

THE TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN THE TRAGEDY OF KING RICHARD II

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This paper aims to discover the tragic elements in the History of *King Richard the Second*. It is worth investigating this play to see the different features of tragedy that have been used in forming the acts and scenes of this play. The play is compared to other tragedies of Shakespeare to display its similarities and differences with them. How do the people around the king behave or seek to get power? The research investigates the ambition of the other characters for the king's throne which is followed by many murders. At the same time, the characteristics of Richard's identity and personality are discussed and also compared to the other Shakespeare's tragic heroes in terms of flow and fate. The play's structure is also investigated to figure out the common characteristics of the tragedy. How does the play start and how does it end? One of the important tools of the play is its language. Almost all of Shakespeare's Histories and some acts or scenes of Comedies include terrifying scenes and frightening events in this play.

Keywords: Tragic elements. Character. Murder. Power. Ambition

Introduction

"Among all the world's great dramatists, Shakespeare alone mastered the art of writing comedies and tragedies. Since they tell entertaining stories and deal with important problems in life. His plays have always been popular" (Mansoor & Noor Al-deen 294). Hence, among his *Histories*, *King Richard II* is the one that is full of tragic mood and sense. "The play is now regarded as one of the greatest of Shakespeare's histories, second in popularity only to *1 Henry IV*" (Forker 90). Most scholars believe that *King Richard II* was composed in 1595, but still, no one can be sure about the date and it remains debatable (Forker 111). It seems that Shakespeare's main source for this play is Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), but Shakespeare also took advantage of more than seven other principal sources which are Froissart's *Chronicle* (1523-5), an anonymous French manuscript chronicle entitled *Chronicque de la Traison et Mort de Richart Deux Roy Dengleterre* (c. 1400), Hall's *Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancaster and York* (1548), *The Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), Daniel's *First Four Books of the Civil Wars* (1595), *Woodstock* (1591-5), and Creton's *Metrical Histoire Du Roy d'Angleterre Richard II (1591-2)* (Forker 124). The title of the play *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* as a personal name is similar to the titles of tragedies like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and especially the tragedy of *King Lear* as they are both Kings of

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England.

Problem statement

Although it is *History*, there are many tragic elements in this play as it is reflected in the title. Therefore, these elements show the play as a tragedy regardless of its historical background.

Research question

What are the tragic elements that exist in the historic play of King Richard II? Are there similarities between this play and the tragedies of Shakespeare?

Objectives

This research aims to show the characters, events, scenes tragic side. It explores the tragedy within this historical play.

Discussion**The Tragedy of King Richard II from a tragic perspective**

The exposition of Shakespeare's tragedies starts with the minor characters rather than the heroes and these characters generally talk about the greater characters in status than themselves and mainly the heroes. Then, after a short period or in the following scenes, the hero appears. This is seen in the four great tragedies of Shakespeare in *Shakespeare's Tragedies* by A.C. Bradley. For example, in *Hamlet*, the exposition starts with some soldiers talking about the ghost of the late king of Denmark, Old Hamlet that has been appearing two nights before. At the very beginning, *Othello* starts with a discussion by Roderigo and Iago about the position of lieutenant that Othello passes from Iago, who thinks that he deserves that military post, to Cassio. *King Lear's* exposition starts with Earl of Kent and Gloucester who talk about King Lear and his decision to divide the kingdom among his daughters. Finally, *Macbeth* opens with the three Witches who try to arrange a meeting with Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, and later the king of Scotland. In contrast, *King Richard the Second* opens with King Ricard, king of England, who tries to judge between two disputed noblemen, Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk. These two noblemen are lower characters in position than King Richard in his kingdom. Thus, the structure of the explosion or the opening scene of the play is not like that of the other Tragedies. It is similar to Shakespeare's tragedies in that it raises a conflict between these two noblemen, Bolingbroke and Mowbray, and this conflict, to some extent,

causes the death of King Richard at the end of the play. Hamilton is on the belief that the king's actions have negative impacts on society as a whole since he does not follow the rules as a king. He even treats his people as 'slaves' while exploiting them. While these misdeeds affect the lives of his people, he is also affected by losing his nation's advocacy. (9)

King Richard, unlike King Lear in *King Lear* and Claudius in *Hamlet*, is not involved in the conflict at the start of the play. The conflict is between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, two noblemen accusing each other of being a traitor to the country. Bloom states that ahead of the commencing of the events of the play, the Duke of Gloucester, Thomas of Woodstock had been killed followed by the combat of Bolingbroke and Mowbray who is involved in the murder of Woodstock. (19) Later on, when the King prevents them from shedding each other's blood on England's land, he becomes a part of the conflict. As a result, Richard gets a tragic flow and it results from his judgment on the two noblemen Bolingbroke and Mowbray by banishing them from England due to their disputes and arguments. Then, Bolingbroke's father dies with grief and Bolingbroke raises an army in Ireland and invades England. The King suffers after his imprisonment in Pomfret Castle and his judgment causes his downfall and the fatal fate of many other characters especially those who try to defend him as a king. What differentiates the suffering of King Richard from that of the other tragic heroes is that it is expected, in contrast to the tragedies, the King knows, in act three/scene two, that things gradually get complicated when reports are come by Scrope that not only young but old men also, join Bolingbroke's army. Bolingbroke's return follows the King's escape to Flint Castle which shows the king's cowardice. Then, under Bolingbroke's stress, he resigns and hands the throne to Bolingbroke. Kehler states that the king is aware of his power and his reign is under control, but in the latter chapters, he loses control which enlarges the audience's pity and pathos. (8)

Nemesis as one of the main elements of tragedy, which exists in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and some other tragedies of Shakespeare, is not present in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*. However, Bolingbroke's reactions and his rage towards King Richard come due to Richard's involvement in the death of Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt. Later on, Bolingbroke wishes for Richard's death and as a result of his wish, Exton murders King Richard. At the beginning of the play, King Richard is revealed as the murderer of Gloucester, his uncle and when the Duchess of Gloucester asks her brother-in-law John of Gaunt to take revenge for Gaunt's blood, he refuses to do so due to the King's power. Although a sense of revenge can be noticed, still, it cannot be called revenge while the murder of the king is not performed by Bolingbroke if he is

considered the one who is wronged by the King.

Death is one of the fundamental elements of Shakespeare's tragedies which is plentiful in this play. John of Gaunt, father of Bolingbroke dies in grief for his banished son and because of his age in act two, scene one as he lastly says these words "Convey me to my bed, then to my grave. / Love they to live that love and honor have" (2.1.138-9). Bolingbroke orders the execution of two of the followers of King Richard, Bushy, and Green, because they encourage the King to decide his banishment. This character is shown as very powerful here as he orders their execution though he is not the king yet, he says "Bring forth these men./ Bushy and Green, I will not vex your souls/ Since presently your souls must part your bodies" (3.1.1-3) Exton murders the king in the fifth act and fifth scene. Exton hears King Henry saying that he wishes for the death of his enemy. For this, He decides to kill Richard who is now imprisoned in Pomfret Castle and this scene can be considered as the most tragic one in the play.

That hand shall burn in the never-quenching fire

That staggers thus my person. Exton, thy fierce hand

Hath with the king's blood stained the king's land.

Mount, mount, my soull thy seat is up on high;

Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die. He dies (5.5.105-12).

Shakespeare uses serious language in *King Richard II*. Throughout most of the scenes of the play, the language that is used is command, order, and defying. "We were not born to sue but to command" (1.1.196). This is when King Richard judges the two noblemen. The seriousness of the language continues till the end of the play. King Henry also, in his last speech orders Exton to disappear "And never show thy head by day nor light" (5.6.44). The play contains one long soliloquy by King Richard in the fifth act, the fifth scene while he is in prison. This soliloquy shows the king's despair and hopelessness as he laments his loneliness and powerlessness. Hattaway says that the poetic language of the play is as important as the actions, events, scenes, and gestures to form the drama. For example, Exton is capable of reading Bolingbroke's ominous intentions from his serious and threatening lines. (141) The use of many fatal terms like blood, death, and revenge displays a dark mood to the audience as it is mentioned in "The blood of English shall manure the ground (IV.i.137). Pierce thinks that the term 'blood' is a symbol of inheritance and death as well as the corruption of the familial and social bonds. It might create a kind of disorder especially the bond between the father and son which is affected by blood since sons mostly need to take revenge for their father's blood or their ancestors. (150)

As a part of the political system of the time, the animosity between King Richard and his uncle John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster develops due to Gaunt's ambitions both for power and lands. (55-6) Then, by mismanaging his power and realm, King Richard becomes arrogant in England. When his uncle dies as a result of his son's banishment, Richard seizes all his property which legally belongs to his son, Bolingbroke. Richard is the king of England which is hierarchically the highest rank in the kingdom. He is quite powerful at the beginning of the play and his power is confirmed by Bolingbroke when King Richard in Act One, Scene One shortens his banishment from ten years to six, Bolingbroke says "How long a time lies in one little word!// Four lagging winters and four wanton springs/ End in a word: such is the breath of kings" (1.3.206-8). It also shows Bolingbroke's ambition as he looks greatly to the power of the King when he judges the noblemen.

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are brave on the battlefield and they fight their enemies even if they are alone as Hamlet and Macbeth, but Richard is shown as a coward when he escapes to Flint Castle as Sir Stephen Scrope tells him that his uncle, York, the governor of England, joins Bolingbroke. So, such a cowardly action lowers the status of the King in the eyes of the audience which cannot come with the actions of a tragic hero.

By heaven, I'll hate him everlastingly

That bids me be of comfort anymore.

Go to Flint castle: there I'll pine away;

A king, woe's slave, shall kingly woe obey.

That power I have, discharge; and let them go

To ear the land that hath some hope to grow,

For I have none.

With this speech, King Richard loses all of his greatness as a king, and the audience cannot admire him compared to the great tragic heroes like Macbeth and King Lear. Here, he loses his identity as a King who shall demonstrate sovereignty and maintenance. In the tragedies where a king is present, the

lower characters do not dare to insult the king or use bad words in front of him. For instance, King Lear in *King Lear* is respected by all the characters in his presence even by those who are against him, while King Richard is insulted by Gaunt as he is dying. He says that the king is sick of reputation. It is an insult not only against the king but also against the hierarchical system. Richard's downfall and death have a relation with his prior actions, but he is not the real cause of his death. The situation is ambiguous and the audience is unable to decide completely whether the King contributes to his destruction or not. Bolingbroke's banishment and King Richard's seizure of Bolingbroke's legal inheritance are involved in this issue. Therefore, if the murder of Richard is considered a result of King Henry's motivation for Aumerle. In contrast, if the audience decides that King Henry is innocent of the murder of King Richard, King Richard's prior actions cannot be considered the result of his destruction. However, Richard gets nobility when it comes to his death and the audience has a sense of pity and fear towards him.

King Richard is a man of words while Bolingbroke is of action. Shakespeare shapes both characters in a way that the audience cannot decide who is a tyrant and who is a patriot. If we consider King Richard loyal to his country, then Bolingbroke would be a tyrant and vice versa. Bolingbroke overcomes King Richard and this is what makes the King more remarkable because he becomes aware of his failings. "The egotism of Hamlet primitively exists in King Richard as well as the growth from arrogant to humanity that of King Lear" (Forker 3).

King Richard does not have all the qualities of a tragic hero who is murdered by Exton in Act Five, Scene Five because he is not a scapegoat like the tragic heroes of the other tragedies of Shakespeare. It is known that the tragic heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies sacrifice their lives to save their countries, like Brutus in Julius Caesar, or for the sake of their families, like Romeo and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, or for the sake of restoring a kingdom, like *Hamlet*, but, here, the situation is completely different. King Richard is murdered while the state is ruled by King Henry and obviously, his death cannot be considered patriotism or sacrificial. The audience cannot see this real catastrophe as they see in tragedies. The potential tragedy of the rumor of King Richard's death while he is in Ireland fighting with the enemies makes his supporters disappear and when he goes back to England, seeing that all his supporters have left him, he consoles himself by being supported by York, but he also realizes that York has joined Henry Bolingbroke. Thus, the King falls in despair and disappointment which shows his dependence on the outer powers to strengthen his realm that extracts him from his real mightiness.

When Bolingbroke raises an army in Ireland and comes to invade England, many of the noblemen of England as Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, and Edmund of Langley, Duke of York join his army against King Richard because he usurps all the legal inheritance of Bolingbroke when John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster and father of Bolingbroke dies. The noble families think that this illegal act is something against all of them (Frye 58)

In the final act, there is a sense of restoration of social order as Henry Bolingbroke becomes the king of England. The play opens with order and then it goes towards disorder with the banishment of Bolingbroke and Mowbray by King Richard and then the death of John of Gaunt, but towards the end, there is a sense of order and stability. Richard as a king has absolute control over England at the beginning of the play, but with his reckless decisions, he allows Bolingbroke to raise an army and take over the throne of the kingdom. Thus, Henry Bolingbroke's action comes as a result of Richard's weakness and misuse of his realm. He is shown, to some extent, as the savior of England from a sick and arrogant king. His loyalty is shown at the exposition of the play when he comes to the king and accuses Mowbray of being a traitor. He does not fight Mowbray for his own sake, but to save his country from such a traitor that may spoil the sovereign.

Now, Thomas Mowbray, do I turn to thee,

And mark my greeting well; for what I speak

My body shall make good upon this earth,

Or my divine soul answers it in heaven.

Thou art a traitor and a miscreant,

Too good to be so and too bad to live (1.1.35.40)

This challenge shows Bolingbroke's braveness and courage as a faithful and sincere character. His sincerity makes him devote his life to his country. It also proves his greatness which perhaps makes him a better king than Richard. Saul states that King Richard is not bald especially when he faces his enemies at Smithfield. (54) There is an imbalance between the two regarding personality and power.

The restoration lacks some characteristics of the restoration of tragedies. For example, the restoration in *Macbeth* and *King Lear* can be seen much more

clearly than in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*. The audience may ask "What kind of restoration is this when Exton murders Richard as a wish of Henry?" Exton justifies his act as he says: "From your mouth, my lord, did I this deed" (5.5.37). Although the king declares that he has wished Richard dead, he banishes Exton for this murder. However, in his last speech, King Henry announces his guilt by going to the holy land to purify himself from involvement in the murder.

I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land to wash this blood off from my guilty hand. March sadly after; grace my mournings here in weeping after this untimely bier.

Thus, the audience shall not think of Richard as a victim because he has wronged Bolingbroke by seizing his property and becoming the leading cause of Gaunt's death. It is also difficult to decide whether the reign of King Henry is a new period of stability or restoration because he is involved in King Richard's murder. After Bolingbroke became the king of England under the name of King Henry IV, other troubles arose under his sovereign. In act five, scene two, Aumerle tries to make a conspiracy against King Henry, but his father, York, reveals his treason to the King and when Aumerle and his mother Duchess of York plead with King Henry, he forgives Aumerle so that God may forgive him too.

At the end of the Tragedies, the crown cannot be taken unless the king is murdered or the audience sees the death of the king, but Bolingbroke takes over the throne while King Richard is still alive. It is not only the throne that is withdrawn from King Richard, his freedom is also taken by Bolingbroke by imprisoning him in Pomfret Castle. Thus, the King is infuriated by the lower characters in rank. Also, if there is an appointment of a new King in Shakespeare's tragedies, structurally, it is in the last act and the last scene, and the audience is not allowed to see the reign of the new king to know his character because this event of taking the throne is the last in the play. For example, Fortinbras becomes the King of Denmark in *Hamlet* in Act Five, Scene Five, Edgar the new King of England in *King Lear*, and Malcolm the new King of Scotland in *Macbeth*. These new Kings of Shakespeare's tragedies all take the throne in the last scene of the last act. However, Bolingbroke appears as the new King of England in the fifth act, the third scene while the act consists of six scenes. So, the audience sees King Henry's reign through the last four scenes of the fifth act.

The conclusion

To conclude, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* is close to the tragedy due to the existence of many tragic elements as is shown, but still, it cannot be called

a tragedy because it lacks some elements of a tragedy. The element of death dominates the play as the main element of tragedy including the murder of the king. The opening of the play shows the conflict between two noblemen then with the strict judgment of the King by banishing both of them; Mowbray for his life and Bolingbroke for six years, the King enters into the flaw of the play. At the end of the play, the events of the play go back to the same point where it starts. At the very beginning, the King of England is considered the murderer of his uncle Gaunt and there are two disputed noblemen, Bolingbroke and Mowbray, who want to solve their struggles with single combat. Also, in the last few scenes of the fifth act, King Henry is involved in the murder of the late King of England, Richard. There is also at the end, a single combat among Aumerle, Fitzwater, and Harry Percy which the King delays. Finally, the assassination of the king follows his imprisonment. However, the events of Tragedies come one after the other in a quick sense, but these quick consequences cannot be sensed here. There are long distances between the events of the play.

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