

WHAT IS TRAGIC ABOUT TRAGEDY?

For the Prairie Group Conference, November 1984

Richard L. Allen

This is a comparison of two of Shakespeare's plays, Hamlet and King Lear to consider the nature of tragedy.

Hamlet has everything. It is a ghost story and a murder mystery. It has a love story that may also be a hate story. There is dueling, intrigue, and the eloquence and depth of character from king to grave digger that we expect of Shakespeare, along with the probing of the human spirit that is found in all of his tragedies.

The play opens with some soldiers talking about the ghost, apparently of the late King Hamlet, who has been on the castle battlements for several nights. Then we are introduced to some of the characters. Laertes, son of Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain, wants the king's permission to return to France since the coronation ceremonies are finished. The king asks if the young man has his father's permission and then graciously gives his own. Before he leaves, Laertes and his sister Ophelia warn each other about the dangers of romance. He warns her about Hamlet. There has been something between the two, and Laertes, does not think Hamlet is likely to marry her. Before the son leaves, Polonius advises him to be prudent in all his affairs. Later Polonius sends a servant to Paris with money for Laertes and also with instructions to find out what kind of life the young man is leading. Polonius is concerned for his position and wants both of his children to behave in a manner that will not harm it. He is intelligent in a way that is shrewd rather than inspired, yet all in all, it is a nice ordinary family.

Hamlet is depressed. The new king, Claudius, is concerned and tells Hamlet that he is grieving his father too long. It is not just his father's death that is making Hamlet despondent. His mother remarried so quickly and to a lesser man than his father was, so he is suicidal. Horatio is an old friend and one of the soldiers who had seen the ghost. Hamlet tells him that he sometimes sees his father, and this startles Horatio into telling Hamlet about the ghost.

The next night, Hamlet comes to see for himself. The ghost tells him that he is the spirit of the late king and that he was murdered by Claudius. Hamlet is devastated. He tells Horatio that he is going to start behaving as if he is crazy to protect himself and swears Horatio to secrecy.

Claudius wants to find out what is wrong with Hamlet. He sets two of Hamlet's companions, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to see if they can learn

something. Polonius thinks he is sick with love for Ophelia, and Hamlet encourages this by writing a foolish love letter to her. However this subterfuge does not last long, because Hamlet soon has a chance to tell Ophelia that he had never cared for her, that she deluded herself in her romantic fantasies and she would be would be better off if she left the outside world and became a nun.

Hamlet is not certain that the ghost was really his father's. It could have been from Satan. How can he be sure? A troop of actors is coming. He will have them reenact the murder of his father, and when Claudius sees it, he will surely reveal himself if he is the murderer. "The play, the play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

It works. The king sees himself portrayed as killing Hamlet's father and rushes out of the room. The audience breaks up in the commotion. The queen, Hamlet's mother, wants to see him alone. Polonius tells the king that he will hide in the queen's bedroom to listen to what happens. He goes there. Hamlet does too, and while he is talking to his mother, he realizes that someone is hiding behind the curtain. Knowing it might be the king, he stabs the hidden figure and then sees with some disgust that it is Polonius he had killed. He says, "I'll lug the guts into the neighbor room."

Since Hamlet is believed crazy, the king decides to send him to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They have a letter that tells the English to kill Hamlet. Off they go.

Meanwhile, back in Denmark, Laertes gathers a little band of soldiers to kill Hamlet. Claudius calms Laertes, then learns that Hamlet is back in Denmark and forms a plan to get him. A duel, just an exhibition, will be arranged between Laertes and Hamlet, but the guard on Laertes sword will be fixed to fall off so he can kill Hamlet, and if that does not work, they will put poison on Laertes sword blade, and if that does not work, they will have a cup of poisoned wine for Hamlet to drink.

Ophelia has gone crazy and drowns accidentally. Hamlet had learned of the letter that arranged for him to be murdered and changed some names so that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern would be murdered instead of him. He had escaped the ship and left them to their fate. The fencing exhibition begins and Hamlet's mother accidentally drinks some of the poisoned wine. Hamlet is winning the exhibition, but Laertes cuts him with the poisoned blade. In the confusion of the fight, the swords are mixed up and Laertes is also cut with the poisoned blade. As the treachery is exposed, Hamlet stabs the king. As the play ends, all of the principal characters are dead.

This synopsis tells what happens. Two questions in particular have been asked by critics: what was so disturbing to Hamlet even before he knew his father had been murdered, and why did he wait so long before acting? To the first question, a number of answers are given by characters in the play or at least hinted. Apparently under the canon law of the time, Hamlet's mother was committing incest with Hamlet's uncle. Although the council had approved the marriage, Hamlet could feel outrage at this. Also he did feel that his uncle was a lesser man than his father had been. Claudius had taken the throne from Hamlet's father, and Hamlet's feelings about that are not clear. Of course, once Hamlet was certain that Claudius had murdered his father, that was motive enough. The other problem of Hamlet's waiting seems the sort of material of which Ph.D. dissertations in English literature are made. If a king commits a

murder, one does not simply call the police and say, "Come over and arrest the king. I think he killed my father." Hamlet chides himself for hesitating, but actually, he moves with purpose. In fact, the drama plays well. The characters develop and have depth. The action moves apace. The suspense is maintained. We would expect this in any play, and it is mentioned only because King Lear plays so badly as a drama.

As that play begins, Lear is getting old. He has decided to divide his kingdom into three parts for his three daughters and has arranged a public ceremony in which he will ask each of them how much they love him and then in response, he will officially give each of them the share he is allotting. The first two daughters, Goneril and Regan, give extravagant speeches about their great love and are awarded their shares. The last daughter, Cornelia (who is Lear's favorite), says something about loving the king because it is her duty. He loses his temper and refuses to give her anything. Her share is divided between the two older sisters. Cornelia has a couple suitors, of whom one is the king of France. The other loses interest when Cornelia loses her inheritance, but the king of France sees her fine qualities and she leaves to become his wife. An earl, loyal to the king, objects to this treatment of Cornelia by Lear, and Lear banishes him. The earl, Earl of Kent, leaves but returns later in disguise and becomes a servant to the king.

A parallel subplot also begins. The Earl of Gloucester has a legitimate son, Edgar, and an illegitimate one, Edmund. Edgar is virtuous and Edmund ignoble. Edmund, with a forged letter, convinces the Earl that Edgar is planning to murder him, and Edgar flees to save his life. He disguises himself as a half-witted beggar, Poor Tom.

Lear has kept for himself only a hundred knights and squires, and his plan is to live with either Goneril or Regan. At Goneril's first, she insists that the king reduce his retainers to only a few, since he does not need any at all. Lear is furious at the insult and leaves to stay with Regan. Goneril warns her sister, and Regan insults him even before he arrives. Kent has gone ahead to Regan's castle. He has a dispute with one of Regan's retainers and is placed in the stocks. This is a personal insult to Lear, and in a stormy confrontation with his two daughters, Lear finds himself stripped of all authority and appearance of authority. He goes out into a terrible storm with his Fool and the Earl of Kent, who is still disguised as a servant. In the kingdom, there are rumors that there may be an invasion from France. Gloucester tells his illegitimate son, Edmund, that he intends to help Lear. Edmund tells Regan's husband, Cornwall. To Cornwall and the two sisters, this amounts to treason, and as punishment, Cornwall has Gloucester's eyes plucked out.

In nature, the storm continues. Lear, Kent and the Fool find a hovel to shelter themselves. They also find Poor Tom inside. Lear goes mad, and since the evil sisters intend to kill him, he must be taken to Dover where he will be safe with Cornelia and the French army. Gloucester finally realizes that he has misjudged both of his sons. He wants to confess his mistake to Edgar. Edgar, who is still Poor Tom, does not tell his father who he is, but he does care for him and save his life.

In the battle, Cornwall dies, but the English forces win as Albany, Goneril's husband, who does have a noble character, joins forces with Edmund. Lear and Cornelia are taken prisoner by Edmund who does not want Albany to save them. Edmund secretly orders their executions. Goneril poisons Regan and then stabs

herself when some other of her activities are exposed. Gloucester dies of shock when he hears that Lear has been killed. Edmund is charged with treason and killed. Only the lesser characters survive, but they are the decent ones; Edgar, Kent and Albany. Albany calls the other two to reorder the kingdom. Kent says that he is soon to join his master and declines. Albany says, "The weight of this sad time we must obey, speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most; we that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long."

These synopses are a review of what happened. This is what the characters did. What they said is the text, and their motives for what they said and did is to be inferred. As we begin such inferences, what do we notice that is obvious? We might observe that in both plays, at the end, everyone is dead. Not very profound, but we need to remember this. We are not in a simple sphere where evil conquers good. These are not plays about the triumph of evil. The Bad people die too. They are plays in which goodness does not triumph completely and without pain. Another observation: the spheres of good and evil are marked, and every character is in one or the other of the spheres. Remember this too.

There is also a notable contrast. Hamlet is a hero in the heroic mold: self-sufficient, noble in character, a loner, a lone rider, God's private detective setting out all alone against the massive power of a vast conspiracy, in control of the situation at all times, a little rough perhaps, but one needs to take off the kid gloves when dealing with evil. Lear, on the other hand, is not heroic until near the end and possibly never. This is why the play is so weak dramatically. With whom can one identify? Lear is not self-sufficient. He is such a doddering fool that it is not safe to let him out on the street, and he never is alone. There are always loyal friends that will make any sacrifice in his best interests. We are not used to identifying with a character like this. Shakespeare was taking a gamble to use such a protagonist. The fact is that it failed with me. I did not like the play. As I began the assignment, I had read both plays long ago. I reread Hamlet with pleasure as the story unfolded before me. Lear was tedious and I never felt any particular interest to see what was going to happen to anyone in it.

However, we are ministers and concerned with moral life, right and wrong. Let us consider then what did Hamlet do that was so right, and what did Lear do that was so wrong.

Hamlet first: Here is a noble prince. He is properly upset about his father's recent death and the unseemly haste of his mother's marriage to his uncle. There is also the canon law provision that makes the marriage incest. Then a ghost tells him that his uncle murdered his father, but he is not impulsive. He wants to be sure of a charge so serious, so he uses the play to find out if the charge is true. It is, but his uncle is the king. Enacting justice will not be simple, however he starts causing death. Does he cause Ophelia's? There is a puzzle here. Had she misunderstood his interest in her and made too much of it because of her romantic nature? That is what he told her. And was she too delicate to stand the truth and so went crazy and drowned? Maybe she was, and if that was so, his advice to her to go to a nunnery was rather harshly delivered, but it was sound advice. Or had he led her on and let her think he had affection and passion that in truth he did not feel? There could be

differing viewpoints about this and real misunderstanding. Let us see it from Hamlet's side and say that while he might have shown more tenderness when he rejected her, he was forthright in a situation that called for forth-rightness. He did not want her to die and seemed remorseful when she did.

The death of Polonius was another matter. Hamlet killed him. Hamlet was a little sorry that it was not the king behind the curtain, but he was not sorry that it was Polonius. What had Polonius done that was so terrible that he deserved to be killed? He was prudent in ordinary affairs. His advice to his son was sound enough. He was not intending harm to Hamlet and was only trying to find the reason for Hamlet's actions so he might be helped. He was not Hamlet's enemy--but he was an ally of Hamlet's enemy. He was in the sphere of evil, so he was killed. More so with those useless simpletons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They were never a threat to Hamlet. Why did he go out of his way to have them killed in England? Here is what Hamlet says about them:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment:
They are not on my conscience; their defeat
Doth by their own insinuation grow.
'Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensed points
Of mighty opposites.

He was saying that this is what happens to people who get into the sphere of evil even if they do not realize that is where they are. There is a bit of Clint Eastwood in this.

Hamlet has nothing to do with his mother's death. The king did not intend it, but he made the situation in which it could happen. Laertes, not a bad sort, was pulled in through loyalty to his father and sister, but what he was pulled into was the sphere of evil. Finally Claudius himself. When Hamlet's sword reached him, the point had finally pierced the center of the sphere and the source of the evil.

Shakespearean tragedy is not Greek tragedy in which the gods control human destinies as if the characters are puppets pulled by strings from Olympus. Hamlet did not have to do what he did. He brooded about what to do, and he might have done nothing. It is significant that in what he did, he was justified. This is what Hamlet did that was right. He acted in a manner that was justifiable. Yet remember, this is not a detective story. It is tragedy. Hamlet also died.

If Hamlet was right because he was justified, what did Lear do that was so wrong? Just about everything. From the very beginning when he arranged this pompous petty display of his daughter's devotion in a public spectacle. "Tell me how much you love me in front of all these people and I'll give you part of my kingdom." It is a humiliation to everyone involved, but Lear is too much an ass to notice. Cornelia is not much better. This is a public ceremony in which one plays one's part. She refused and thereby compounded the embarrassment and humiliation. She does the worst thing possible on the occasion. She tells the truth. She says, "You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I return those duties back as are right fit." She says she loves him because it is her duty. This is

truth. She says, "You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I return those duties back as are right fit." She says she loves him because it is her duty. This is important in Shakespear's understanding of life and the basis of tragedy; There are duties in life, and if we do not attend them, we shall suffer.

Lear loses his temper. He cuts Cornelia off and when Kent asks him to reconsider, he is banished. Lear is almost proud of having such a furious unreasoning temper. The show may have played better in an England where kings were accepted. As a modern man who has little affinity for the doctrine of the divine right of kings, I look for at least a touch of regality in the kings I follow.

I felt a degree of sympathy for Goneril and Regan having to deal with this bombastic old fool with his hundred knights riding around the country side and then coming in to supper with dirty boots expecting to be fed and housed, but Lear is astonished and outraged when he does not get everything he would like to have. Lear is so obnoxious that we must wonder at the motivation of those who remain loyal to him. There is nothing about his person that would inspire any respect. Are the the loyal ones demented too? No, they are commendable. They are loyal because it is their duty to be loyal to their king.

The Fool is a curious character. He speaks a wry cynicism, yet these are the thoughts that Lear should have had. Is the Fool Lear's alter ego? Does the Fool have the thoughts that Lear will not permit himself to have? The Fool leaves well before the end of the play and it is about the time that Lear is facing the reality that everybody is not nice to everybody else all the time. Everybody does not always do his duty because it is his duty.

Gloucester does not seem so obnoxious as Lear, but as the protagonist in a parallel subplot, he is as gullible. No matter how artful the forgery, would an ordinary alert man believe that a son who had always been devoted and thoughtful would suddenly enter a plot to murder him? Would he not want a little more evidence than that? Would he not at least want to ask him about it?

blame
We are not seeing ordinary stupidity here with Gloucester and Lear. This is the foolishness of noble souls who do not believe that all souls are not as noble as they are. Of course there are some contradictions. In believing that Edmund could not do anything so treacherous as forging the letter, Gloucester had to believe that Edgar could plot to kill him. However, the lesson is one that U.U.'s in particular might note. In our reaction against the doctrine of original sin, we are inclined to think that everyone can be cured, that everything can be fixed, and that no one is to blame for anything. We might remember that Channing said that God has given us rationality and holds us responsible for it. Shakespeare goes further and says that innocence if coopted by evil will be punished like evil. Look at what happened to Polonius and to Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern. Look at what happened to Gloucester and Cornelia and Lear himself. We might even see the difference in the two plays this way. Hamlet is good against evil, and some innocents are drawn into the net of evil. In Lear it is taken further. King Lear is innocence against evil.

some innocents
What then is tragic about tragedy? It is an intrinsic characteristic of life and needs to be seen from two sides. From the side of evil, there is a moral order, and if the moral order is breached, devastation is unleashed and havoc destroys and obliterates. Claudius murdered his brother, and the awesome

power of the offended moral order was set loose. Decency and villainy alike were shattered. Everyone was killed. in King Lear, Goneril and Regan were in violation of their moral obligation to respect their king and father, and the violation began the storm of destruction in the realm. They and their opponents alike lost everything, even to their lives.

From the side of goodness, it comes to this: Eternal vigilance is the price of righteousness. Good does not overcome evil through some intrinsic power of its own. Evil is what can not sustain itself, but its shadow and threat are not removable. The tragedy of Hamlet is that there is a price for decency. It may be high, and it must be paid. This is the other aspect of the moral order. The tragedy of Lear is of a deeper level. While Hamlet was caught in a break in the moral order, Lear was not. The tragedy of Lear is that he did not recognize the ever lurking threat of evil. It began through his initiative. He dallied in innocence, relaxed his vigilance, so his intrinsic goodness was subverted to evil's purpose which was the shattering of the moral order. The tragic quality centers about the paradox of innocence. The ideal person would be so removed from evil that he or she would not only be free of it but would not know of its existence and possibility. However such innocence is so easily corrupted that the innocents are easily aligned against virtue. One person in the world with malevolent intent is a peril to all the innocents of the earth.

In summary, the tragic in tragedy, as presented in Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear, is that evil and the suffering it brings are not from outside this world but are an integral part of it. Sometimes good people are enmeshed in it and are helpless. Sometimes good people doubt its existence and are thus vulnerable to its wastings in a manner that they need not have been.