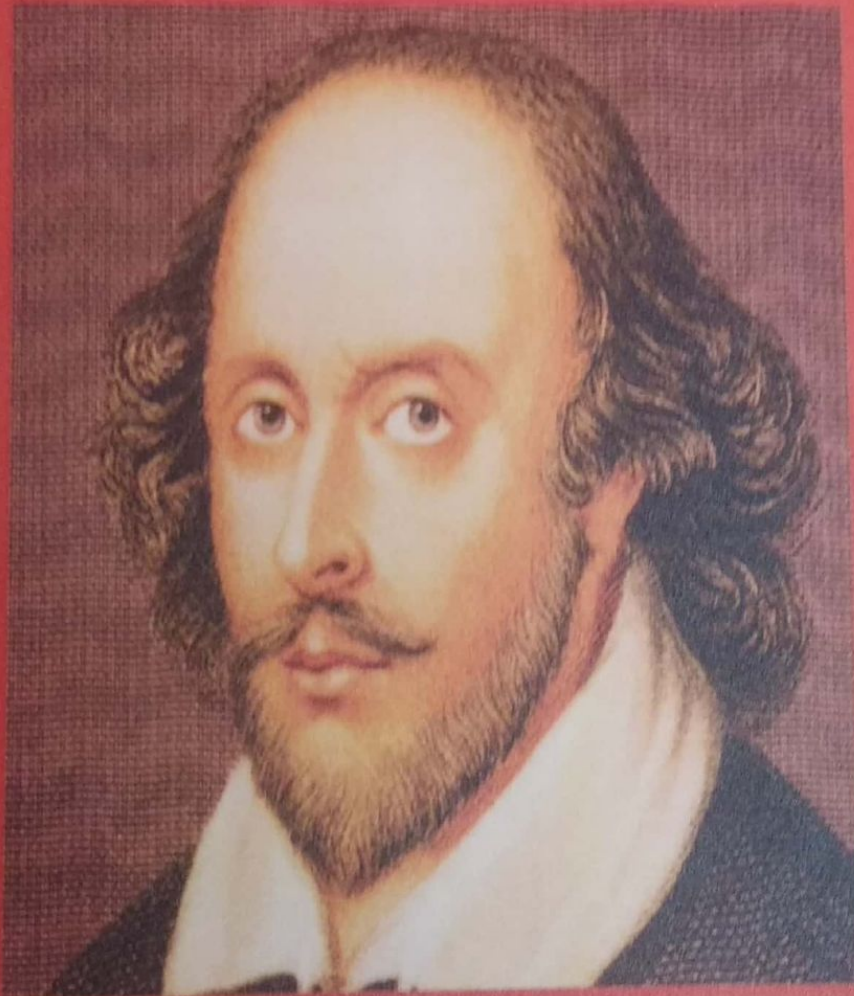


SHAKESPEARE FOREVER

T.M. UMA RANI
GOMEZ SOPHIA
U. ANAMICA



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women
(Autonomous)
Periyakulam, Tamilnadu, India

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Web:jaceng@annejac.com
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"STRAIT IS THE GATE, AND NARROW IS THE WAY": A STUDY ON THE PROTAGONISTS OF SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

R. GOWRI MANOHARI

The plays of Shakespeare are the master keys that open the doors of art of living. Reading his plays itself is a life enhancing activity. Through his protagonists' fall and accomplishment his readers are sermonized to lead a perfect life. His characters are the benchmarks to all the men and women of the world. His portrayal of femininity nourishes the imagination of the poets. The courageousness, shrewdness and innocence of men are established through his characterization. Like an immediate punishment from God, the fools assault their opposite speaker by their witty commands and correct their mistakes. And they are also the agents of happiness. Sometimes they philosophize the main characters as well as the readers. At that time, the fools are the mouthpiece of Shakespeare. On the whole Shakespeare is a keen observer of men and matters.

The comic plays deal with the success and fortune of the heroes. But the tragedies examine the inexorable defeat of men by the monster called fate. So, most of the time, the tragedies entice the readers than the comedies. The fall of the tragic heroes of Shakespeare happens because of their own actions. The flaw in their characters lead them to the downfall. They fail to choose the 'less travelled' path, in times of calamity. The eminences of these great heroes are buried under anxiety and fear. Even

though they are not new to this critical situation, unlike the wise men they have failed to choose the 'narrow gate'. Their majesty bends its knees before the hands of fate.

Hamlet hesitates to kill Claudius, though he knows he is the cause for his father's death. Even after the complaint of his father's ghost, he never feels the urgency of taking revenge instead he wants to check the sincerity of the ghost. He fails to act as a prince and as a son. In such a critical moment even an ordinary man would have taken revenge for his father's cryptic death; but Hamlet is ineffective and reluctant to react. Hamlet's procrastination in decision making leads to his tragic end.

HAMLET.

Alas! Poor ghost.

GHOST. Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing

To what I shall unfold.

HAMLET.

Speak; I am bound to hear.

GHOST. So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.

HAMLET. What?

GHOST. I am thy father's spirit; (1.5.5-10)

Othello, the protagonist is an army general of Venice and most romantic figure among the Shakespearian heroes who suffers from suspicion and jealousy. He mistrusts those who are loyal to him. He loves Desdemona and he goes in the verge of taking her to the battlefield. He does not want her to be in her father's house in his absence because he loves her abundantly. In the beginning of the play he appears calm and dignified. Even when Brabantio comes to him with a sword, he says,

"Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them". (1.2.59)

Such a man completely loses all his control over him and all his love turns into hatred when his mind is poisoned by Iago. Iago twists the story against Desdemona by making Cassio meet her for his reinstatement. Without knowing the treacherous idea of Iago, the innocent Desdemona goes out of her way and pleads her husband on Cassio's behalf. Othello finds nothing wrong about it in the beginning, but by the gangrenous speech of Iago leads him to the path of destruction.

Did Michael Cassio,
IAGO.

When you wooed my lady, know of your love?

OTHELLO. He did, from first to last. Why dost thou ask?

IAGO. But for a satisfaction of my thought;

No further harm.

OTHELLO.

Why of thy thought, Iago?

IAGO. I did not think he had been acquainted with her. (3.3.95-99)

Othello walks in the path which is paved by Iago and his judgement becomes chaotic that leads to the death of his wife and himself.

In *King Lear*, Lear, a majestic king, does not know how to distinguish the love of the duplicitous daughters and sincere Cordelia. His arrogance, misjudgment and ignorance lead him to his doom. He doesn't know how to discriminate the love of Cordelia from Goneril and Regan. In the very first scene Shakespeare unwraps these flaws of Lear to the audience.

LEAR. But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA.

LEAR. So young, and so untender?

Ay, my good lord.

CORDELIA. So young, my lord, and true.

LEAR. Let it be so. Thy truth then be thy dower:

Towards the end of the play, he suffers from guilty consciousness and dies. He learns his lessons from his sufferings. His death is not a punishment to him; but Cordelia's.

Next, if we take the story of Macbeth, he is a great soldier in the army of King Duncan; but his ambition is kindled by the witches in the very first scene. He wants the witches to be clearer. Even though he holds a higher position in the King Duncan's army, he aspires for the position of the king.

MACBETH. Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:

By Sinel's death I know I am thane of Glamis;
But how of Cowdor? the thane of Cowdor lives,
A prosperous gentleman; (1.3.70-73)

Immediately after hearing prophecies he forgets about his position and without reasoning these presage he is ready to attain that. All his devotion and commitment to his labor doesn't work in front of fate.

Shakespeare's heroes fight with their inner conflicts. Macbeth fights between his over ambition and his fidelity. Othello struggles amid his love and suspicious nature. Hamlet brawls between his Plan of revenge and religious way of living. King Lear scuffles with his misjudgment and his daughters' betrayal. Like this every individual comes across a mental trauma in their mind. But, assorting wise decision is very

important. Like Robert Frost a man should be courageous enough to choose the less travelled path.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference. (18-21)

The selection of the wrong path is very easy but travelling in that may lead to the catastrophic end. The Bible says, 'the way to hell is broad and many will travel through it. But it definitely leads to destruction'. But choosing the narrow and 'less travelled' path is difficult in the beginning; but it will 'make all the difference'. Because the way to heaven is narrow. Only a few can travel through it which leads to the eternal life. By choosing the ordinary or wide path the heroes of Shakespeare enter into purgatory. Through his portrayal of tragic heroes, Shakespeare, the king of English Literature, instructs his readers to follow thus;

"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in there at:

Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." (Matt. 7: 13-14)

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