Renaissance theater and its take on tragedy with classical literature and its version of the same—but doing so by focusing mainly on Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. “ If *Antony and Cleopatra* is . . . a non-tragic tragedy or a tragedy without a ‘ real’ tragic ending, it may very well be due to its mixture of neo-Aristotelian tragedy with the Christian dramatic tradition

whose transcendental moral outlook basically annuls tragedy by inserting it into a greater divine scheme” (Klung 323).

In other words, *Antony and Cleopatra* is a tragedy in the sense that its main characters die, but it is not a tragedy in the sense that it does not leave its audience with the same sadness that a classical tragedy does. Naturally, this means that Antony—the main character in *Antony and Cleopatra*—is a different sort of hero than a tragic hero. Klung attributes this largely to the difference in religious and social contexts that created the two dramatic traditions. In classical tragedies, the tragic hero “ is a character of noble stature and has greatness . . .

The character must occupy a position of ‘ high’ status but must also embody nobility and virtue as a part of his/her innate character . . . Though the tragic hero is preeminently great, he/she is not perfect” (Hibbinson). Basically, the tragic hero must be a good person overall but must be flawed in some way. Dictionary. com gets more specific: a tragic hero is “ a literary character who makes an error of judgement or has a fatal flaw that, combined with fate and external forces, brings on a tragedy” (“ Tragic Hero”). Shakespeare’s Antony is perhaps a bit more complex. “ Antony undergoes a continuous process of reversible metamorphoses, in the course of the play oscillating between morality, human greatness, and tragic myth” (Klung 323). Rather than being moral except one fatal flaw that brings on a linear chain of events ending in the hero’s demise—one recalls Antigone—Antony is perpetually switching from moral to flawed and back again. This complexity indicates that the Renaissance hero is perhaps more realistic than the tragic hero.

People do not, after all, have only one flaw. Each of us is endowed with many flaws to varying degrees, and these flaws collectively, as well as our virtues, determine our actions and subsequently our fate. Shakespeare's Antony, a Renaissance hero, embodies this human complexity in a way that classical tragic heroes do not. On the other hand, it is hard to claim too much distinction between Antony and a classical tragic hero. Antony is flawed: he allows himself to be seduced by Cleopatra at the expense of his military focus and ultimately fights against his own countrymen as he follows Cleopatra's whims.

In the end, Antony dies, defeated by his fellow Romans who, unlike him, maintained their loyalty to the state. Lust, then, could be considered Antony's tragic flaw, and he could be seen as a tragic hero in the classical tradition. Nevertheless, Antony is an example of a Renaissance hero. History had not been kind to Antony, who was depicted as lustful and utterly devoid of any sense of duty toward his country, a grievous offense particularly in those days. Plutarch, certainly, had not cast Antony in a positive light in his biography *Life of Antony*. Yet Shakespeare took Antony's story and crafted "a drama that explores the beauty of perdition and the personal greatness of the man who had become the very image of corruption" (Klung 305).

In essence, Shakespeare reinvented for the Renaissance a new Antony, a true Renaissance hero. Antony is flawed, yet he is a hero. This is evident especially in his last words, when he urges the audience not lament his passing and altogether seems rather untroubled by his own death. "If we are to believe his words, Antony has no regrets or complaints – we hear absolutely no echo of the lamentations of the Greek tragic heroes – since he

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has enjoyed his part as best he could and even secured himself a worthy exit” (Klung 322). Antony’s lack of regrets is evidence of a life well lived and is perhaps one of the most heroic achievements possible. Another Renaissance hero is Doctor Faustus, the title character of Christopher Marlowe’s famous play.

Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for 24 years in which to have supernatural powers and a demon servant to fulfill his every whim. Faustus is obviously flawed. “ Marlowe is careful to show us that in his egoism Faustus deludes himself into thinking that magic, which means control over nature, is ‘ heavenly,’ and that, for example, Helen’s kiss—or rather, worse yet, the kiss of a demon impersonating Helen—confers immortality” (Barnet xviii). Faustus is selfish, foolish, and arrogant. However, Faustus is not one-dimensional. “ He studies medicine so that he may ‘ heap up gold,’ but he also would ‘ make men to live eternally.

‘ In him we occasionally hear the voice of the Renaissance humanist, the man refreshed by the greatness of the pagan past and anxious to live an ampler life than his father had lived” (Barnet xx). The humanism, however wasted on a character who meets so bad an end as Faustus, shows that Faustus is not all bad—and also that he belongs specifically to the Renaissance, the era when humanism was the major school of thought. He does not fit the modern vernacular definition of hero, certainly, but there is an aspect of the heroic in him. Faustus and Antony are Renaissance heroes. They are both crafted with a Christian audience in mind—Antony and Cleopatra is a moral tragedy, a genre disparaged by the classical age and

revived and glorified by the Renaissance; Doctor Faustus is a very obviously Christian story with an obvious moral standpoint.

Antony is of noble birth, but Faustus is not, reflecting the Renaissance's changing idea of who could be a hero. Antony and Faustus are both flawed, certainly, and ultimately both of them meet ends determined exclusively by their mistakes. However, they are both morally heterogeneous—each is flawed in multiple ways, but each also contains redeeming characteristics. In this way, both are Renaissance heroes. Works Cited Barnet, Sylvan.

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