

King lear – an aristotelian tragic hero

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Shakespeare masterfully develops Aristotelian tragic heroes. According to Aristotle, a tragedy depicts the downfall of a hero due to his tragic flaw (hamartia) and fate or the actions of the Gods. A tragic hero, typically an aristocrat or nobleman, ultimately recognizes his tragic flaw (agnorisis), but often only after it leads to his suffering and demise (peripeteia). In the end, the tragedy evokes a sense of pity or catharsis for the tragic hero. King Lear perfectly fits Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero. As a result of his tragic flaw, King Lear's life is transformed from a life of good fortune and privilege to a life of misfortune in which he suffers many losses including loss of authority, identity, and ultimately, sanity.

At the commencement of the play, it is evident that King Lear is given all the respect and honour of a nobleman. Kent articulates his nobility, "Royal Lear, Whom I have honored as my king, Loved as my father, as my master followed, As my great patron thought on in my prayers," (Shakespeare 1. 1. 141-144). As the King of Britain, he is the highest ranking member of British royalty and enjoys a lifestyle of happiness and great privilege. His social rank added to his pride as he referred to himself as "Apollo" and "Jupiter".

As with many of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Lear's tragic flaw is his obstinate pride and lack of personal insight and judgement. This hubris not only brings about his own suffering, but also causes others pain. For example, being dissatisfied with Cordelia's response about her love for him, King Lear's pride lead him to banish Cordelia, followed by his loyal servant Kent when he tries to enlighten him. Kent is banished after he tells King Lear that Cordelia loves him: "Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least, Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound, Reverb no

hollowness,"(Shakespeare 1. 1. 171-173). Lear's pride blinded him from listening to Kent and from seeing the true faces and intentions of his daughters, Regan and Goneril. His lack of insight allowed him to be manipulated by the kind, although deceptive words of his cunning daughters. The tragedy, and Lear's personal downfall unfold when he divides his kingdom between the antagonists, Regan and Goneril, not based on merit, but rather flattery. The two ungrateful daughters subsequently conspire against him, remove him from their homes and leave him as a man begging for food and shelter.

Lear's foolishness slowly turns into madness. He hires a servant (Kent in disguise) without knowing anything about him. He begins to doubt his judgement and starts to show hostility to others for no apparent reason. His suffering drives him to insanity. He suddenly realizes his grave error in dividing his kingdom to his two undeserving daughters and disowning the sincere one. Regarding Cordelia he says: " I did her wrong," (Shakespeare 1. 5. 24). His suffering is compounded by the knowledge that Regan and Goneril have betrayed him. He threatens, " I will have such revenges on you both that all the world shall — I will do such things — What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be the terrors of the earth!" (Shakespeare 2. 4. 279-282). Through his pain and suffering he acknowledges that he is going mad and, at first asks the gods to intervene, " O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!"(Shakespeare 1. 4. 24) but later simply gives into his madness, " I have full cause of weeping, but this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!" (Shakespeare 2. 5. 284-286). In the last scene, Lear

slips in and out of insanity. He temporarily regains his sanity and happiness when he sees Cordelia, “ We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage. When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down, And ask of thee forgiveness”, (Shakespeare 5. 3. 9-11). When he carries in her dead body, he again deteriorates into madness and his ultimate demise is death.

In the end, the audience can’t help but feel profound pity for King Lear. He is elderly and appears to have been a good king and father at some point. His tragic flaw causes him to fall from being the most important man in Britain to “ a slave, a poor, infirm, weak and despised old man”, (Shakespeare 3. 2. 19-20). He becomes full of self pity when he is caught in the storm. He loses all confidence, power, authority, love - and even sanity - in the face of his daughters’ actions. Although Lear instigated this tragedy by banishing Cordelia, the consequences of his tragic flaw seem to be unjustly harsh. The audience witnesses the cruelty he is subjected to by others and hopes to see their downfall. Unfortunately, in this tragedy, Lear is not victorious.

King Lear satisfies all the requirements of an Aristotelian tragic hero. The nobleman’s love of flattery, his anger, pride and misjudgements lead not only to his own downfall but to the destruction of his family and the death of many others, including Cordelia, the only daughter who truly loved him. While, in the end, he displays self realization, humility and humanity, the discovery happens much too late to save him. The audience is left sympathizing for a man who suffered more than he deserved.