

SOME TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN SHAKESPEARE'S
"RICHARD III" AND "RICHARD II"

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

The history plays of William Shakespeare are of great and world-wide interest not only for historians but also for scholars and students of literature. Although these histories have been continually the subject of discussion and controversy since the sixteenth century, their richness and universality still make them subject to more discussion and criticism. In writing history plays, Shakespeare's aim was probably moral as well as didactic. His purpose was to convey a message to men, especially rulers, exposing the evils of tyranny and usurpation. In writing history plays, Shakespeare's main concern was not factual truth but poetic and aesthetic truth which in turn is timeless and universal. So as a dramatist Shakespeare's method of writing history was to select, modify and add new incidents and characters to the chronicles in order to stress the plays' human aspect. In so doing, Shakespeare helped to bring history plays closer to tragedy than to history.

The tragic elements in Shakespeare's plays *Richard III* (1592) and *Richard II* (1595) will be the focus of this thesis.

Emphasis will be laid on the tools or devices that the dramatist uses in order to develop the tragic conflict in each play such as the characters, the plot, the themes and the imagery. In addition to this, "New Historicism" which appeared in the 1980's, will be discussed in order to reveal how it emerged in Shakespeare's histories: *Richard II* and *Richard III*. It is hoped that the critical analysis would prove that the main principles of New Historicism were incorporated in Shakespeare's histories long before the identification of the movement.

In writing about the tragic elements in Shakespeare's history plays, it may be useful to present a quick survey of the development of tragedy from the ancient Greek times till the Elizabethan age. This review will be the substance of Chapter I. It will be helpful to fully apprehend the meaning of tragedy and its different definitions throughout that period. Furthermore, the relation between history and tragedy and the difference between these two concepts, will be discussed in this chapter. New Historicism, whose main function is to remove the barriers separating literature and history and which attempts to link the past with the present, will also be considered.

Chapter II will deal with a critical study of the tragic elements in *Richard III* (1592). The play belongs to Shakespeare's first tetralogy which comprises *The three parts of Henry VI* and *Richard III*. *Richard III* traces events since the death of Henry VII, till the end of Richard's reign and the succession of Henry Tudor to the throne. In writing *Richard III*, Shakespeare blended history with literature; he added new incidents such as the wooing scene (I,ii) and he created new characters such as Margaret in order to give the play a tragic perspective. But as the play was written at the beginning of Shakespeare's life as a dramatist, it is considered as an immature play because the protagonist of the play is a villain.

Chapter III will concentrate on *Richard II* (1595) as a representation of the dramatist's second tetralogy which comprises *Richard II*, *the two parts of Henry IV* and *Henry V*. The play covers the last two years of Richard's reign. *Richard II* is considered maturer than *Richard III*, though *Richard III* is more lively. *Richard II* possesses the features of tragedy which are found in *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, and this will also be alluded to in this chapter.

The choice of *Richard III* and *Richard II*, as two examples of the first and the second tetralogies, came as a result of their sharing some distinct tragic elements that distinguish them from the rest of the history plays. In both these plays Shakespeare has considerably developed his sources and treated these plays not as a historian, but as a unique and creative artist.

CHAPTER ONE
Tragedy and History

CHAPTER I

Tragedy and History

The concept of 'Tragedy' has undergone several changes in the field of literary history. It has its origin in the Greek and Roman times, but the subsequent cultures developed it as a literary genre. The concept of tragedy in modern times is completely different from Greek tragedy; this difference came about in response to the special conditions of contemporary life. As the modern man suffers in order to live, suffering has become a dominant idea in modern tragedy. Una Ellis Fermor, a twentieth century critic, believes that tragedy means suffering and that there should be a balance between good and evil in a good tragedy. She declares:

Balance is thus maintained in all great tragedy; suffering and catastrophe upon the one hand and upon the other a relation (often unspecified and undefined) with some fundamental or universal law whose operation justifies or compensates them. From this arises the conflict of impressions: evident evil against partially hidden yet immanent and overruling good. Thus for all tragedy is akin.¹

¹ Una Ellis Fermor, Shakespeare's Drama (London :Metheun, 1980), p. 154.

Fermor's idea of balance between good and evil is supported by I.A. Richards in his essay "Principles of Literary Criticism". Giving Shakespeare's history plays as an example, he says:

In Shakespeare's histories, which move towards the tragic idea without asserting it, we feel something of this balance between Henry VI and Richard of York, between Richard II and Bolingbroke, between Henry VIII and those many who encountered his wrath. Macbeth and Duncan, Antony and Octavius, Coriolanus and the Tribunes, represent valid point of view on each side. The disaster that emerges is due to the opposition¹

The twentieth century has an increasing interest in the psychology of man, so the dramatists became more interested in character than in plot. In this respect, the twentieth century dramatists agree with Shakespeare who differs from Aristotle concerning the importance of the plot. Shakespeare lays a great deal of emphasis on characterization, to the extent that he sometimes makes some of his characters overshadow the plot, as we see in Othello, Macbeth and Cleopatra.

¹ I. A. Richards quoted in, Clifford Leech, The Critical Idiom : Tragedy (London : Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1978), p. 57.

Aristotle, the Greek philosopher followed by the Roman critic Horace, believes that the fable or the plot is the essence of tragedy and that it should have the priority in any work of art. His definition of tragedy stresses the plot, action and response of the audience to them. He defines tragedy in his *Poetics* (2.334 - 323 B. C.) as :

An imitation of some action that is important, entire and of a proper magnitude by language embellished and rendered pleasurable but by different means in different parts-in the way not of narration but of action effecting through pity and terror the correction and refinement of such passions¹

Walter Jackson Bate points out that this emphasis on plot rather than on the portrayal of particular characters and his insistence that man be revealed through action not through feelings, may be said to illustrate the classical conviction that "poetry" or drama should guide the observer and instruct him rather than give voice to his personal associations and feelings ²

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Thomas Twining (Cairo: The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop, 1979), P. 14.

² Walter Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic, Premises of Taste in Eighteenth Century England* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1961), p. 19.

Next to the plot come the characters. Aristotle believed that the change from prosperity to adversity should not happen to a virtuous man because this evokes disgust rather than "pity" and "fear". At the same time, the change from adversity to prosperity should not be represented to a vicious character. Similarly, the fall of a very bad man from prosperity to adversity should not be represented because it excites neither pity nor terror.¹ In short, Aristotle summed up the characteristics of the tragic hero in the following terms:

There remains for our choice the character between these extremes: that of a person neither eminently virtuous or just nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some error of human frailty, and this person should also be someone of high flourishing prosperity.²

However, Aristotle's definition of tragedy remained unchanged during the Roman times and the Middle Ages. In the Elizabethan age, it had undergone a slight change by Marlowe, Kyd and Shakespeare who depicted villains as tragic heroes for their plays, such as the characters of Dr. Faustus by Marlowe,

¹ Poetics, P. 28.

² Poetics, P. 28-29.

Lorenzo and Villuppo by Kyd and Macbeth and Richard III by Shakespeare. In spite of the change they made in the characters of their tragic heroes, Marlowe, Kyd and Shakespeare retained the idea of rank which was stressed by Aristotle. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this concept of rank is rejected because modern writers such as Ibsen, Shaw and Osborne became more interested in the common and ordinary man.

Dorothea Krook, a twentieth century critic, tries to link the traditional concept of the tragic hero with the modern concept. She combines the classical concept of nobility of the tragic hero with suffering which is one of the dominant ideas in modern drama. She insists on the tragic hero's being an extraordinary man with necessary qualities in him such as "Charisma", courage, nobility of spirit and at the same time he should have the capacity to learn through suffering¹.

Furthermore, Aristotle's "Hamartia", the hero's error, was discussed by many critics. Different issues about its implications resulted from their arguments. In his book, *Hamartia*, J. M.

¹ Dorothea Krook, "Heroic Tragedy", in *Tragedy Development in Criticism*, ed. R. P. Drapr (Hong Kong : The Macmillian Press Ltd., 1980); P. 189-190.