

# Observant heroism of albany

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The concept of creating heroes is as inherently human or at least historically prevalent as creating gods. The latter is motivated by a need to clarify the world, the former by a craving to establish a sort of unattainable glory or ideal to emulate. Either way, each concept fills a human void. Since history is more ripe in the offering of lying, murderous scoundrels and oppressive dictators, humanity relies on literature to fill the void of heroes. The hero of a work of fiction is easily identifiable by traits such as bravery and nobleness and the defeat of some force of evil, as well as public recognition and celebration of this deed. This praise is not always the case though, as is evident in the portrayal of Albany in Shakespeare's tragedy King Lear. Albany does not lack the characteristic or even the accomplishment of heroic deeds, yet his role as the hero is downplayed in favour of Edgar, and it appears that the common perception is that he is an insignificant character in the play. This idea is formed because Albany has very few lines in the play. Albany alternatively exemplifies the idea of being the uncredited hero of the play. This statement is evident in heroic qualities, including his constant attempt to be objective and neutral, his ability to empathize and show compassion, and the way in which he fights injustices.

The fact that Albany attempts to be objective in his judgement and actions proves that he is the hero of the play, even though he is unacknowledged for it. This trait is shown in the introduction of Albany to the play when King Lear insults Goneril for questioning his ability to manage his knights. Instead of following the expected course of action and defending his wife, Albany conquers this potential bias by simply stating to Lear, " Pray sir, be patient" (I. iv. 240). One could argue that this is more an indication that he is passive

and submissive, but the fact is that Albany would have nothing to gain by this because in that moment Lear had already relinquished all power and sway to his daughters. Albany also demonstrates the ability to maintain rational thought in the face of criticism. Goneril claims that he is only compassionate out of ignorance by saying, "You are much more attack'd for want of wisdom" (I. iv. 327), and instead of lashing out and attacking this idea, Albany accepts that there could be some truth to the claim by saying in an objective manner, "How far eyes pierce I cannot tell" (I. iv. 329).

Additionally, his ability to be objective is only shown vividly when contrasted by the actions of other characters. For example, Oswald, who is merely a servant of Goneril's and does not have the obligations of a husband, takes her side more than Albany does. This is evident when he refers to Lear condescendingly as, "My lady's father" (I. iv. 67). Moreover, Goneril, who is the daughter of Lear, does not respect him, as is shown when she claims, "... he hath ever but slenderly/ known himself" (I. i. 309-310). This contrast demonstrates that Albany does not succumb to the bias of those he is close to, and instead he tries to objectively analyze the situation.

The objective stance that Albany takes is evident when he states, "Now, gods that we adore, whereof comes this?" (I. iv. 270). This is in response to Lear calling Goneril a thankless child and essentially disowning her. In this quote, Albany sagaciously questions the long-term effects of the conflict that has just been created between Goneril and Lear instead of just simply defending his wife. A more blunt example of Albany's objectivity is when he says, "I cannot be so partial" (I. iv. 293) to Goneril when she asks him about his opinion of Lear casting her away. Albany's actions also reflect objectivity

when he offers to read the letter that the disguised Edgar has given him concerning Edmund's treachery. He tells Edgar that, " I'll overtake you.- Speak." (V. i. 46), and so he does not succumb to the bias of stigmas about the structure of society, such as the idea that the poor are senile and not worth communicating with. Finally, the fact that Albany is never involved in the theme of the young versus the old, such as his lack of involvement in the gouging out of Gloucester's eyes, shows that he does not take sides. These numerous actions and judgements of Albany make it evident that he always attempt to be neutral and objective, making him worthy of the idea of the uncredited hero of the play.

The ability to empathize and show compassion is another trademark of a hero, and Albany exhibits this quality as well. First, when Lear angrily speaks of Goneril's treachery against him, Albany tries to understand his plight by stating, "...I am guiltless as I am ignorant/ [Of what hath moved you]." (I. iv. 252-253). Additionally, he insists on giving Lear credit for his abilities, showing his want to extend compassion. This is evident when he states, " Well, you may fear too far" (I. iv. 309) in response to Goneril worrying that Lear cannot manage his knights. The perception other characters have of Albany is also crucial evidence of his empathetic nature. For example, Albany is referred to as having, "...milky kindness..." (I. iv. 325), and of being a , "...mild husband" (IV, ii, 1) by Goneril, as well as being called, "... virtuous...(IV. vi. 288)" by Edgar. These perceptions are important because both Edgar and Goneril view Albany as a caring man, and because these two characters fit one extreme of either good and evil, there is more truth to their claims about Albany because both extreme perspectives have the same

opinion. Furthermore, the power of Albany to care for Lear is shown clearly when contrasted in the way in which the other brother-in-law, Cornwall, treats him. For example, Cornwall states about Lear that, " 'Tis best to give him away, He leads himself" (II. iv. 323), in reference to his own lack of concern for the future of Lear after he is sent out into the storm.

Additionally, Albany shows that he is compassionate in how he shows concern for even those that have committed selfish acts, demonstrating that he is willing to extend forgiveness and empathy beyond just those that have treated him well. This is evident when Regan becomes sick and Albany states, " She is not well. Convey her to my tent." (V. iii. 125), and also when he asks that Goneril be looked after by saying, " Go after her, she's desperate. Govern her." (V. iii. 189) during an argument that breaks out about Edmund's betrayal. This idea is furthermore shown when Albany cries out, "...save Him!" (V. iii. 174) upon Edmund falling to the ground wounded in a sword fight with Edgar. Moreover, Albany shows sympathy in how he perceives Lear, stating that he is a, " gracious aged man" (IV. ii. 46), and, " Whose reverence even the head-lugged bear would/ lick," (IV. ii. 47-48). This is a metaphor stating that Lear is so kind that even an ill-tempered bear would not attack him because of his benevolent nature. These feelings and actions demonstrate that Albany shows empathy and concern for the well-being of other characters, and this entitles him to being the uncredited hero of King Lear.

Albany also constantly fights and speaks out against injustices. Upon being informed of Edgar's alleged treachery, Oswald says that Albany, "...called

me ' sot'"(IV. ii. 8), meaning a fool. This demonstrates that Albany will not commit the unjust act of accepting rumours and accusing someone based on questionable information. Oswald also states of Albany that, " I told him of the army that was landed;/ He smiled at it." (IV. ii. 4-5). Albany realizes the absurdity and ironic injustice of the fact that the approach of the French army is made out to be a hostile attack by Regan, Goneril and Edmund. The irony is that in reality it was really these same characters that initiated all hostilities in the play by casting Lear out, while the French attack was merely in retaliation to this. Moreover, Albany passionately speaks out against injustices committed towards family, such as when he declares, " She that herself will sliver and disbranch/ From her material sap perforce must wither"(IV. ii. 39-40), meaning that the fact that Goneril betrayed her family and those that support her will cause her inevitable demise. Albany also exposes the way in which Goneril exploits her situation by calling her a, "... self-covered thing" (IV. ii. 70). In this, he suggests that she exploits the fact that she is a woman because he believes treacherous behaviour is less expected of a woman. This demonstrates a will to reveal the injustice of such unfounded social perceptions. Finally, Albany's mentality towards acts of evil is most vividly captured in his quote, " Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile" (IV. ii. 43), in that he asserts that truth or honesty is viewed as a sick distortion by those who commit unjust acts. This was in response to Goneril for her poor treatment of Lear.

Albany's fight for justice is shown in his concern for the numerous acts of treachery that are taking place. He claims that, " Humanity must perforce prey on itself" (IV. ii. 54), in which he implies that humanity becomes its own

enemy and will eventually destroy itself if actions such as those of Regan and Goneril are not fought against. Furthermore, he speaks out about the unjust actions of what is supposedly his own side in the war by saying, "...by others Whom I fear/ Most just and heavy causes make oppose." (V. i. 30-31). This implies that he is aware that those who are supposedly his allies have committed acts of betrayal, such as the betrayal of Lear by Goneril, and that he realizes that people have just cause not to trust them. Albany also shows that he is willing to force others to come to realizations about the evils that they have committed. For example, he states to Goneril, "...read thine own evil./ No tearing, lady. I perceive you know it." (V. iii. 181-182). This is regarding the fact that she knew of Edmund's deception, yet still allied with him. Most glaringly obvious is Albany's quest for justice in the quote, " All friends shall taste the wages of their virtue" (V. iii. 366-367). This signifies his conviction that those who commit noble acts will be rewarded, as well as his belief that all criminals will receive punishment. The latter is shown in the line, "...and all foes the cup of their deserving" (V. iii. 367-368). This unswerving belief in the ultimate enactment of justice is legitimate, as it is consistent with the way he acts throughout the play.

Albany is the literary depiction of an ideal that is sorely lacking in society: the hero. Trademark qualities of a hero are found in him, such as the ability to be objective and neutral, the power to show empathy and concern for others, and the obligatory fight for justice. Unfortunately, the status of hero is carelessly given to Edgar, or at least this is the common perception. This is likely true only because Edgar enacts the final physical vindication by wounding Edmund to the point where he dies, and this act resonates more

than Albany's subtle, though more significant, actions. Only through examining the nuances of all characters does it become apparent that Albany deserve to be the hero, and specifically, the uncredited hero. He represents the injustice of attempting to glorify someone while ignoring the contributions of those behind the scene. After all, it is Albany's sense of humanity that prevents the chaotic forces of greed, bias, hate, and every other human vice from consuming all characters. Albany is the quiet observer, interjecting throughout the play only to slip in a quick reply of keen wisdom, though what elevates him above all other characters is that he is not always passive and that he actually creates observable, positive change. He represents the possibly fictitious or naive notion that qualities like honesty and kindness actually exist in some pure form. If anything, he represents an ideal that most of humanity views as foreign.