

SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY AND LAMB'S TALE: A STUDY OF *OTHELLO*

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Abstract

This paper aims at a comparative study of Shakespeare's *Othello* and Lamb's *Tale of Othello*. In doing so, it traces back the emergence of tragedy in Renaissance and fiction in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as two separate genres. It also points out the deviations of Lamb's *Tale* from the Shakespearean oeuvre in order to appropriate the Bard's masterpiece for children's entertainment and education.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Lamb, *Othello*, Tragedy, Tale.

This paper attempts to look at the genres of the tragedy and the tale. It is of interest that a single story, namely that of *Othello* has been rendered into both artistic moulds of the said genres leading to the germination of two different texts. Tragedy flourished in Renaissance England, while the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of the short story. Looking at this genealogy, it would be interesting to locate the similarities and differences in the two texts [Shakespeare's *Othello* and Lamb's *Tale of Othello*], to see if an 'essential' form of tragedy survives in Charles Lamb's *Tale of Othello* in his *Tales from Shakespeare* (jointly written with Mary Lamb). Has Lamb's reading of Shakespeare's *Othello* churned out a tale which, although it sets out to make Shakespeare accessible to the young reader, becomes an imprint of its own age and time? Moreover, issues of whether Shakespeare's plays were capable of being represented on stage became resonant when Lamb was writing, with Lamb himself joining the debate in his essay "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation". Is there a distinct discourse of tragedy which privileges poetry over prose in the speech of the tragic protagonist? These issues are discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

"Indeed, the consensus of English critical opinion has been that the tragic form of Shakespeare – unlike that of classical Greek drama or that of neoclassical French drama – derives from a poetic vision of such brilliance that no grammar can suffice to translate it into concrete form." (Esther Merle Jackson, *King Lear: The Grammar of Tragedy*, p.25) [1]. The 'consensus of English critical opinion' that Jackson refers to is an indication to the post-eighteenth century critical assessment of Shakespearean drama. Neo-classicists such as Pope, romanticists such as Lamb, and humanists such as Bradley have held that the drama of Shakespeare lends itself more to literature than to theatre. Jackson's statement also seems to categorize Shakespeare's tragedies into an altogether new, separate body – different from that of the Greek and neoclassical forms – by virtue of its being embedded in poetic language. Two

assumptions on Jackson's part may be detected here: first, that Shakespeare's dramas, especially the tragedies, are essentially poetic. The second assumption proceeds from the notion that the form of poetry is inherently chaotic and not given to rules of grammar and syntax. Therefore, attempts to perform a Shakespearean tragedy by use of idea, sound, costume, and setting – are doomed to fail at the conceptual stage itself.

In his essay "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation", Charles Lamb critiques the notion of dramatic performance as being at par with the power to create poetical works of imagination. He objects to the deification of the actor, whom he considers a mere imitator of the signs of passions of a dramatic character created by the dramatist. He, however, concedes that the imitative portrayal of the actor is much more impressionistic on the viewer rather than on the reader who must slowly apprehend the dramatic text through reading. And herein, the average playgoer (especially those who cannot read or write) identifies the actor with the character which they represent.

Theatre, in Renaissance England, was by no means an exercise in individuality. As Stephen Greenblatt writes: "There may be a moment in which a solitary individual puts words on a page, but it is by no means clear that this moment is at the heart of the mystery... Moreover, the moment of inscription ... is itself a social moment." [Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, p.4-5] [2]. The point here is that dramatists like Shakespeare never shied away from declaring their indebtedness to literary sources. Theatre companies paid for the books used as sources- for example, Holinshed. Thus so far it is clear that the theatre was the space invested with the power to generate pleasure in the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages. With the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the individual reader became the audience. The public space of performance shifted to the private interior space of the home. Although novels may have been read aloud to members of the household in the eighteenth century, this specific domestic group was nothing like the theatrical audience of Elizabethan England. Simultaneously, the mode of cultural expression and practice moved from poetic drama to that of prose.

The genre of tragedy is traditionally thought to be most equipped to transcend the temporal moment of creation and to represent universal truths about human life. In his tragic drama *Othello*, Shakespeare has been credited with apprehending and representing the "most painfully exciting and the most terrible" tragic visions in western dramatic literature. There is a long drawn history of criticism of *Othello*. A. C. Bradley says that *Othello* was written next after *Hamlet*. After *Hamlet* in the tragic world of Shakespeare the heroes are enlarged to something colossal reminding of Michael Angelo's figures. Othello as a hero is the first instance of being essentially large, grand, towering personality among his fellows. Bradley points out that *Othello* is about 'sexual jealousy' which brings with it a sense of 'shame and humiliation'. Swinburne's point is that we pity Othello even more than Desdemona but we watch Desdemona with more unmitigated distress. Coleridge describes Iago's villainy as 'motiveless malignity', which is criticized by Bradley as misleading because the latter believes that there are reasons behind Iago's such kind of villainy. According to Thomas Rymer, *Othello* is a 'tragedy of handkerchief' which serves as 'a warning to all good wives that they look well to their linnen' and 'a lesson to husbands, that before their jealousy be tragical, the proofs may be mathematical'. He adds that *Othello* is a mix of 'some burlesque, some humour, and ramble of comical wit, some show, and some mimicry to divert the spectators; but the tragical part is plainly ... a bloody farce, without salt or savour'.

The next section hopes to look at Lamb's rendition of Shakespeare's *Othello* in terms of the obvious references to Shakespeare's text and also the deviations that Lamb incorporates into his Tale. Cynthia Sundberg Wall's *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* is a study of a variety of prose forms of the period. Wall narrates the transformations of spatial descriptions in the late eighteenth century novels. By the eighteenth century, interior spaces were so varied that print texts needed to describe these spaces and the objects within them.

This need to describe, to narrate informed the literature produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Tales from Shakespeare, Designed for the use of Young persons*, written in 1807, was the first joint work of Charles and Mary Lamb. They received sixty guineas for it. Charles wrote *Lear, Macbeth, Timon, Romeo, Hamlet* and *Othello*. *Tales from Shakespeare* does not claim accuracy for itself. In an essay dated 1932, F.J. Darton praises the *Tales* saying that although the stories can no longer claim to provide all modern children with spontaneous pleasure, what they do have is "a kind of earnestness and faith which grows into charm.... The English, as language, is more than a means of expression; it is an expression in itself." [3].

In 1807, Mary and Charles Lamb published *Tales from Shakespeare*, their attempt to portray the lessons that Shakespeare has to offer in a more age-appropriate manner. Since the Lambs, many authors and filmmakers have adapted Shakespeare's plays for children and young adults. Shakespeare's *Othello* offers readers a cautionary tale about the dangers of envy, isolation, and revenge while commenting on racial and gender tension. Universal themes for sure, but considering the circumstances of sexual infidelity, physical violence, and suicide, one might understand why this play may be unsuitable for younger audiences. Knowing who the target audience is for these adaptations is the first question that needs to be answered. Charles and Mary Lamb's version of *Othello* is clearly aimed at children. The decision to re-write the tale of Moor of Venice in a simplified prose style is evidence of this. According to Megan Lynn Isaac's *Heirs to Shakespeare*, "The Lambs felt that since children are more familiar with the style and conventions of stories than dramas, prose retelling would be both more easily comprehended and more appealing to young readers". [4] In the "Preface" to *Tales* Lamb clearly reveals his intention saying

It has been wished to make these Tales easy reading for very young children. To the utmost of their ability the writers have constantly kept this in mind; but the subjects of most of them made this a very difficult task. It was no easy matter to give the histories of men and women in terms familiar to the apprehension of a very young mind. For young ladies too, it has been the intention chiefly to write; because boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book; and, therefore, instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand: and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read to them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene from which it is taken; and it is hoped they will find that the beautiful extracts, the select passages, they may choose to give their sisters in this way will be much better relished and understood from their having some notion of the general story from one of these imperfect abridgments; — which if they be fortunately so done as to prove

delightful to any of the young readers, it is hoped that no worse effect will result than to make them wish themselves a little older, that they may be allowed to read the Plays at full length (such a wish will be neither peevish nor irrational). When time and leave of judicious friends shall put them into their hands, they will discover in such of them as are here abridged (not to mention almost as many more, which are left untouched) many surprising events and turns of fortune, which for their infinite variety could not be contained in this little book, besides a world of sprightly and cheerful characters, both men and women, the humour of which it was feared would be lost if it were attempted to reduce the length of them. [5]

Changing the play from its poetic form to prose is most clearly motivated by the need to make it easier for children to understand. This translation also gives them more flexibility with the plot line. Adapting a five-act play into a short children's story will undoubtedly result in a condensed storyline. "Young people's editions of Shakespeare are, almost by definition, abridged versions of the play" (Isaac 8). The Lamb's version of *Othello* is no different. They omit the rich language and narrative complexities in order to clearly tell the story of Iago's intricate plan and preserve the "envy is dangerous" moral.

The opening or introduction to any literary work is extremely important. It is what sets the mood. How the adapting authors decide to open their version can illustrate a lot about their intentions and their audience. Shakespeare's play begins with anger and annoyance. Iago and Roderigo are angered, jealous, and frustrated about Cassio's promotion and Othello's marriage to Desdemona. The very first word uttered by the Iago is the profane exclamation, "Sblood", which sets the tone for his contemptible character and the wicked plan he will soon set into motion.

The opening of the Lambs' edition could be considered the complete opposite. "Brabantio, the rich senator of Venice, had a fair daughter, the gentle Desdemona. She was sought to by diverse suitors, both on account of her many virtuous qualities, and for her rich expectations." These opening passages read like a fairy tale. Not only does it sweeten up the originally bitter opening, but also sets up Desdemona, the "fair" maiden waiting to be won, as a central protagonist.

It seems that the Lambs want their young readers to feel most sorry for Desdemona rather than Othello. From the very beginning the tale declares that the "greatest lady" should not be "altogether condemned for the unsuitableness of the person whom she selected for her lover." She can do no wrong. She is, of course, innocent of any wrongdoings in Shakespeare's play too, but the way in which the Lambs force it upon their readers is questionable.

In the end of the original, the eponymous hero tragically falls victim to Iago's elaborate plot and demands the readers' sympathy by begging for understanding and committing suicide, his final act of service as General. In the same sentence of Othello's tragic demise, the Lambs are sure to mention "that his wife (poor innocent lady) had been ever faithful to him." As in the opening, they continue to make the story about Desdemona, taking the spotlight away from Othello at the most empathetic moment. They omit his final speech and the fact that he understands his transgressions and cannot forgive himself for what he has done. The Lambs, as narrator, then point out the faults of Othello themselves. This drastically changes the reader's view of Othello and the play as a whole.

In simplifying *Othello*, the Lambs do Shakespeare's play very little justice. The basic framework is there. It is a skeleton of the story without the heart. They do not add anything to the

play and leave much out. The only characters in their version are Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Cassio, and Brabantio. By deleting persons of the play they are forced to ignore important contextual characters like Emilia and Roderigo. They completely exclude these secondary plots and characters. The Lambs leave out important plot points such as the moment Othello gives his wife the handkerchief, the attempted murder of Cassio, and Iago's torturous decision to never speak a word.

The Lambs' adaptation of *Othello* touches lightly on important topics. The play's themes are deep, dark, and disturbing and may not be suitable for young children. The Lambs do a good job introducing Shakespeare's commentary on the dangers of envy. And whether it was purposeful or not, there is a level of racial tension that is worthy of discussion between a parent/teacher and the children. Unlike Shakespeare's work, there is no need for critical thinking. Everything is pleasantly laid out for the young reader and the end is tied up neatly without ambiguity. The Lambs follow a traditional fairy-tale formula that resolves the problem for the reader while trying to teach them an important lesson.

This early complicity with Shakespeare's text is however soon intervened into by Lamb's observations and comments which he weaves into the story. The dramatic plot or *syuzhet* (events in the order in which they are actually narrated by a text) soon transforms into story or *fabula* (setting-out of events in a narrative in their linear sequence) where Lamb continually intersperses his tale with his own thoughts.

In his essay *On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation*, Charles Lamb refuses to acknowledge Shakespearean plays as capable of dramatized performance: "... I cannot help being of opinion that the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on a stage than those of almost any other dramatist whatever... There is so much in them. ... with which eye and tone, and gesture, have nothing to do." [5]

Tales from Shakespeare was a unique endeavour at giving children and simple folk something of the Elizabethan spirit. No one had hitherto attempted anything of the kind. It was at the same time an attempt "to narrate ... our story" [to borrow from Lamb's *King Lear*] – revealing as much of the period's morality as the plots of Shakespeare's plays. According to Harvey Darton, "The *Tales* provide a defence of poetry by a kind of nursery introduction to it in prose."

Darton's statement quoted before attests to the already prevalent view that Shakespeare's plays, especially the tragedies are an exercise in poetry. Writing in 2004, George Steiner, in his article "'Tragedy', Reconsidered" speaks of the preconditions that a play must fulfill for it to be considered a 'tragedy'. [6] If a play harbours concepts of redemption or holds out hope of messianic intervention – it might pass for serious drama, but it won't be tragedy in any absolute sense.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD) defines 'tragedy' (apart from the specifically literary sense) as 'a very sad event or situation, especially one that involves death'. Similarly, the adjective 'tragic' is also connected to suffering or death of somebody, 'making one feel very sad'. These annotations in OALD of course, operate within a colloquial, idiomatic usage of the terms 'tragic' and 'tragedy'.

Tragedy in reference to western literature is also a contested term, used to signify a spectrum of literary texts not necessarily belonging to the dramatic genre. In his article, Steiner proposes a model for defining tragedy not based on the Aristotelian framework as outlined in

Poetics. In his own words, he aims to detect a ‘minimal but indispensable core shared by tragedies in literature.’

By virtue of having negated the Aristotelian/ Greek model of understanding and evaluating tragedy, Steiner grounds his theory in the Christian idea of ‘original sin’. That fallen condition of Man becomes embedded in tragedy, the human condition is ontologically tragic. Proceeding along this line of thought, ‘homelessness’ becomes the premise for tragedy, the idea here is that the very being of man is unwelcome, alien to life and tragedy ensues. Steiner further locates this pattern of original sin and ensuing guilt as operative in the foundational narratives of Christianity, the Promethean myth, Rousseau, Marx and finally Freud.

To structure the matrix of the tragic form, one needs a few givens, some imperatives with which to weave together a tale of suffering and self-destruction. First in the metaphorical list of these preconditions is the negation of hope of any kind, the negation of the possibility of redemption, of acceptance leading back into the social fabric. In Steiner’s words, ‘a core of dynamic negativity underwrites authentic tragedy.’ Another prerequisite seems to be the role that Fate plays in marring one’s fortunes. This extra-human presence, which is unconventional and more importantly inexplicable, seems to be a recurring motif for tragedies. And it is this powerful, inexplicable force that is subjected to rage, despair, irony in a tragedy.

Rewriting a tragedy – a genre with its own linguistic, philosophical, conceptual norms – is an act fraught with implications and complexities. Moreover, Lamb’s *Tale* not only has to negotiate this challenge but also has to keep in sight the norms of the ‘tale’, another genre in its own right. The Tale of *Othello* then, becomes a document revealing and (at the same time) problematizing Lamb’s conception of tragedy. Simultaneously, the tale also traces the shift in the dominant mode of cultural expression – from drama to prose – since the time Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote for the Elizabethan and the Jacobean stage.

Acknowledgement

Working on this paper has made me realize the debt that I owe to the Department of English, University of Kalyani. A note of gratitude is in order. I wish to thank:

The teachers of the Department of English, University of Kalyani for two years of fun-filled learning.

My parents who always encourage me to do better.

I dedicate this paper to the Department of English.

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