CHAPTER II

THE STRUCTURE OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY AND THE DENOUEMENT

Despite its apparent adherence to Renaissance dramatic conventions in terms of the segmentation of the plot into an exposition, a conflict and a resolution in conformity with the Aristotelian requirement of a beginning, a middle and an end, the Shakespearean tragedy presents a structure that is distinctively independent of conventional attitudes in so far as its association with the thematic tensions of the play is concerned. For whereas the structure in the case of the other tragedies of the period is more of a technical feature, the Shakespearean tragic structure no longer remains a merely technical concern but becomes an integral part of the development of the theme itself. And while it is true that the arrangement and procession of the episodic units determine the technical character of the Shakespearean tragedy like any of the contemporary plays, the contexts in which these units flourish in the Shakespearean plot is provided by the thematic concerns themselves. It is thus through a strategic correspondence between a gradual rise of tension and a systematic onward movement of the dramatic units that the Shakespearean tragic structure finds its expression. However, for the purpose of understanding the tragic idea vis-à-vis the structure it is imperative that we investigate into the nature of the thematic...
divisions of the Shakespearean tragic plot. For it is through a proper understanding of the “phases of tragic progress,”¹ to borrow a phrase from Ruth Nevo, that we best understand the playwright’s tragic design. But as we explore the phases of the tragic progress it would be our special endeavour to concentrate on the endings of the tragedies of Shakespeare with a view to discovering the kind of resolutions they bring about as they mark the conclusion of the tragic action. For although the tragedies in the main refuse to be fettered to any rigid structural pattern, the endings of these plays, however, reveal a kind of paradigmatic design in weaving the loose threads together purporting thereby to give a sense of firm closure to the tragic action. And, as Bernard Beckerman convincingly argues:

To whatever extent certain thematic motifs remain unsettled (as in Lear and possibly Measure for Measure), the story itself ended conclusively ... the finale brings together and accounts for all the disparate elements in a story. Whether completely resolved in each instance ( we are never explicitly told what happens to Lear’s Fool), each play ties up all loose ends, thereby making the last scene a knot of peculiar intensity and activity.²


The role of the tragic ending in the context of the structure of the plays can, therefore, be hardly overemphasized. But as it is the tragic protagonist who plays a pivotal role in shaping the structure of the plays it is in the light of his eventful career that we should like to study the stages of the tragic action. For, each of these stages, as Ruth Nevo states:

...discloses further and further reaches of the implications of the fall of the tragic hero from fortune to misfortune. They are not separate numerical narrative units related by addition, but serial phases in the sequence of a tragic discovery which develops from an embryo, with each phase giving rise to what follows and implied by what precedes.3

The present chapter, therefore, aims at making an investigative study of the endings of the four major tragedies of Shakespeare, viz., Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, and Othello with regard to the structures of these plays in terms already stated.

I

Hamlet happens to be the first of the tragedies of Shakespeare to attain a kind of maturity within the terms of our understanding of the tragic structure of his plays. And what seems to be basically responsible for the accomplishment is the sense of a tragic balance achieved through an effective articulation of the play’s events and its protagonist’s fortune. In fact, the phases of the tragic development are so arranged that the thematic tensions of the play seem to coalesce with the complex vicissitudes of the protagonist’s

3_op. cit. p.22
eventful career in a way not discernible in the early tragedies. But, while it is true that the tragic action in the early tragedies, too, centre round the figure of the protagonist, these plays lack the kind of structural triumph achieved by the later tragedies owing basically to the playwright's inability at this juncture of his dramatic career to break himself completely free from the conventional pulls. V.K. Whitaker, for instance, sees the point when he states that:

the later plays exemplify the kind of tragedy that we associate with Shakespeare; the earlier, various other kinds of tragedy that Shakespeare could write. The earlier tragedies are, in fact, much closer to those of his contemporaries in externals of structure than the later.4

Hamlet thus not only makes a significant departure from the early tragedies but also becomes to a great extent the structural matrix for the later tragedies of Shakespeare.

A sense of uneasy calm seems to characterize the opening of Hamlet. The appearance of the Ghost of a king recently dead before men who are charged with the responsibility of guarding the castle at night coupled with the thought of a threatened invasion from Norway create an air of eerie tension as the apparently perplexed guards, not knowing "in what particular thought to work" (I.i.67), feel "sick at heart" (I.i.8). Although the mood of the scene in particular changes towards the end to the contemplation of the wholesome effects of the Christmas nights as also to the renewal of hope with the advent of the new dawn, the general mood of the play at large is established. For the heart-sickness referred to by one of the minor characters remains throughout to

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influence the course of events in the play and has, therefore, much to contribute to the emotional atmosphere of the play. The way is thus laid for the hero to emerge with his characteristic “nighted colour” (I.ii.68) -- a phrase reminiscent of the phrase “sick at heart” and also of the setting of the first scene -- into a world infested by men with base motives and hypocritical stances. In other words, he finds himself being drawn into a nauseous climate of political and emotional vandalism where the king himself far from being the pillar of strength and protection he was expected to be turns out to be a regicide and an astute pretender; and the queen, an imprudent adulteress committing incest with the author of her husband’s murder. Situated thus, in the midst of an overwhelming uncertainty of emotional attitudes and political designs, Hamlet, the hero, begins to experience a crisis of identity. Sensing the kind of anguish and despair his actions were likely to bring upon his nephew, Claudius, the shrewd politician tries to reassure Hamlet with his words ostensibly full of sympathetic concern:

We pray you, throw to earth
This unprevailing woe, and think of us
As of a father: for let the world take note,
You are the most immediate to our throne;
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son,
Do I impart toward you.

(I.ii.106-12)
But for Hamlet, a student of the University of Wittenberg, it does not take much time to
discover in the glib tongue of Claudius an effort to hide his disturbing sense of guilt as
hidden below the facade of profound conscientiousness of his words is an uncanny
awareness of his role in depriving the prince of not only his parental love, but to a great
extent, of the throne as well. Consequently, the kind of cunning and hypocrisy resorted to
by Claudius hasten to cause in the already tormented soul of the hero, with a father killed
and a mother stained, a sense of alienation from the society of man itself as he can see the
world now as nothing more than:

an unweeded garden,

That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

(I.ii.135-37)

He thus contemplates suicide as the only possible route of escape from the upheaval but
recoils from the deed, self-slaughter being a violation of the canons fixed by the
“Everlasting”:

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a new dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix’d
His canon ’gainst self-slaughter!

(I.ii.129-32)

The crisis deepens further as Hamlet encounters the spirit of his father who unfolds
a most harrowing tale concerning a “most unnatural murder”(I.v.25) and demands of his
son as a mark of filial duty a befitting revenge on the serpent that "Now wears the crown"(1.39). The serpent, however, is none other than Claudius himself -- the victim's own brother. Although the Ghost's revelation for Hamlet is quite appalling, it also serves to confirm at the same time his intuitions concerning his uncle's foul involvement in his father's death as revealed by his immediate response to the Ghost's story:

O my prophetic soul!

My uncle!

(I.v.40-41)

However the fact remains that Hamlet is now put under severe mental stress as the predicament he finds himself in torments him between the desire to dissociate himself from the world of creative action, the world to him now being a "quintessence of dust", and the need, on the other hand, to obey the command of an authority external to himself. As a matter of fact, the Ghost's command tortures him both by causing him to sever all his ties with man and society:

Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;

(I.v.98-101)

and by inciting him to swing into a life of perilous action much against his will:

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
G. Wilson Knight who finds in the Ghost's command of revenge the unique quality of the play states:

... a sick soul is commanded to heal, to cleanse, to create harmony...the sickness of his soul only further infects the state -- his disintegration spreads out disintegrating.5

But the soundness of his perception notwithstanding, the disintegration that Knight happens to notice can be seen as the natural fall out of an awful void that Hamlet experiences in his subjective world consequent upon the kind of social and emotional persecution he is subjected to. For, in a society where the odds are all against him, Hamlet is now faced with the task of redefining his identity in the context of the situation he is hurled into. And, therefore, if "a sick soul is commanded to heal, to cleanse, to create harmony," the source of the sickness is Claudius himself. Similarly, if his disintegration "spreads out disintegrating," it is because the more he tries to delve into the heart of the mystery surrounding his father's death, the more emotionally distanced he becomes from those of his relatives and friends who, instead of offering him their shoulders to lean on, show a most pathetic lack of integrity and concern thereby injecting into his much perturbed mind not only a detestation for life but a fair dose of cynicism as well, sufficient to dictate his future course of action. It is significant, therefore, that Hamlet's observation concerning the nature of truth and philosophy:

There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,
(I.v.174-75)
comes most appropriately after his encounter with the Ghost with his inquiring mind receiving a further jolt towards the contemplation of the falsities of surface glory. And coming as it does, virtually, at the end of the first act, which, structurally speaking, forms the exposition of the play, Hamlet's statement serves as an important index to a major preoccupation of the play with the nature of things beyond their apparent reality -- a preoccupation vindicated only by the ending of the play.

From Act II onwards almost till the final scene there is a constant attempt in the play at revealing the nature of man in its true colours. But, interestingly, the effort to unmask the one character couples with the imperative for the other of masking the self, thus affording a kind of approbation of Polonius's serio-comic suggestion: "By indirections find directions out" (II.i.64). Similarly, his advice to Laertes "to thine own self be true" (I.iii.78) too assumes significance in the context of the total experience of the play. And thus the plot marches ahead through a series of strategic devices engaged in both by the hero and his adversary each trying to win a score over the other.

Although dissimulation as a dramatic device of finding "directions out" figures early in the first act itself with Hamlet's decision to "put an antic disposition on" (I.v.172), it is with the progress of the action through the play's middle that the devices, strictly speaking, gather momentum with the play-within-the-play marking the turning point. With the avowed intention of holding "as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (III.ii.21), Hamlet launches through the dumb show, in the words of Francis Fergusson:
...a direct attack on Claudius as his chief antagonist, and an attempt to resolve the deeper "contrasts", the divided counsels, the incommensurable visions, which constitute the malady of Denmark--or at least its chief symptom...the presentation of the play is the peripety: it puts the King and his regime on the defensive, and justifies the most hidden institutions of Hamlet and the most sacred messages of the ghost.⁶

So overwhelming, indeed, is the impact of the play scene on the play itself that the later scenes can be seen, to a considerable degree, as the effect of this scene itself. Having seen his true colour in the mirror of art, Claudius now takes cognizance of his shaky position and is stirred into resorting to counter attack against his chief adversary yet retaining his surface composure and stately bearing. Hamlet, on the other hand-- his suspicions now confirmed-- makes a kind of intellectual effort to balance passion and reason ("blood and judgment" III.ii.65) so as to acquire an objectively authentic view of man. While the reference to the conflict and judgment obviously indicates the unrest in his own mind, it also follows that Hamlet's self-definition at this point is involved in an attempt to define man. But passion, as such, does not loosen its hold over him completely as the subsequent developments reveal. It is of course true that his sense of judgment prevails over his passion as he spares a kneeling Claudius at his prayers only in anticipation of a more favourable moment when not only would the soul of Claudius be fit for its hellward journey but the very fact of his alienation itself would be viewed upon as a public necessity.

rather than as the fulfilment of a private act of revenge. But this sense of calculated reasoning which enables him to defer the killing of Claudius until a more opportune moment takes leave of him in the very next scene itself as on entering his mother’s chamber he seizes upon the first available opportunity to kill the king who he thinks is hiding behind the arras. Without allowing a second thought to interfere with his instantaneous decision he runs his sword at once through the arras only to discover that it is Polonius that he has most inadvertently killed and not Claudius. But even after this dastardly act he shows no signs of any remorse. Instead, he is in a frame of mind so passionately charged up that he starts raving at his mother in a language so caustic and unbecoming of him that it is not until the ghost of his father intervenes that he is brought to his senses.

The fourth act marks a critical phase in the development of the tragic action of the play as several of the events taking place here seem to have a bearing on the ending of the play. First, the emergence of Laertes as an avenger assumes great importance from the structural point of view. For placed as he is now with a father killed and a sister drowned, he holds the promise of playing a decisive role in the course of events to come. Second, Hamlet’s discovery of and his subsequent success in frustrating his uncle’s plot to have him (Hamlet) eliminated while serving to underscore for him the nature of the villainous power afflicting the state of Denmark, ironically, help him gain his confidence over himself, leading eventually to his bold assertion when demanded by the occasion, “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane” (V.i.237-38). Claudius, on the other hand, on learning of Hamlet’s escape from the voyage to England grabs at the opportunity provided by Laertes’ cry for
vengeance and subsequently for justice for using the latter as both his shield and weapon against Hamlet -- a device whose efficacy is proved only in the denouement of the play. Even so tragic an incident like the death of Ophelia is turned to his advantage by Claudius as the mishap pushes to the limit Laertes’s thirst for revenge on Hamlet. The accomplished impostor that he is, Claudius thus hits upon the characteristic device of using deceit as an effective weapon against his adversaries with the dual intention of having his chief opponent Hamlet destroyed and dispensing as well any thought of revenge against himself from the mind of Laertes. Consequently, he convinces Laertes into having the latter’s revenge upon Hamlet in which Laertes would have his foil unguarded as Hamlet being “most generous and free from all contriving / will not peruse the foils” (IV.vii.135-36). Claudius himself would also keep ready at hand a cup of poisoned wine so that in the event of Laertes’s failure to strike Hamlet dead, the poison would do the job for them should Hamlet call for a drink. However, as the ending of the play shows, Claudius’s “efforts do not re-establish the regime; they make at most a horrible simulacrum of a healthy state; smooth on the surface but dead within.”

The denouement, of course, comes as a superb prize of dramatic action. While it is a habit with Shakespeare as Fergusson suggests:

...to wind up the complicated plots at the very end; and the big killings do not occur until the last scene.

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7 ibid. p. 110
8 ibid.
it is in Hamlet that the winding up is done with a definite design and a clean sense of purpose for the first time. Although the "big killings" in such early plays like Titus Andronicus and Romeo and Juliet also take place in the last scene, a kind of savage brutality and a reckless haste respectively seem to steal away from the dramatic merit of these plays. And what is most important, the killings do not quite strike us as a structural necessity. But in Hamlet, on the other hand, the events of the last scene seem to be dictated by a sense of dramatic necessity. The dramatic units, in other words, from the beginning itself are so arranged that the ending, when it comes, is felt as the *sine qua non* of the play holding, as it were, the very key to all the major structural complexities the plot has to offer. In fact, the indispensability of the denouement as a dramatic unit is felt nowhere more tellingly than in the way in which the terminal events seem to accommodate themselves into the framework of the protagonist's career as it evolves through the successive stages of the episodic units of the play. Fergusson, therefore, is of course right when he contends that:

The substance of Act V is chiefly what Hamlet the "Chief reflector" sees when he returns, spent, nervously exhausted, but clear-eyed from England. He sees the fatal illness of Denmark: the literal bones in the graveyard; the many details of social disorder (the Prince, for instance, on a level with the grave-digging clowns); the "maimed rite" of Ophelia's funeral, and the death-trap of Claudius's last court assembled for his duel with Laertes. The widespread malady of Denmark is clear at last, and with the
end of Claudius and his regime it is gone like a bad dream.  

What is significant about the denouement, then, is that it succeeds in placing the tensions permeating the action into their proper epiphanic contexts bequeathing thereby to the play a sense of structural completeness. The play, as we have seen, presents an action involving the murder of a king and the kind of disastrous consequences engendered by the foul deed. The effect of the regicide is indeed so disturbing to the social and political order and indeed to the frame of the world, that all life and order -- in terms both individual and social -- are suddenly turned violently awry forcing in the process the murdered king’s son to set right a time that is severely out of joint. But as the action moves through the successive stages of the structure, the son -- incidentally the hero of the play -- embarking upon his arduous mission begins to encounter the malady afflicting the state and the society in all its uncertain and unholy ramifications. But the meanings and consequences, however, of the action and all its concomitant circumstances are brought to a final reckoning only in the last scene of the play.

It is in this scene, for instance, that the hero perennially groping for clarity and a definition of his identity suddenly reveals an attitude of calm acceptance especially after the experiences of his voyage to England on the one hand and his realization on the other of the kind of indignities that the dead are subjected to -- regardless whether the dead in question is Yorick, “the fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy” (V.i.167), or the mighty Alexander or the “Imperious Caesar” (1.192). In the same way the Ghost’s command which serves as the great propellant for the tragic action by stirring the hero into

\[\text{9 ibid.}\]
a life of creativity is finally executed. And the way the execution is carried out, Maynard Mack Jr. observes:

... is thoroughly a product of Claudius's deceitful rule, a final dramatization of the way indirections can, and must find directions out in the murky atmosphere of Elsinore. The Ghost's command has been done, though not as directly as he desired, and the villain has been "Hoist with his own petard." Both the world's call for revenge and evil's own tendency toward self-destruction are balanced in the symbolism of this double killing with sword and drink.10

Similarly, the true significance and import of such structural milestones like the play-within-the-play, the killing of Polonius and the subsequent emergence of Laertes as avenger are finally realized in the last scene of the play. The image of the times, for instance, which the players present in the mirror of art finds its archetypal patterns in the concrete reality of life as one hears:

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;

(V.ii.373-75)

Laertes's passion for revenge, in the same way, evokes similar vibrations in Hamlet as the latter admits before Horatio:

For, by the image of my cause, I see

The portraiture of his: I'll court his favours.

But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me

Into a towering passion.

(V.ii.77-79)

While it is true that Hamlet in "seeing the image" of his cause by the "portraiture of his" shows a kind of maturity that Laertes lacks, the sameness of the "cause" they pursue, however, eventually causes them to be killed by the same sword that seems to epitomize the last and final iniquitous motive of the Claudius regime. Laertes, recognizing the actual cause leading to their death exchanges forgiveness thus:

Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet:

Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,

Nor thine on me!

(V.ii.321-23)

But the sword that kills Hamlet and Laertes also takes Claudius's life as a brilliant illustration of evil facing its own nemesis. And with that "The wheel is come full circle" (King Lear V.iii.174). The denouement of the play thus shows that after all the "carnal, bloody and unnatural acts" the time which was so severely out of joint is finally set right and that despite the death of the hero the mission of his life is eventually accomplished

II

In the last scene of King Lear as Edmund the wayward bastard son of Gloucester lies fatally wounded by Edgar, his step brother, the latter intending to "exchange charity"
(V.iii. 167) reflects upon the kind of ignominy suffered by their father and states:

The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us,
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes.

(V.iii. 170-72)

whereupon Edmund replies:

Th’hast spoken right, ’tis true.
The wheel is come full circle; I am here.

(V.iii. 173-74)

Edmund, we understand, is obviously being reminded of his insidious role in bringing about the disaster of Gloucester’s family and to a considerable degree of Lear’s as well. But his observation “The wheel is come full circle” trespasses the narrow limits of personal reference and assumes a much wider significance in the context of the structural function of the ending of the play as it is precisely the business of the denouement to show as to how after the travails and reverses of fortune the wheel eventually is, indeed, come full circle. But in order to arrive at a conclusion of this sort it is imperative that we take a close look at the structure of the play in its entirety. To start with, like Hamlet, the situation at the beginning of King Lear, too, is marked by a sense of emotional turmoil stemming forth from an initial violation of the natural bonds. For whereas in the earlier play a most unnatural fratricide lies at the root of all troubles, in King Lear a most
unnatural apportionment of "paternal care, propinquity and property of blood" (I.i.111-13) seems to account for the very disturbing situation out of which the tragedy arises. Thus in both the plays the heroes find themselves being surrounded by such appalling facts that the all too familiar world for them suddenly turns topsy-turvy making it necessary for them to redefine their identity and role. But whereas in the case of Hamlet, the hero is not responsible for the initial situation in which he finds himself placed, in King Lear, on the other hand, it is the hero himself who is entirely responsible for creating the situation.

The beginning of King Lear, then, confronts us with a situation in which King Lear, the hero of the play, aged "fourscore and upward" (IV.vii.60-61) intending to confer the "cares and business" of kingship on "younger strengths" (I.i.38-39) decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. But the way in which the apportionment is done not only shows the king's miserable lack of wisdom and judgment but presents the action itself as an inglorious instance of the way in which "power to flattery bows" (I.i.147) in failing to distinguish the true from the false, the genuine from the counterfeit. For in allowing his fiendish daughters to feed fat his pride with their "empty-hearted" (I.i.152) flatteries he thoroughly misconstrues the true feelings of Cordelia as they appear in her 'plainness' which again Lear unfortunately sees as her pride. Thus he disowns her to a degree that

... the barbarous

Scythian

Or he that makes his generation messes

To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour'd, pitied, and relieved,

As thou my sometime daughter.

(l.i.114-19)

But the abdication of his kingship and the most injudicious treatment of Cordelia only serve to flatter the savage natures of his elder daughters so much so that in the words of the Fool:

The hedge sparrow fed the cuckoo so long

That it's had it head bit off by it young.

(I.iv.214-15)

as Lear himself is reduced to "an O without a figure" (I.iv.192) --- the symbolic "nothing".

in other words, he had endowed Cordelia with. Consequently, Lear is now left asking:

Does any here know me? This is not Lear.

Does Lear walk thus? speak thus? where are his eyes?

Either his motion weakens, or his discernings

Are lethargied -- Ha! Waking? 'tis not so --

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

(I.iv.225-29)

By the beginning of Act III Lear’s downfall is complete as in a horrible show of monstrous ingratitude his elder daughters shut their doors against him and hurl him into the storm only to strive

... in his little world of man to out-scorn
The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain.

(III.i.10-11)

The play, however, enters its crucial phase with the storm scenes much in the manner of the play-within-the-play scene in Hamlet which serves as an important signpost in the structural context of the play. For if the play-within-the play in Hamlet performs the very important task of holding the mirror up to nature on the one hand, it forms on the other, a dramatic device urgently necessary to propel the action forward. Similarly, the storm scenes in Lear serve to demonstrate on the thematic level the regeneration of Lear - as he begins to perceive the human realities in their naked form -- simultaneously with the rapid disintegration of the society and its total disregard for the human values. In the context of the structure, on the other hand, the storm on the heath provides the much needed episodic links for the plot to move ahead with a cohesive design. And, as Whitaker points out:

... during the storm on the heath Shakespeare begins to devote attention to the processes of Lear's regeneration even while he shows the forces of anarchy gathering power in his former kingdom. On this level, the storm brings with it the moral choice, not for evil but for good, and when Lear finds himself at one with poor naked wretches and tears off his clothes --- the "lendings" that symbolized his illusion that he was apart from other men and from human nature --- the turning point has been reached and his regeneration has begun.11

11Whitaker, op cit., p. 214
On being exposed to the miseries of the poor and the wretched Lear learns for the first time in his life that

The art of our necessities is strange

That can make vile things precious  

(III.ii.70-71)

and that the

... unaccommodated man

is no more but such a poor, bare, forked

animal

(III.ii.70-71)

But as his sufferings intensify in the course of his tortuous wanderings in the tornado his wits unable to bear the brunt of the attack any more get unsettled. Finally, as he gets to sleep in that state of mental instability, he is carried off in a litter provided by Gloucester to Dover to be nursed and attended to by Cordelia. But as he recovers from his madness under the care and tutelage of Cordelia his regeneration acquires a new height as he begins to see himself now not as a king but as a man. As he begins to show signs of the “great rage”(IV.vii.77) being “killed in him”(IV.vii.78), Cordelia asks for his blessings whereupon he kneels down in humble submission before her and states with all humility:

Pray do not mock me:

I am a very foolish fond old man,

Fourscore and upward more, not an hour more or less;

Do not laugh at me;
For as I am a man, I think this lady 
To be my child Cordelia.

(IV.vii.60-69)
The emphasis of the lines obviously is on Lear's realization of human identity. Twice in the same speech Lear refers to the fact that he is now a plain "man" — "I am a very foolish fond old man" (IV.vii.60) and "As I am a man" (IV.vii.69) — nothing more nor less. The basis of the reality that comprised his world thus undergoes a radical change as no longer concerned about the forms of kingship and hierarchy he seeks to find his true identity now in nothing but in being a "man". And in the context of his new-found identity all that matters for him is Cordelia alone. He finds, therefore, as it were, as Alexander Leggatt succinctly argues an answer to his own question "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" :

... he is re-establishing some sense of his identity, not through counting up the number of knights he is allowed, or noting gestures of respect (he rejects those) but simply through an awareness that he has a relationship with Cordelia .... He ceases to care about kingship, justice or power. Only one thing matters: Cordelia. Not even love as an idea matters; simply Cordelia.\(^\text{12}\)

The understanding of Lear's search and discovery of his identity in these terms enables us as Arnold Kettle would have us believe to look at the loss of his wit during the course of his interaction with the realities encountered by the unaccommodated "Poor

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naked wretches” (III.iii.28) as essential to their recovery: “Lear, the king reduced by the new people of bourgeois world to the depth of human humiliation, falls only to rise, and becomes a man…. The turning point of the play is Lear’s losing of his wits to find them.”

The madness of Lear thus becomes a metaphor not only for the destruction of his old self but of possession as well. And the kind of possession we see in him -- unlike the destructive nature of the possession of Othello and Macbeth by such forces of disruption like on lago or the Witches -- leads him to his regeneration as well as to a profound understanding of the human realities. But alongside the regeneration of Lear the storm on the heath also serves to underline the disgraceful aspect of social decomposition at its lowest ever. The social crack-up was of course always there as pointed out by Gloucester in an earlier scene:

... love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide, in cities mutinies, 
in countries discord; in places treason; and the bond crack’d ’twixt son and father... machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves.

(I.ii.110-20)

but with the storm on the heath the very reality of the situation described by Gloucester comes to express itself with such brutal extremity that it appears as though

Humanity must perforce prey on itself

Like monsters of the deep.

Similarly, when Lear makes his scathing attack on the actual nature of justice:

See how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear:
change places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is thief? Thou
hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar.

he "makes his culminating analysis of the reality that underlies the appearance of
things."\(^{14}\)

Again, as C.J.Sisson perceives:

Gloucester, like justice is blind, yet may well see how the world goes, with
no eyes. A farmer's dog barking at a beggar is 'the great mirage of
Authority --- a dog's obeyed in office.' The dispensers and the instruments
of justice are corrupt and evil themselves. Plaintiff and defendant alike are
but guilty in different ways. And justice is merely impotent. The kingship
itself is not left unscathed in Lear's sharp irony: 'No, they cannot touch me
for coining; I am the King himself.'\(^{15}\)

Gauging by the concatenation of such regeneration and decline of human attitudes
Northrop Frye makes the pertinent observation:

\(^{14}\)G.K.Watson, "Lear's Last Speech," in Shakespeare Survey 13 (Indian

\(^{15}\)C.J.Sisson, “Justice in King Lear,” in Frank Kermode (ed.) Shakespeare:
It is during and after the storm that the characters of the play begin to show their real nature, and from then on we have something unique in Shakespeare: a dramatic world in which the characters are, like chess pieces, definitely black or white: black with Edmund, Goneril, Regan and Cornwall; white with Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester, Kent and eventually Albany.\textsuperscript{16}

It is precisely by showing the "real nature" of the characters involved --- in whatever form, black or white --- and by setting up expectations thereby that the play's middle builds up a crucial link with the denouement.

One of the important messages of the storm scenes, as we have seen, is that it is only in his ability to understand himself in terms of the plain and naked reality of his being without any pose or embellishment whatsoever that a man can understand the proper worth of his fellow beings in their natural colours. And this understanding of the intrinsic excellence of the natural man fosters in the individual the need to love and be loved. In the Lear world, this is just as true of Lear as it is of Gloucester. For the kind of adversities they are persecuted with humbles them both into recognizing the follies committed by them in making a blindfold denunciation of love and truth at the height of their hauteur and power. Shorn of their infirm glory now both display a kind of unqualified remorse signalling thereby the great metamorphosis their personalities have

undergone. Gloucester, for instance, on learning of Edmund's role in getting him into the fell clutches of the treacherous villains Regan and Cornwall cries out:

O my follies! Then Edgar was

abus'd.

Kind Gods, forgive me that, and prosper

him. (III.vi.90-91)

The thought of his inhuman treatment of Edgar engorges his mind so that it becomes a kind of constant obsession with him. As he is, therefore, being led and comforted by the old man on the heath, he repents:

Away, get thee away, good friend,

be gone.

Thy comforts can do me no good at all;

(IV.i.15-16)

For by now he has realized

I stumbled when I saw / ...

O dear son Edgar,

The food of thy abus'd father's wrath

Might I but live to see thee in my touch

I'd say I had eyes again.

(IV.i.19-24)

Finally, as he is about to make the great leap that would shake off all his afflictions, his prayer before the mighty Gods is: “If Edgar live, O bless him!” (IV vi 39).
Lear’s remorse is even more penetrating for not only does he vindicate the possibility of some cause on the part of Cordelia to provoke her into turning away her filial love for him but is even willing to be killed by her in order to expiate the wrongs he had done her:

If you have poison for me I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause; they have not.

(IV.vii.72-74)

Thus the kind of relationship that builds up between penitent fathers and oppressed children on the basis of newfound love and understanding gives to the play a new twist thereby affording the denouement with immense structural significance.

As we move into the denouement of the play what we witness is a mood of nervous excitement akin to the opening scenes of the play. For the focus here is once again on the Lear-Cordelia relationship especially in the aftermath of Lear’s discovery of her irreplaceable energy. The kind of tension unleashed by Lear’s abandonment of Cordelia in the opening scene of the play is now countered by his desperate attempt to keep her as close to his bosom. And such urgent, in fact, is the need to nourish and foster this new grown relationship with pleasant pain that he sees a point of advantage in the defeat of Cordelia’s army in the hands of the British forces as the prospect now brightens up for him for setting his rest “on her kind nursery” (I.i.123) as they are being led to the
prison by the British soldiers. Ironically, when Lear was deluded by his elder daughters into believing that he was “everything” to them referring to Cordelia he had said:

... for we

Have no such daughter, nor shall see

That face of hers again.

(I.ii.63-64)

and now when the same daughters have reduced him to “nothing”, it is Cordelia who is “everything” to him. To Cordelia’s question “Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?” (V.iii.7), therefore, his answer is one of violent negation: “No, no, no, no!” (V.iii.8). He would rather be happy in prison with Cordelia than subscribe to anything contrary to their state of blessed togetherness. Summarily dismissing the very idea of ever willing to see his elder daughters he cries out:

Come, let’s away o prison.

We two alone will sing like birds i’th’cage;

When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down

And ask of thee forgiveness; so we’ll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies, and then hear poor rogues

Talk of court news, and we’ll talk with them too,

Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out;

(V.iii.8-15)
In this state of heavenly bliss, Lear would resist all knowledge pertaining to the work-a-day world so as to preserve and nurture the knowledge already acquired in the heat of his adversities. And, therefore, as Leggatt contends:

Questions like 'Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out' were once of vital importance to him, for he was in the thick of such action himself. Now, in line with his rejection of kingship in the previous scene, he views the whole of public life with detached amusement.\(^{17}\)

Similarly, J.K. Walton observes:

His mind is now raised far above the immediate events by which he is assailed, because of the knowledge he has acquired, a knowledge that enables him to evaluate the 'packs and sects of great ones' at their true worth. What unites him for ever to Cordelia is their active interest in truth: they will 'take upon's the mystery of things, / As if we were God's spies' (V.iii.16-17).\(^{18}\)

It is interesting to note that the way in which Lear craves for the prize companionship of Cordelia at this stage is reminiscent of how France had seized upon her inner worth, thereby championing the thematic elevation of insight. Lear realizes, too, that it needs a special kind of reverence for the human relationships to understand the humanity of France and Cordelia. His commitment to Cordelia, therefore, is as intense and

\(^{17}\) op cit. p.89.

complete now as was his dislike for her at the beginning. And once again, as Leggatt puts it:

As he found his identity in her, he finds his death in hers. It is the play's last and most painful image of the human bond... Lear's commitment to Cordelia is so intense that it ends his life, demonstrating her value to him with terrible decisiveness, and countering Lear's savage view of man in the middle scenes... Lear has learnt not just how much Cordelia loves him, but how much he loves her, and this knowledge kills him.\(^{19}\)

While the ending of *King Lear* demonstrates in no uncertain terms the completion of the circle through which Lear's experiences of the human condition toss him about, it also shows as "the logical outcome of the principles of structure," to use a phrase from Whitaker, that have operated all through the play, the repetition of a similar pattern of events in the lives of the other characters as well as evidence confirming the coming full of the great wheel of fortune. One of the closest parallels of the Lear syndrome as has already been referred to in passing is of course Gloucester. Lear, as we have seen, dies of sorrow at the death of Cordelia. But the sorrow which causes his death also reconciles him permanently with Cordelia and puts an end to his tortures on the "rack of his tough world"(V.iii.313) initiated by his self-imposed estrangement from her. In the same way, Gloucester, too, dies reconciled with Edgar as his "flaw'd heart" (V.iii.196) unable to withstand the excitement caused by Edgar's woeful tale of duty, devotion and sufferings found itself caught

\(^{19}\)op.cit. pp.92-93.
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief

Burst smilingly.

(V.iii.197-98)

Similarly, Edmund seeking to capitalize on his brother’s “foolish honesty” (I.i.172) with a view to furthering his evil designs is eventually destroyed by Edgar himself so that “the wheel comes full circle and the foolishness of Edgar confounds the wisdom of Edmund.”\(^{20}\)

Like Claudius, who considering the hero as “Most generous, and free from all contriving” (IV.vii.135) resorts to a nasty game to undo his adversary and is, in the process, “hoist with his own petard,” so too, Edmund intending to ride smooth on the foolish honesty of Edgar is defeated in his own game by the latter, the person he had least expected to bring about his destruction. And the kind of nemesis seen at work in the fall of Edmund also operates in the same manner to frustrate the designs of the evil sisters Goneril and Regan as they turn against each other in desiring the same man until they are both consumed by the fire of their promiscuous lust. And as Edmund the object of their mutual lust himself declares:

The one the other poison’d for my sake

And after slew herself.

(V.iii.240-41)

On assuming charge of an authority undeservedly bestowed upon them by a wrong decision they thoroughly abuse that authority flouting all norms of healthy politics that keep the society on its track. And as a glaring instance of the kind of lasciviousness and

\(^{20}\)Whitaker, op.cit. p.214.
vulgarity that such unbridled abuse of power leads to the sisters in a most corrupt expression of their faithlessness eventually resort to such treacherous plots against each other that both of them are finally destroyed demonstrating thereby the way in which evil faces its own nemesis.

The denouement of *King Lear* thus emerges as a major triumph in terms of the thematic structure of the play as the elimination of the disruptive forces of life not only signals the end of the "machinations, / hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders" (I.ii.112-13) that permeate the world of the play but also brightens up the prospect of the return of natural order and humanity into the kingdom once again. And the first sign of such restoration of order manifests itself as Edgar, the very embodiment of common humanity -- as clearly evident from his role of Poor Tom -- becomes the next ruler. His profound words at the end of the play:

> 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.

(V.iii.323-26)

are an indication, clear enough, that as the new ruler his emphasis would be on the truthfulness of feelings rather than the hypocrisy of the tongue, on endurance rather than the invention of inglorious ways to greatness and on the acquisition of knowledge from age and experience. And with his kind of experience as Poor Tom as well as with the capacity to recognize the quality of the sufferings and experiences of the "oldest" before
him he thus emerges as the true successor of Lear most capable among the survivors of
sustaining the "gor'd state" (V.iii.320).

III

No politically significant event like the murder of a king as in Hamlet or the shift of
authority and power as in the case of King Lear comes to determine the nature of the
tragic suffering in Othello. Instead, as private and commonplace a theme as marital
discord between a man and a woman coming from different cultural backgrounds seems to
be at the core of the play's action. Yet the difference in the nature of the tragic substance
notwithstanding, the ending of the play seen in its structural context seems to be imbued
with similar epiphanic purports as in the plays already discussed. But whereas in the case
of both Hamlet and King Lear the existence of more plots than one tend to give a complex
tilt to their structures, Othello presents a relatively less difficult structure devoted to the
extraordinary admixture of the representation and celebration of love in its extreme form
and its equally emphatic degeneration. And what is significant about the relationship
between the hero and the heroine vis-à-vis the growth and fall of their love is that while
Desdemona retains the same glorified and unsuspecting attitude towards love till the very
end, Othello's euphoria deflates and is overpowered by a sense of unremitting jealousy as
he allows his feelings to be manipulated by the slimy Venetian Iago, whose loyalty to his
General is not only of doubtful integrity but is obviously filled with envy and racial
contempt.
To come to the plot itself, the beginning of *Othello* is significantly different from both *Hamlet* and *Lear* in that the kind of uneasiness unleashed by the initial situations in these plays is conspicuously absent in *Othello*. It is of course true that the fact of the elopement of his daughter with the Moor brings upon the subjective world of Brabantio a heavy casualty inasmuch as the shock, as we come to hear from Lodovico in the last scene of the play, kills him. But Brabantio’s sufferings notwithstanding, the deed itself does not affect the Venetian state in general terms -- a fact underscored by the Duke’s words of consolation to Brabantio:

When remedies are past, the griefs are ended
By seeing the worst, which late on hopes depended
To mourn over a mischief that is past and gone
Is the next way to draw new mischief on.
What cannot be preserv’d when fortune takes,
Patience, her injury a mockery makes.
The robb’d that smiles steals something from the thief,
He robs himself that spends a bootless grief.

(*I.iii.202-09*)

Again,

If virtue no delighted beauty lack,
Your son-in-law is far more than black.

(*I.iii 289-90*)

In the same way, Brabantio’s repartee, too, is equally suggestive of his painful experience:
He bears the sentence well that nothing bears
But the free comfort which from thence he hears;
But he bears both the sentence and the sorrow
That to pay grief must of poor patience borrow.

(I.iii.212-15)

Apparently, then, apart from the way it harasses Brabantio, there is nothing in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona at this stage to warrant a breach of peace or to set rancours in the Venetian state. On the contrary, the kind of love they bear towards each other seems to be grounded on so absolute a mutual trust that they begin to see a reflection of their identities in the mirror of each other’s being. Desdemona, for instance, drops the hint that their marriage is indeed a marriage of true minds when she states before the senate:

I saw Othello’s visage in his mind.

(I.iii.252)

Describing the process through which Desdemona’s identification with Othello takes place, Kenneth Gross in an interesting article quite cogently argues:

The stories that Desdemona hears, that she “devours” with such a “greedy ear”, open up a space of unwonted trouble in her sense of the world. a doubled feeling of strangeness and pity, a sense of distance, and a desire somehow to bridge the distance .... They present her not just an other to desire but an other with whom she might identify; .... Hearing the story
wounds her, yet her compensatory wish is to be the very thing that she has heard about.\textsuperscript{21}

Similarly, as Arthur Kirsch contends:

Othello’s capacity to generate wonder is ultimately an expression of his capacity to feel it, and it is own childlike wonder and reverence that make his love for Desdemona in the early acts so remarkable .... He invests his whole being in his love for her ... \textsuperscript{22}

Othello’s identification with Desdemona, however, reaches its culmination on the sea-port of Cyprus after his triumphant return from the war with the Turks as in the euphoric exaltation of the moment he greets her as “my soul’s joy”(II.i.182) and expresses a desire to die an happy death having reached a state of contentment not likely to be surpassed by any worldly comfort in the unknown future:

\begin{quote}
O my soul’s joy!

If after every tempest come such calms,

May the winds blow till they have waken’d death,

And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas,

Olympus-high and duck again as low

As hell’s from heaven. If it were now to die,

’Twere now to be most happy, for I fear
\end{quote}


My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

(II.i.182-90)

But the death wish ventilated by Othello at this point of time is what critics find most disturbing as it smacks of a kind of premonitory terror concealed beneath his exterior confidence -- the terror that he may have to lose his Desdemona. Yet the source of the terror lies in his uxoriousness itself. But whatsoever may be the consequential import of these impassioned expressions, the conjugal relationship itself up to this point seen in terms of the structural development promises no tragic prospect. And as Wilson Knight observes:

This is the harmonious marriage of true minds. Othello, Desdemona, and their love are here apparent, in the scene of storm and reverberating discharge of canon, as things of noble and conquering strength: they radiate romantic valour. Othello is essential man in all his prowess and protective strength; Desdemona essential woman, gentle, loving, brave in trust of her warrior husband. The war is over. The storm of sea or brunt of cannonade are powerless to hurt them: yet there is another storm brewing in the venomed mind of Iago.23

Despite the surface calm of the scene, therefore, a mood of simmering tension begins to show up as the harbinger of tragic eventualities through the malevolent quest of the

23op.cit. p. 111.
archvillain lago. The quest, however, is made explicit both through Iago’s asides and through his confessions of his ulterior motives before Roderigo as he dupes the latter with metricious promises of uniting him with Desdemona thus squeezing him of his purse. For instance, early in the first scene itself, referring to the nature of his services to Othello, Iago gives a true account of his corrupt designs before Roderigo notwithstanding his otherwise dishonest transaction with the latter:

In following him I follow but myself --
Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty
But seeming so for my peculiar end.
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In compliment extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

(I.i.59-66)

Again in an important soliloquy, he exclaims:

For that I do suspect the lustful Moor
Hath leap’d into my seat; the thought whereof
Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw upon my inwards;
And nothing can nor shall contend my soul
Till I am even’d with him, wife for wife;
Or failing so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgment cannot cure.

(II.i.289-96)

Moreover, like Claudius seeking to capitalize on Hamlet’s natural disposition towards being “most generous and free from all contriving” (Hamlet IV.vii.135) and like reckoning on Edgar’s “foolish honesty” for the success of their malicious plots, Iago, too, expects to exploit the fact that “the Moor is of a free and open nature” (I.iii.393-95) for the success of his malignant enterprises.

Iago’s designs begin to bear fruits of success with the progress of the play into the middle scenes as betraying his vulnerability and proneness to jealousy, Othello most unwittingly surrenders all his sense of judgment and introspective ability to the puppetry of Iago’s devilish machinations and comes to be completely possessed by him in a way that he does not remain his sovereign self anymore. Consequently, all his exalted notions concerning love and its concrescent promises appear to Othello as absolutely vapid and Desdemona herself becomes for him an “excellent wretch”(III.iii.91) and he cries out in sheer agony:

Perdition catch my soul

But I do love thee; and when I love thee not,

Chaos is come again.

(III.iii.91-93)

Thus the action of Othello moves into that crucial area of Shakespearean tragedy where the hero begins to be tormented by a terrible sense of identity crisis. But whereas Hamlet
and Lear, too, go through the same phase of crisis as do perhaps all the great heroes of
Shakespeare, Othello seems to mark a departure from the rest in the sense that he is the
only hero in the entire canon of Shakespeare's plays with a tribal background, he being a
Moor. He is thus both geographically and culturally removed from the affairs of the world
he so sincerely serves and into the web of which he gets passionately ensnared. More than
anything else, therefore, it is a sociological factor that comes to influence his attitude
towards the society of Venice. And it is this aspect of Othello's position that Iago exploits
to the full. For it is by inciting Othello into an awareness of the fact of his sociological
alienation from the private manners and dispositions of the Venetian society that Iago
succeeds in implanting the seeds of jealousy in the noble Moor. For instance, it is by
referring to the fact of Othello's ignorance of the proclivities of the Venetian woman that
he successfully assails his vulnerable ears with as preposterous a tale as Desdemona's
infidelity:

I know our country disposition well.

In Venice they do let God see the pranks

They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience

Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown

(III.iii.205-08)

Again,

But pardon me -- I do not in position

Distinctly speak of her; though I may lear

Her will, reconciling to her better judgment.
May fall to match you with her country forms
And happily repent.

(III.iii.238-41)

Othello, too, urged by the need to repose his confidence on a native Venetian in the face of his growing sense of insecurity in an alien world is so thoroughly convinced of the honesty of Iago that he accepts all his slanders against Desdemona as unalterable statements of fact. Consequently, Desdemona who had left her father and had rejected "many proposed matches / of her own clime complexion and degree" (III.iii.234-36) only to "consecrate" her "soul and fortunes" to Othello's "honours and valiant parts" (I.iii.253-54) now becomes for him, with Iago's aspersions with her regard to her sexual perversity engorging his mind, a "forked plague" (III.iii.280) And his "relief / Must be to loathe her" (III.iii.271-72). As pointed out by Whitaker, therefore,

Iago works by keeping Othello's mind upon the physical aspects of his marriage and upon the improbability that Desdemona should continue to love a man black, ill-favoured, and alien as he is. This seems to me the real point of Othello's blackness. It does not denote a race or climatic background predisposing a man to jealousy ... Othello's colour simply means that, once he starts thinking in sensual terms, as he does repeatedly in the scene, the probabilities are all against him, and he needs only minor prods by Iago to convince himself. His jealousy is rooted in insecurity.²⁴

Similarly, Arthur Kirsch writes:

²⁴op.cit. p.250.
This is the crux of Othello's fall, and his union with Iago's world of blood lust follows immediately. He believes that Desdemona cannot be true because he becomes convinced that Desdemona's manifest attraction to him is itself perverse, a "proof" of her corruption.25

Michael Neill, too, in a recent article comments:

... It produces in Othello a terrible kind of arousal .... It is an arousal which his imagination can satisfy only in the complex fantasy of a revenge that will be at once an act of mimetic purgation (blood for blood, a blot for a blot), a symbolic reassertion of his sexual rights (the spotted sheets as a parodic sign of nuptial consummation), and an ocular demonstration of Desdemona's guilt (the blood-stain upon the white linen as the visible sign of hidden pollution): "thy bed, lust-sustained, shall with lust's blood be spotted" (5.1.36).26

Iago's diabolism reaches its high watermark as with the kind of devilish virtuosity of conjuring up images of deception he mesmerizes Othello into believing that the very handkerchief he had given Desdemona as his first gift was now in the possession of Cassio. The piece of information so infuriates Othello that his blood — to the right effect, as desired by Iago -- begins to "Burn like the mines of sulphur," (III.iii.329) as he swears vengeance:

25op.cit. p. 515.

O that the slave had forty thousand lives!
One is too poor, too weak for my revenge.
Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago --
All my fond love thus do I blow to Heaven.
'Tis gone.
Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell.
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate! Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For 'tis of aspics' tongues.

(III.iii.446-53)

As the action progresses the poison of jealousy affects Othello to such a degree that the sense of loss and desolation experienced by him in the private world intrudes upon his public world too -- the world to which he essentially belonged -- in a way that he finds himself being forced into the painful necessity of bidding farewell not only to the arms of Desdemona but to the arms of "glorious war" (III.iii.358) as well. Hence, "Farewell! Othello's occupation is gone," (III.iii.360). In identifying Desdemona as both his "fair warrior" and "soul's joy" he had hopes of striking a balance between his private and the public worlds. In other words, he had sought to identify her as the mainspring of his inspiration for fulfilling his roles both as a noble warrior and a passionate lover. In losing Desdemona, therefore, he loses both the worlds. With reference to Othello's "speech of farewell to arms," Nevo, for instance, would have us believe that:
It is the challenge and achievement of welfare, in that summoning of the energetic resources of the mind and body for an exacting purpose, that Othello we perceive, had found satisfaction for all the needs of nature. (It is for this reason that the fife and drum and neighing steed quicken his pulse with the excitement of anticipation, anticipation of happiness); of fullness and completeness of being. The speech ends with his recognition that that which occupied him, that which fulfilled him, which defined and gave form to the self of the man of action, is gone for ever. For back to the past he can never go. Thus is Othello’s own recognition of his disintegrating loss of self given poignant expression.27

While Nevo succeeds in giving a perceptive account of Othello’s attitude to war, she falls short of appreciating the fact that “that which occupied him, which fulfilled him, which defined and gave form to the self of the man of action is gone for ever” inasmuch as he had looked upon Desdemona as the edifice of his hopes for finding his fulfilment as a warrior hero. After all his “soul hath her content so absolute” (II.i.189) only in his union with Desdemona and through his involvement in “the big wars / that makes ambition virtue” (III.iii.53-54). Having lost Desdemona, therefore, he loses the world itself.

The fourth act of Othello articulates the further triumph of Iago as he sets about his Satanic mission of possessing the soul of Othello with the latter’s moral degeneration reaching its abysmal depth. For not only does his despairing rage find expression in such a brutal outburst like “I will chop her into messes” (IV.i.196) but he does actually strike

27 op.cit. p.199.
Desdemona in presence of the Venetian ambassador Lodovico who being shocked out of complacency at the Moor's change, ejaculates:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passions could not shake, whose solid virtue.
The shot of accident nor dart of chance
Could neither graze nor piece?

(IV.i.261-64)

Yet it is at this moment of personal crisis when Othello is virtually at the nadir of his hopes following his colossal misconstrual of the surface realities of human behaviour that he comes to recognize, as it were, the magnitude and dimension of the kind of hopes he had invested his Desdemona with:

But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,
Where I must live or bear no life
The fountain from which my current runs,
Or else dries up -- to be discarded thence!

(IV.i.57-61)

The situation is reminiscent of Lear’s disowning of Cordelia who like Othello being taken in by surface appearance commits the fatal blunder of disinheriting the daughter he loved most:

I lov'd her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery.
Through a repetition of such analogous situations where individuals are shown as victims of a tragic misapprehension of the implicit meanings of appearance and reality, Shakespeare seems to underline the fact that it is the very real and terrible human failure to know and judge things including the affected individuals themselves that accounts for the tragic suffering. And it is to this kind of a realization that the denouement of these plays distinctly and tellingly point to.

To come back to the action of *Othello*, the sense of loss experienced by Othello and the resultant anguished determination to do away with the "cause" of all his worries that constitute the major part of the action of the third and fourth acts precipitate with unprecedented force in the denouement of the play. But the denouement also witnesses the tragic reversal in the face of the protagonist's recognition of his fatal flaw having subjected his will and wisdom to a veritable moratorium in allowing himself to lead a life in terms of the dictates of a "pernicious caitiff" (V.ii.322).

As Iago provides the fantastic "ocular proof" (III.iii.364) of the adultery of Desdemona as desired by Othello, the latter -- despite the abominable concoction to which the proof itself is subjected -- is so absolutely convinced that he concludes "That the probation bear no hinge nor loop / To hang a doubt on" (III.iii.369). And true to his earlier resolve "... on proof, there is no more but this -- / Away at once with love or jealousy" (III.iii. 195-96), therefore, he shows now a most implacable decision to do away with love and jealousy, once for all as he decides to strangle Desdemona "in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated" (IV.i.204). As the action moves forward Othello's
resolve consolidates and by the time we come to V.i. he can almost visualize his success as he mistakes Cassio’s cry for help on being wounded by Iago under the cover of darkness for his death cry. And in the excitement of the moment he blurts out:

'Tis he. O brave Iago, honest and just
That has such noble sense of thy friend’s wrong!
Thou teachest me -- minion, your dear lies dead,
And your unblest fate lies. Strumpet, I come.
Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes are blotted;
Thy bed lust-stained, shall with lust’s blood be spotted.

(V.i.31-36)

“This remarkable speech,” as McElroy suggests

... concentrates in six lines all the erroneous beliefs which govern Othello’s conduct -- belief that Iago is honest, that Desdemona is a strumpet, that his cause is just, that he can renounce his love and act dispassionately -- all this plus one new error: he now believes contrary to the ascertainable facts, that Cassio is dead .... the speech is a kind of compendium of error and prelude to disaster ... this combination of calm, sure resolve with multiple error contributes to the dread of the impending catastrophic mistake that is about to be made irrevocable.²⁸

With all the erroneous beliefs thus firmly ingrained in him, Othello now proceeds to execute justice least realizing that his “just grounds” (V.ii. 141) are in themselves

blatantly unjust. But on entering her bed chamber, he finds himself being tormented by the
conflict between the need to kill Desdemona in compliance with his concern for justice and
"his agonized reluctance to kill Desdemona, his poignant awareness of her loveliness and
his vivid consciousness of the finality of death"29:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul --

Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars --

It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,

And smooth as monumental alabaster.

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

.................................................................

............................................. When I have

Pluck'd thy rose,

I cannot give it vital growth again;

It needs must wither. I'll smell thee on the tree.

[ Kissing her.]

O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade.

Justice to break her sword! One more, one more.

Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,

And love thee after. One more, and that's the last:

So sweet was ne'er so fatal. I must weep,

29 op.cit. p.207.
But they are cruel tears. This sorrow's heavenly;

It strikes where it doth love.

(V.ii.1-22)

What the speech transparently reveals is the extraordinary quality of Othello’s love for Desdemona -- even when his commitment to love itself drives him to a kind of dementia that impels him to his murderous resolve -- as well as his uncompromising sense of justice. It is of course true that the kind of uxoriousness that had inspired Othello to long for death “If it were now to die, / 'Twere now to be most happy” (II.i.187-88) now demands of him to take her life. For in spite of all the charms and attractions she holds for him with “that whiter skin of hers than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (V.ii.4-5), Othello is convinced “Yet she must die” (V.ii.6). And “she must die” precisely because he cannot afford to bear the pain and ignominy of his “soul” -- the term he uses to address her both on the sea-port of Cyprus when his love for her reaches its apogee and at the time when he is all set to put her to eternal rest -- being soiled and contaminated by sin, as he feels “else she’ll betray more men”(V.ii.6). But in addition to this curious concern with love an intransigent passion for justice governed by his tribal sense of honour also contributes to Othello’s lethal decision. For however insupportable the consequence of his action or whatever the nature of the sacrifice demanded, under no circumstance can he allow “justice to break her sword”(V.ii.17). But once the quest for justice is satiated as he smothers Desdemona to death, justice itself begins to torment him as on the discovery of his colossal blunder he falls into a state of despair not experienced by any other tragic hero.
of Shakespeare as he recognizes the self-deceiving rationalization of his violence in committing the heinous murder.

The ending of *Othello* thus differs significantly from the tragedies already discussed in that the protagonist's knowledge of the kind of errors responsible for the tragedy dawns upon him only after the fatal damage has already been done allowing him thereby no scope whatsoever to take any evasive action to rectify matters. Having been driven to a state of harrowing uncertainty with regard to his status as a husband and an alien vis-à-vis Desdemona's nuptial fidelity, Othello is made to look upon his marriage as something not quite in accord “whereto we see in all things nature tends” (III.iii.235). And, therefore,

The more Othello is made to feel his marriage is a violation of natural boundaries, the more estranged he and Desdemona become, the more estranged they become, the more he desires her. Only murder, it seems, with its violent rapture of possession, can break such a spiral; but it does so at the cost of seeming to demonstrate the truth of all that Iago has implied about the natural consequences of transgressive desire.³⁰

But in killing her, Othello also

... makes Desdemona into the very idol, the mindless god, to him he also sacrifices her. She becomes a pure figure of denial, a means of repudiating the knowledge that she is mortal, that she has blood that can be shed: “Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee after” (5.2.18-

19), he says kissing her with all the necrophiliac despair of one who might kiss a marble statue.  

The recognition, however, when it comes, emerges as a major structural triumph as the sheer mastery with which the playwright winds up the plot at the point of the protagonist’s discovery and response to the heinous error places the denouement of Othello at a matchless height of artistic achievement in the realms of English dramatic literature. Whereas there seemed to be not an iota of evidence in support of Desdemona’s innocence and of her fealty to the marriage vows till she is strangled out of breath, evidences now come crowding in to torment himself with the realization of the monstrosity of his deed. There are, for instance, the evidences from both Emilia and Cassio with regard to the truth of the ill-fated handkerchief strong enough to wring out of Othello the piteous cry:

... cold, cold, my girl!

Even like thy chastity, O cursed, cursed slave!

( V.ii.278-70 )

But what strikes as crucially significant is Iago’s final resolve to maintain silence.

Demand me nothing, what you know, you know.

From this time forth I never will speak word.

( V.ii.306-07)

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For it is the kind of silence that speaks volumes as Iago himself had stated earlier in the same act in connection with Bianca's silence over Cassio's injury:

... Nay guiltiness will speak

Though tongues were out of use.

(V.1.109-10)

And strangely enough Bianca's silence, too, speaks not of her "guiltiness" but of Iago's as does his own silence itself. As for Othello himself, the revelation of his unwitting blunder, as McElroy would have us believe, is:

... not simply discovery of the truth but recovery of the truth. He had had the truth at the beginning and had needlessly abandoned it for a passionately held delusion. Now he must face not only the heinousness of what he has done but the needlessness of it as well; .... He must not only face a great error and a greater loss, but he must come to a completely new evaluation of himself and where he stands in the Othello-world.32

The evaluation is, of course, fraught with devastating consequences. For with all the weight of guilt and loss laid upon him, Othello now finds the world too much to bear with inasmuch as a life without Desdemona -- his soul -- simply entails a hideous procession of unendurable moments "upon the rack of this tough world" (Lear V.iii.313). Afflicted thus with this sense of excruciating despair, Othello finally seeks and finds his release from the "world-wearied flesh" (Romeo and Juliet V.iii.112) as well as his reconciliation with Desdemona like Romeo only in his suicide. For Othello, at the moment of his death,

32 op.cit., pp. 139-40.
realizes that no compensation other than self-slaughter itself is strong enough to grant him that union with Desdemona he now so desperately longs for. And, therefore, like Lear’s final reconciliation with Cordelia after suffering all kinds of unmitigated disaster that the “flesh is heir to” (Hamlet III.i.63) only in his death, Othello too is reconciled with Desdemona. But in the latter case, it is Othello himself who becomes his own judge and executioner. And the wheel comes full circle as Othello dies upon the kiss he had wished for much earlier in the play on the sea-port of Cyprus proving in the process that the “content so absolute” (II.i.189) he had experience then rested after all in a faith “so absolute” as he had nourished then. And now at his death, shorn of all doubt and jealousy, this absolute contentment is what he ultimately experiences. And as has been brilliantly pointed out by Kenneth Gross:

... Othello and Desdemona, who took upon each other the image of each other’s life, at the end take upon each other the image of each other’s death, the victim of a murder claiming to be a suicide, the suicide claiming to be victim and judicial murderer at once. It is a scene that confesses their mad, destructive implication in each, but also the mutual externality of persons who are hardly whole subjects without the other.  

And as for Iago, that “hellish villain” (v.ii.351) as no punishment is severe enough to match the magnitude of his crime he is rightly made to bleed “but not kill’d” (V.ii.292). He is thus denied immediate capital punishment as in Othello’s sense “ ’tis happiness to die” (V.ii.293). All the same, Lodovico’s words at the end of the play with regard to the

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33 op.cit., p. 843.
"censure" of Iago provides us, as it were, with a kind of partial compensatory gratification for the massive calamity experienced:

To you Lord Governor

Remain the censure of this hellish villain;

The time, the place, the torture -- O enforce it!

(V.ii.350-52)

And as “Cassius rules in Cyprus” (V.ii. 335), despite the pity and terror evoked by the fall of the noble Moor social and political order are finally restored with all their attendant blessings.

IV

If in Othello we have a structure relatively simpler as compared to those of Hamlet and King Lear in that it hinges, as has been already pointed out, on a single plot for the development of the tragic action, the structure of Macbeth, on the other hand, despite its dependence on a single plot poses a formidable difficulty owing basically, to the ambiguous nature of the tragic potentiality of the play. It is, of course, true that like Othello the structure of Macbeth too revolves round “the temptation and fall of a great and good but less than perfect human being,” but in the case of the latter play the career of the protagonist comes to be so dreadfully vitiated by a spate of ghastly crimes that the structure of the play finds itself intricately poised between the emotional imperative to condemn the criminal activities perpetrated by him and to retain at the same time an

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ungrudging sympathy for him by placing his shortcomings within the parameters of human frailty. And as R.S. Crane perceives:

If we are normal human beings we must abhor his crimes; yet we cannot completely abhor but must rather pity the man himself and even when he seems most the monster (as Macbeth does in Act IV) we must still wish for such an outcome as will be best, under the circumstances, not merely for Scotland but for him.35

But despite the complex emotional vibrations evoked by the nature of the tragedy the structure of Macbeth yet seems to be in paradigmatic proximity to the thematic development of the other mature tragedies of Shakespeare as already discussed. For the sequence of events informing the play seems to be in line with the pattern revealed by the other mature tragedies of Shakespeare inasmuch as the action of Macbeth centres round the protagonist's search for identity, his self-recognition and his calamitous end followed by restoration of order. But unlike the other tragedies of Shakespeare like Hamlet and Lear, the hero's search for identity and the corresponding inability to comprehend the responsibilities of his status continue almost till the end of the play much in the manner of Othello thereby investing the ending of the play with remarkable significance.

To come back to the plot itself, the supernatural visitations with which the play opens assume a kind of significance that the appearance of the Ghost in the opening scene of Hamlet seem to be imbued with. For both the witches in Macbeth and the Ghost in

Hamlet not only perform the important structural function of initiating the action of the play but also serve to define, as it were, the mood of the plays concerned. And just as the image of heart sickness "'Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart" (Hamlet, I. i. 7-8) conjured up by one of the minor characters in Hamlet serves to offer a penetrating comment on the emotional atmosphere of the play, so too, the witches' unified utterance "Fair is foul, foul is fair; / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (I. i. 11-12) is expressive of the kind of inversion of order and the reversal of values that so characterize the action of Macbeth. And it is of crucial importance, too, to the meaning of the play that the kind of language used by the witches find an important echo in the very first words of Macbeth, the hero of the play as he states before Banquo on the blasted heath "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I. iii. 38) suggesting thereby the possibility of a mystic association between the yet unspelt desires of Macbeth and the unwholesome designs of the witches. And, therefore, as Dowden comments:

... although Macbeth has not set eyes upon these hags, the connection is already established between his soul and them. Their spells have already wrought upon his blood.36

Although the nature of the connection between the hags and the soul of Macbeth that Dowden speaks of cannot be exactly defined at this stage of the play, what however, is certainly transparent is the fact Macbeth's first encounter with the witches "bodes some strange eruption" (Hamlet, I. i. 69) to the state of Scotland. The encounter is also closely linked "with the technique of exposition, with the creation of dramatic tension, suspense

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and expectation, and even of dramatic contrast.\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, Wolfgang Clemen's views on the role of the witches and their prophecies in the context of the structure deserve attention:

The witches and their prophecies will always remain the starting point for any discussions of preparation in \textit{Macbeth}. The prophecies of the witches are ambiguous: they raise expectations but they do not set clear goals towards which the characters and the whole course of action might move in one direct line .... The prophecies of the witches are the point of departure for both the inner and the outer action, and they actually set it in motion, promising for the future the fulfilment of the hopes and desires but also of the fears and doubts of the main characters. So one might say that the events in the play are a continued reaction to the witches' oracles.\textsuperscript{38}

The effect of the prophecies on Macbeth is skillfully contrasted by the playwright with Banquo's response to the same situation so as to give us an indication of what the future is going to be like for both the characters and indeed for the play as well. For whereas Banquo retains a cool and sober critical attitude towards the predictions as seen in his warning to Macbeth of the potential danger of yielding to them

\begin{quote}
And oftentimes to win us to our harm,

The instruments of Darkness tell truths;

Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37} Wolfgang Clemen, \textit{Shakespeare's Dramatic Art} (London and New York: Methuen, 1972; Rpt. 1980) p.2

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 77
In deepest consequence.

(I.iii.123-26)

Macbeth is not only rapt in contemplation of the instant fulfilment of the two of the prophecies “Glamis and Thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind.” (I.iii.117) but also tries to visualize the future even beyond the attainment of “the greatest.” Consequently, he asks Banquo the very pertinent question:

Do you not hope your children shall be Kings,
When those that gave the thane of Cawdor to me
Promis’d no less to them.

(I.iii.118-19)

Macbeth’s question to Banquo gains much importance in view of the fact that the future of Banquo’s children now suddenly becomes for Macbeth a mirror for his own future in the face of the prophecies of the witches. And as the action proceeds Macbeth will be seen as waging a war with the children who happen to be the formidable representatives of the future. And as Cleanth Brooks very succinctly argues:

The babe signifies not only the future; it symbolizes all those enlarging purposes which make life meaningful, and it symbolizes, furthermore, all those emotional and -- to Lady Macbeth -- irrational ties which make man more than a machine -- which render him human. It signifies pre-eminently the pity which Macbeth, under Lady Macbeth’s tutelage, would wean himself of as something ‘unmanly.’ 39

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Thus from the very moment of his encounter with the witches Macbeth begins to be disturbed by a kind of unrest that gives rise to a sense of identity crisis even at this early stage of the play as he begins to take cognizance of the changes taking place within him vis-à-vis his natural inclinations and by extension, his “state of man”:

... why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,

And make my seated heart knock at the ribs,

Against the use of nature? Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings.

My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,

Shakes so my single state of man,

That function is smother'd in surmise,

And nothing is, but what is not.

(I.iii.134-42)

What we find in this speech, then, is a reference to the overturning of hierarchy which forms, as has been stated already, a major pre-occupation of the play. Macbeth finds himself so placed that his “single state of man” is terribly shaken. In other words, his indivisible and composite nature is so disturbed by the one overwhelming image of regicide that all his natural power of action is hopelessly crushed. Thought normally leads to action. But, in the subjective world of Macbeth, action itself is “smother’d in surmise.” And this reversal of hierarchy that turns the inner world of Macbeth topsy-turvy expresses itself in the outer world too, leading eventually to a total breakdown of order.
The next scene of the play forms an important milestone in the structural context of the play with some of the most powerful dramatic ironies contributing to the thematic development of the play. For instance, Duncan’s observation,

There’s no art
To find the mind’s construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust --

(I.iv.11-13)

while being in itself the reflection of a profound truth also points to one of the greatest ironies of the play as even in the wake of his new found knowledge with regard to the falsities of appearance Duncan commits the same blunder once again. And this time the blunder proves fatal as the new recipient of his trust eventually robs him of his life. Next, Macbeth’s rejoinder to Duncan’s acknowledgment of his gratitude to the kind of services rendered by the former,

Your Highness’ part
Is to receive our duties: and our duties
Are to your throne and state, children and servants;

(I.iv.23-25)

is fraught with similar ironic overtones as it is through a total disregard for the “throne and state, children and servants” that Macbeth would shortly be turning Scotland into a veritable graveyard. Finally, Duncan’s announcement

Sons, Kinsmen, Thanes,
And you whose places are nearest, know,
We will establish our estate upon
Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter
The Prince of Cumberland: which honour must
Not unaccompanied invest him only,
But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine
On all deservers.

(I.iv.35-42)

in spite of providing us with “one of the play’s basic indices of life, opposed by numerous images of blocking and stifling (‘stop up th’ access and passage’, ‘scarf up the tender eye’, ‘light thickens’)” confounds Macbeth with “bleak and deep desires” (I.iv.51). For The crown of Scotland was originally not hereditary. When a successor was declared in the life-time of a king, as was often the case, the title of Prince of Cumberland was immediately bestowed on him as the mark of his designation. Cumberland was at that time held by Scotland as the crown of England as a fief. As a matter of fact, despite his assurances that “signs of nobleness, like stars shall shine on all deservers” Duncan’s choice of Malcolm as the next successor to the throne seals all prospects for Macbeth for of inheriting the throne legally. Thus his peace of mind is violently shaken and he cries out in an anguished aside:

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*Kenneth Muir, *op.cit., p.25
The Prince of Cumberland! -- That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(I.iv.48-53)

Although the expressiveness of the language -- studded as it is, with images and apostrophes of the most appropriate kind -- is certainly admirable, the fact remains that Macbeth's fell purpose does indeed clash with the "compunctious visitings of Nature" (I.v.45) against the wishes of Lady Macbeth. For the "black and deep desires" so provoked by Duncan's action hurl him into a state of severe emotional turmoil as he finds himself caught between the conflicting impulses of fulfilling a private urge and retaining a public image untarnished as well thereby highlighting the playwright's attempt at showing his fall later on as the inevitable consequence of a noble soul coming under the influence of evil temptations.

It is significant, therefore, that Macbeth's hesitant resolve to seize upon the greatness prophesied is strategically countered by Lady Macbeth's extraordinary haste to feel "the future in the instant" (I.v.58), if need be, by unsexing herself. Consequently, the repetition of the imagery used by Macbeth to give vent to his dark desires earlier in his "Stars, hide your fires!" speech by Lady Macbeth serves to express her apparent demoniac strength in contrast to Macbeth's compunctious sufferings even as the substance of his
anguish, viz., the succession to power by means foul and illegal is identical with the prospects that trigger her energy:

Come, thick Night,

And pall thee in the dunniest smoke of Hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,

To cry, Hold, hold!

(I.v.50-53)

As we witness this "Denaturing" and the overturning of hierarchy once again, the inference we are invited to make from the speech as Ruth Nevo suggests is:

... that which is destructive in nature, nature's mischief, she embraces, that which is preservative, the great bond she cancels and tears to pieces.... She is allying herself with all that is destructive in nature -- the cursed thoughts which nature gives way to in repose -- and against all that is sustaining and protective.42

Nevo also takes care to show as to how the dramatic irony of the "temple-haunting martlet" speech is heightened not only by what follows it, but also by that which precedes it.43

This guest of summer,

The temple-haunting martlet does approve,
By his loved mansionry that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, no coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed, and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd
The air is delicate.

(I.vi.3-10)

"The whole cycle of procreation," states Nevo:

... is given its gentlest, most winning aspect in this nesting imagery, where
the bird chooses its softest airs, the mellowest summer weather for its
has renounced with a poignance of effect which cannot be accounted for
save in terms of the immediate alterations of dramatic sequence. 44

Following the murder of Duncan, the porter scene, however, invokes visions of hell as
against Duncan's reference to "heaven's breath" before his death.

The next scene in the play assumes great significance from the structural point of
view as the hero enters that crucial stage of Shakespearean tragedy when torn between
conflicting passions he finds himself struggling for a sense of direction as the will to act is
impeded by the pale cast of thought. And this state of mind of the hero is sought to be
ventilated through a soliloquy thereby acquainting us with the nature of the dilemma

44ibid.
confronting him at that moment of time. Macbeth’s anguished despair too, in the same way, now finds expression in the great soliloquy:

If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well
It were done quickly: if th’ assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and end-all -- here, ...

............................................................................

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which overleaps itself
And falls on the other.

(1.vii.1-28)

Macbeth whose humanity at this stage is still intact despite being possessed by the witches is obviously more concerned about the consequences of the act than the act itself. And as the speech clearly reveals, he is more bent on finding excuses for not committing the deed contemplated than vindicating the performances of the act. He thus conjures up the image of the naked new-born babe -- the image, that is, of purity, innocence and the saving instincts of life -- to justify his recoil from the “terrible feat” (1.vii.81). And as his conversation with Lady Macbeth reveals that in spite of the sinister promptings of ambition, the natural man of sentience in him is still worried about keeping intact the “golden opinions” brought from “all sorts of people” (1.vii.33). Macbeth, at this stage, is,
therefore, terribly at a loss to discover his true self and would fain “do all that may become a man” (I.vii.46). However, being unable to bear the brunt of Lady Macbeth’s attack on manliness, Macbeth finally succumbs to her fiendish instigation:

I am settled, and bend up

Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

Away and mock the time with fairest show:

False face must hide what false heart doth know.

(I.vii.80-83)

Pico della Mirandola, for instance, suggests that the essence of man is the freedom of choice, which may turn him into an angel or a monster. In his Oration on the Dignity of Man, God himself tells man:

... we have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and moulder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer.

When, therefore, Macbeth decides to perform the “terrible feat” it appears that his exercise of the freedom referred to by Pico turns him to a monster. But there is also present in Macbeth’s speech here, an undertone of deep self-reproach. And when Macbeth says that “False face must hide what heart doth know,” he is acutely aware of a sense of deliberate smothering of conscience.

By II.ii., the terrible feat is accomplished as Macbeth shakingly asserts “I have done the deed — Didst thou hear a noise?” (II.ii.14). And the regicide is both preceded
and followed by a spate of such unnatural occurrences: marked by shrieks, starts, hallucination and terror that they immediately suggest the conjuring up of "The great doom's image" (II.ii.79). On the individual level, too, the effect of the fatal error on Macbeth is instant and is revealed by his inability to say "Amen". He is thus

... paralyzed by his inchoate knowledge of the irrevocable. That the word sticks in his throat, physical manifestation of psychic fact, is in keeping, in this most psychoanalytic of plays, with the rendering of the Macbeth experience.45

It is worth noticing that Macbeth's tragic error like that of Lear's takes place at a sufficiently early stage in the play. In the process, both the protagonists, unlike Hamlet or Othello, are invested with ample opportunity to reflect upon the nature of the deeds committed by them. In the case of Lear, of course, the madness that comes to possess him immediately after the commitment of the fatal error ironically produces in him a regenerative effect, when, by exposing him to the naked realities of life, it leads him to a kind of widening of consciousness with regard to the complex nature of the human condition itself. On the other hand, Macbeth comes under the possession of the witches -- the instruments of darkness -- even before the heinous crime is committed, the effect of the fatal deed on him is obviously fraught with devastating consequences thereby making the prospect of recovery for him at the end of the play a remote possibility.

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45 ibid., p.235.
The horror of the crime committed, of course, afflicts Macbeth with a terrible sense of lament and guilt. Reflecting on the magnitude of the terrible deed Macbeth cries out in solemn despair:

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine
> Making the green one red.

(II.ii.59-62)

However, as the sequence of events reveal the sight of blood which so torments Macbeth at this stage certainly does "incarnadine his life, if not the multitudinous seas." For the search for the self continues for him even after the attainment of kingship which instead of offering him the satisfaction he had anticipated leads him not only to frustration but also haunts him with a terrible feeling of insecurity as well as emptiness. For the more he tries to define his identity the more he finds himself vulnerable. Thus in the opening scene of Act III, rightly in consonance with the thematic structure of the play Banquo and his children form the subject of his ruminations as he looks upon them as potential threats to his sovereign identity in view of the prophecies of the witches who continue to be his guardian angels even at this critical juncture of his career:

> To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus:
> Our fears in Banquo
> Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature

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46 Whitaker, op.cit., p. 264.
Reigns that which would be fear'd: 'tis much he dares;
And, to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety. / ...

They hail'd him father to a line of kings. / ...

...If 't be so

For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,
Only for them.

(III.i.47-67)

He is thus bent on removing the impediments on his way to success. But success eludes him. For even when Banquo is eliminated, "the seed of Banquo" (III.i.69) escapes only to torment him with renewed fear:

We have scorch'd the snake, not kill'd it:
She'll close, and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.

(III.ii.13-15)

The thought of Fleance's escape so distresses him that he ventilates his despair in the form of a death-wish as he compares the "torture of his mind" with Duncan's peace:

Better be with the dead,
Whom we to gain our peace, have sent to peace.
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;

(III.ii.19-23)

The new "identity" of King, in other words, does not bring him peace of mind, but only "ecstasy". But the haunting sense of lament that engages his mind is soon followed by an instinct of self-assertion that finds its expression in deeds of the most barbarous kind. Significantly, therefore, he is irked by the necessity to visit the witches indicating thereby the complete dispossession of the self only to be completely possessed by the witches, thus demonstrating the fact that he is no more a free agent now but a slave of evil forces:

-- I will to-morrow.

And betimes I will to the Weird Sisters:

More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know
By worst means the worst. For mine own good,
All causes shall give way: I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

(III.iv.131-37)

As Macbeth meets the witches the vision of the Apparitions along with their prophecies feed him with buoyant hopes. But

The buoyancy however is short lived. The nagging question of the futility of which Banquo's issue is the symbol, must be answered, and the line of
kings which stretches out to the crack of doom confirms the despair with
which he curses the pernicious hour.\textsuperscript{47}

Thus he takes the murderous resolution:

\begin{center}
from this moment
\end{center}

\begin{center}
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
\end{center}

\begin{center}
The firstlings of my hand.
\end{center}

\textit{(IV.i.146-48)}

Once again, then, we witness the overturning of order. For Macbeth’s decision clearly
shows that his action is inspired by impulse and not by sober thought. And the immediate
victims of the lethal resolutions are Macduff’s children -- the “firstlings”, in other words,
that trouble his mind -- along with their mother. And as Michael Long puts it:

\begin{quote}
The assault upon Macduff’s family is perhaps the most moving of all
Shakespeare’s scenes involving child victims, partly because of its own
intrinsic quality and partly because of its context in the play at large ... we
hear new registers of the human voice in the prattling of the ‘poor monkey’
and in the gentle ‘natural touch’ of Lady Macduff.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

The all-pervading air of gloom and distrust and the total disregard for order and
degree -- evidenced first in the rebellion of Macdonwald and followed by the great
betrayal of Macbeth -- which, structurally speaking, so define the characteristic mood of
the beginning thus remains much too pronounced a feature of the middle scenes as well.

\textsuperscript{47}Nevo, p. 245.

\textsuperscript{48}Michael Long, \textit{Macbeth}, Harvester New critical Introductions to Shakespeare
In fact, the disturbing situation continues unabated till the very end of the play. As a matter of fact, Scotland, as Rosse, one of the nobles, describes is turned into a veritable grave:

Alas poor country!

Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot

Be call'd our mother, but our grave;

(IV.iii.164-66)

Similarly, as Wolfgang Clemen perceives:

Pursuing Macbeth's comments on his future action right through the scenes following Banquo's murder, we are struck by the decline in the imaginative poetic element and the ascent of a more direct and decisive mode of experience (e.g. III.iv,136-40; IV.i,146 ff.). In this way the language reflects the inner transformation which has taken place in Macbeth. The gap between thought and action is narrowed, deeds follow one another in rapid succession, for their 'inner preparation' has been curtailed.\(^{\text{49}}\)

But Clemen does not point out that this constitutes a demented, disorderly state of being. Humanity is not impulse, but impulse mediated by thought, rendered into action.

As we move on to the fifth act of the play, we are struck by the terrible force with which the ironic reversals come crashing on as the play moves towards the resolution. Lady Macbeth's somnambulist trance, for instance, in which the inner distress of the soul in agony reveals itself in the shape of a diseased mind against the wishes of the conscious

\(^{\text{49}}\) op.cit. pp. 81-82.
mind is the first sign of the heinous crime committed by Macbeth under her tutelage having a boomerang effect. In tune with the thematic structure of the play, therefore, Lady Macbeth’s hopeful words “A little water clears us of this deed.” (II.i.66) to a mind in turmoil meet their ironic contrast in her own torment when “all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (V.1.50) and “what’s done cannot be undone” (V.1.65). In the same way, her awareness of Macbeth’s need for sleep “You lack the season of all natures, sleep” (III.v.140) to ease the perturbation of the mind is now countered by her own sleeplessness. The kind of reversal thus seen in Lady Macbeth’s shattered psyche serves as an index to the occurrence of like reversals in Macbeth as the veil of his monumental self-delusion is removed in the denouement of the play. Macbeth’s discovery of the tragic delusion is, however, deliberately delayed as if to highlight the complexity involved in investing the structure of the play with an emotional ambiguity that make us feel “both that Macbeth is being killed in a just cause and that his state of mind and the circumstances of his death are such as befit a man who for all his crimes has not altogether lost our pity and goodwill.”

It is true that when Macbeth visits the witches for the second time he knows with a certainty that Banquo’s line will occupy the throne of Scotland:

Then art too like the spirit of Banquo: down!

Thy crown does sear mine eye-balls: -- and my hair'

Thou other gold-bound brow is like the first: --

A third is like he former: filthy hags!

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50R.S. Crane, op.cit., p.211.
Why do you show me this? A fourth? Start, eyes!

What! will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?

Another yet? A seventh? -- I'll see no more: --

And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass,

Which shows me many more; and some I see,

That two-fold balls and treble sceptres carry.

Horrible sight! Now, I see, 'tis true;

For the blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me,

And points at them for his. What! Is this so?

(IV.i.112-24)

Macbeth, in other words, comes to know from this "show of eight kings" that he is going to meet a fatal end. There is, therefore, the sense that he is waiting in the meantime for the end, cynical, desperate and fatalistic. But, it is finally in the denouement of the play that he is made to realize through the consequences of his act as well as through the reversal of events, the way in which he had been befooled by the witches into turning himself away from the order.

The events in the denouement, therefore, keep alternating between our awareness of the kind of isolated suffering his actions have pushed him to and his ostensible resolve on the other hand to strive, to seek, and not to yield in the face of extreme disaster. The state of his desolation and the simultaneous rejection of all love for him are of course conveyed both through his own confession and through the perceptions of other character. For instance, Angus, commenting on his predicament states:
Now does he feel
His secret murthers striking on his hands;
Now minutely revolts upbraid his faith breach:
Those he commands move only in command,
Nothing in love now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief

(V.ii.16-22)

Close upon the heels of this knowledge comes Macbeth's confessional description of the kind of solitary existence he has carved out for himself by means of his most unscrupulous and sacrilegious deeds in the name of exercising authority and power:

Seyton! -- I am
sick at heart,
When I behold -- Seyton, I say! -- This push
Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now.
I have liv'd long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troop of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
Similarly, his response to the news of Lady Macbeth’s death shows the kind of callous apathy into which he has sunk from which even the death of his wife cannot arouse him. For he is convinced of the vapidity which life affords us all in leading us to “dusty death” (V.v.23). Macbeth, thus, on the one hand clings to life, a survivor. On the other hand, life has lost all taste for him. At the end, when he finds himself being brought to a state where:

They have tied me to a stake: I cannot fly
But bear-like I must fight the course

(V.vii.1-2)

Macbeth is profoundly aware of a sense of destiny. Only he forgets that the fatal cause had been drawn by himself.

The ending of the play thus strikes us with pity and terror at fate of the hero who wrenches himself from the cause of nature deliberately. Yet our sympathies with the beleaguered hero notwithstanding we cannot afford to wink at the justice of the exultation of the avengers when Macduff cries out:

Behold, where stands
Th’ usurper’s cursed head: the time is free.

(V.ix.20-21)

Moreover, in structural terms, the beheading of Macbeth not only indicates as in the case of the other tragedies, that the wheel is come full circle but also signals the defeat of Macbeth in his war with the future. For the moment, Malcolm, the son of Duncan,
succeeds to the throne of Scotland, future wins. In the process, the ending of the play underlines as in Sophocles, the limits of human identity. The denouement also shows that Macbeth’s fall is both sudden and a fruition of a seed already there. Finally, Malcolm’s assurance of conferring awards and titles on all deservers while echoing Duncan’s language in I.iv.35-43 also holds out the prospect of giving back to Scotland the good old days of the “most sainted being” (IV.iii.109). And just as in Hamlet, the time which was “out of joint” is finally brought to order at the end of the play, so too, the reversal of natural order witnessed throughout Macbeth is finally righted as nature, humanity and order are restored. For with the elimination of Macbeth, “the time is free” (V.ix.21).

It emerges from our study of the structure of the four mature tragedies of Shakespeare that even when the plays in general do not seem to be governed by a strict adherence to any structural pattern the denouement of the plays, nevertheless, succeeds in unfolding a paradigmatic structural expression. For the way in which the loose strands of the plays finally come to be woven together in the denouement of the plays despite the complexities of plot-construction, we come to acknowledge the existence of a pattern of expression insofar as the structure of the Shakespearean tragedy is concerned. And as this structure expresses itself through a process of integration with the phases of the thematic development of the plays the pattern comes to reveal itself through the way in which the career of the tragic hero comes to a characteristic end. For as Ruth Nevo quite succinctly argues:

The axis of development in the Shakespearean sequence of events is the tragic hero, through whom all that was potential in the beginning...
actualized by the end. He may be conceived as a prism whose facets are
turned successively toward the light by the moving plot, of whose dynamic
structure he is a constituent part.\textsuperscript{51}

Thus the epiphanic purports and designs that come to inform the paradigm of the end are
best realized through the realization and experience of the tragic hero. Our discussion of
the tragedies of Shakespeare here thus goes on to establish that it is through the tragic
reversals that take place at the end of the plays that the structural pattern manifests itself.
For our experience of the tragedies shows that the reversal of expectations in all the four
tragedies almost without any variation is most tellingly informed by an inextricable
admixture of suspense and a sense of inevitability. Consequently, the denouement, in our
view, serves to expose the limits of human identity, the different aspects of which are
being explored by the tragedies under discussion. There is, therefore, the feeling that a
sense of destiny comes to express itself at the end of the tragic action through an
interworking of human will and natural compulsions. The pattern is also discernible, as
our study reveals, from the way in which the wheel of fortune is seen to come full circle as
the different characters meet their respective ends. Finally, there is a sense of restoration
of nature, humanity and order after the closing carnage of the tragedies.

\textsuperscript{51}Ruth Nevo, op.cit., p.21