The Aristotelian definition of tragedy itself underlines the importance of the tragic hero. For the tragic hero, as Aristotle declares, should ideally be:

... a man who morally stands midway between the two extremes. He is not eminently good or just, though he leans to the side of the goodness. He is involved in misfortune, not however, as the result of deliberate vice, but through some great flaw of character or fatal error in conduct. He is moreover, illustrious in rank and fortune; the chief motive no doubt, for this requirement being that the signal nature of the catastrophe may be more strikingly exhibited.¹

Aristotle's definition, then, by implication insists on a certain process of our identification with the tragic hero despite the height and grandeur of his station. For it is ultimately through his capacity to arouse the emotions of pity and fear in us that the tragic hero enables us to establish a kind of kinship with him. For pity, in Aristotelian terms, is

aroused by unmerited misfortune and fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.

Therefore, as S.H. Butcher puts it:

The tension of the mind, the agonized expectation with which we await the impending catastrophe springs from our sympathy with the hero in whose existence we have for the time merged our own. The events as they pass before us seem almost as if we were directly concerned. We are brought onto a mood in which we feel that we too are liable to suffering. In the spectacle of another's errors or misfortunes, in the shocks and blows of circumstance, we read the 'doubtful doom of human kind.' We are thrilled with awe at the greatness of the issues thus unfolded, and with the moral inevitableness of the result. In this sense of awe the emotions of fear and pity are balanced.2

Aristotle, while forming his opinions, was of course being guided by the examples of the classical tragedies before him like those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But the relevance of his opinions to the tragedies of Shakespeare, we feel, is even more remarkably pronounced inasmuch as the sense of becoming we share with the tragic heroes of Shakespeare is relatively much easier than with those of their classical counterparts. For instance, the sacrifice of his daughter by Agamemnon at the altar of public duty and his subsequent death in the hands of his wife may fail to convince us as being grounded in reality, but it is not quite difficult for us to situate the sufferings of Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth or Othello for all their greatness and status, within the framework.

2ibid. pp. 262-63.
of the contingent conditions of life itself. All the same, it is possible that Aristotle with his profound rationalism has no room in his conception of tragedy for a factor or dimension of human life which is beyond all human calculations or justification. We mean here, what has been called the religious dimension of tragedy. While Aristotle has an illuminating insight into the structure of tragedy and its intimate connection with the tragic emotions, his view of tragedy is wedded perhaps to his notion of the Golden Mean in life, sobriety and temperance which are the marks of highest wisdom for him. But, again, it is not only until we come to confront the endings of these plays that we recognize the full reality of 'the shocks and blows of circumstance' in the spectacle of the errors and misfortunes of another man. For it is only in the ending of a Shakespearean tragedy that the hero is finally seen to emerge as a person breaking himself free from the clutches of those external forces that serve to bring about his disastrous end. In the present chapter, therefore, we should like to see as to how the ending of a Shakespearean tragedy by focussing on the final gestures of the hero as he finds his definition of himself places him as a pattern of humanity itself thereby inducing in us not only a sense of admiration for him but a feeling of closeness as well. We should also like to see as to how the circumstances of the ending eventually present the tragic hero as the sacrificial victim redistributing his vital energy among those he leaves behind.\textsuperscript{3} We should now like to begin our discussion on the present chapter with \textit{Hamlet}, the first of the mature tragedies of Shakespeare.

\textsuperscript{3}John Holloway, \textit{The Story of the Night}, p.141.
We have seen in the course of our discussion of the structure of the Shakespearean tragedy in the last chapter how the Shakespearean tragic hero forms the nucleus round whose life and activities the action of the play takes shape. This sense of importance attached to the role of tragic hero, then, seems to be evident in Hamlet right from the first mention of the hero. For the sentinels guarding the castle of Elsinore at night being visibly shaken by the appearance of the Ghost of the recently dead king of Denmark consider it their bounden duty to report the traumatic experience of the night to the young Prince of Denmark who they think would be able to unearth the nature of the reality signified by the repeated appearance of the Ghost. Thus Horatio states:

Let us impart what we have seen tonight

Unto young Hamlet; for upon my life,

This spirit dumb to us, will speak to him.

Do you consent we shall acquaint him with it,

As needful in our loves, fitting our duty

(I.i.169-73)

The kind of esteem in which this young Prince is being held by the others around him is thus made clear at this early stage of the play itself. It is quite significant that the guards on duty instead of reporting the matter straight to the King himself consider it their duty to apprise Hamlet the Prince of their harrowing experiences even when they think that “This bodes some strange eruption to our state” (I.i.69) and especially when the suggestion comes from someone like Horatio who is himself held in high esteem by Hamlet for being
"A man that fortunes buffets and rewards / Has ta'en with equal thanks" (III.ii.63-64).

Horatio’s suggestion, then, to acquaint Hamlet with their adventures is indicative not only of the kind of love the people have for him ("needful in our loves"), but more importantly, it is also suggestive of the kind of expectation with which he is looked up to. In other words, he is looked upon as "the man to deal with their crisis and to whom they are devoted." ⁴ The same sense of being “one whom all had respected and looked up to”⁵ prevails even in Ophelia’s reference to Hamlet as

Th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state,

The glass of fashion and the mould of form,

Th’ observed of all observers

(III.i.151-53)

In the midst of all these expectations which people in general invest him with there comes for Hamlet the momentous command from the Ghost of his father to avenge his most foul and unnatural murder. Consequently, he finds himself being thrown into a predicament where he is forced into leading a life alien to his natural inclinations. Torn thus between the external compulsions of undertaking “enterprises of great pitch and moment” (III.i.86) and a desire at the same time of retaining a private sovereign self intact Hamlet laments the fact that he was ever born to set right a time that is severely “out of joint” (I.v.189). However, the knowledge that Hamlet gathers from the Ghost about the villainous circumstances leading to the death of his father convinces him of the necessity to

⁴Ibid. p.23.

extirpate the cancer afflicting the state of Denmark both as a conscientious son and a dutiful Prince, the cancer being personified by Claudius himself -- the dead king’s brother and the man holding the reins of power in Denmark. And in this awareness of his sense of duty there comes to Hamlet what Philip Edwards calls “the opportunity for deliverance.” But, again, the nature of the duty he is called upon to discharge so enmesh him in all kinds of unforeseen disasters that the ground and meaning of his reality get completely shattered. For, he finds himself being drawn into so obnoxious a climate of political and emotional vulgarity that life itself becomes for him a kind of meaningless activity denying the very possibility of any significant human action worth the name. As a matter of fact, as Charles J. Sugnet contends:

... the hero is plunged into a world that calls in question all his unexamined beliefs, and when those beliefs are shaken, his case of action and gesture disappears as well.

Sugnet also goes on to show as to how Ophelia’s description of Hamlet’s degeneration suggest the complete reversal of the hero’s prior situation:

The courtier’s princely manner is gone; the scholar’s tongue babble’s gibberish; the “glass of fashion” not only wears black, but goes about him with

his doublet all embrac’d,

No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,

---


Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle.

(II.i.78-80)⁸

The world of values and positive action thus being well lost for him and languishing still under the possession of the Ghost's command Hamlet starts experimenting with roles ranging from putting "an antic disposition on" (I.v.172) to seeking another man's identity ("But greatly to find quarrel in a straw / when honour's at stake [IV.iv.55-56]."

The ending of Hamlet, however, presents the hero in an entirely different light. For the Hamlet we encounter at the beginning of Act V after his return from England is a visibly changed man displaying a kind of quiet integrity in marked contrast to the restless demeanour of the early scenes. Consequently, what we witness in him is a new sense of person emerging out as no longer tormented by the presence of an external authority to pester him with commands, Hamlet begins to show signs of a marked change in his state of mind as he begins to shape his thought and action in the light of his actual experiences of the world of reality. In the graveyard "that visually epitomizes the play's preoccupation with death,"⁹ for instance, the realization dawns upon Hamlet that the fact of life as the "quintessence of dust" (II.ii.300) is indeed an actuality firmly rooted in the experiences of the little world of man. For the politician, the courtier, the lawyer, the landowner, the mighty Alexander and the imperious Caesar are all reduced to the same dust by death:


⁹Arthur Kirsch, William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Influence, p.511
As thus. Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam, and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?

(V.i.188-191)

Similarly,

Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,

Might stop a hole to keep a hole away

(V.i.192-93)

Hamlet is thus convinced that death is an inexorable law of nature against the might of which all human endeavours are of little consequence. And, therefore,

He now applies the reductio ad absurdum to the general picture of vainglory rather than the specific individuals of his own acquaintance ....

Most significantly, in this scene and the one following, Hamlet can relate himself to the common human condition without the feeling of intense loathing and revulsion, the need to extirpate himself that characterized his struggles in the earlier scenes.\(^\text{10}\)

But close on the heels of Hamlet's awakening to the consciousness of death and its consequences, there comes for him the appalling revelation that his Ophelia is to be buried. The pathetic sight of Ophelia dead so moves him that it produces in him a different kind of energy impelling him to assert at once not only his passionate feelings for the one dead but

also his royal identity. Thus with a rare show of passionate fury and youthful energy he
leaps into the grave of Ophelia announcing “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane,” (V.i.239) and
graples with Laertes upon the theme of love for Ophelia. It is true that the burden of
external pressures coupled with Ophelia’s rejection of his love had constrained him earlier
from realizing the depth of his feelings for her. But now that she is all her true and pure
self in her death and he too is being guided by his natural instincts Hamlet’s innate
passions come to the fore once again and he declares his resolve to “fight with him upon
this theme / Until my eyelids will no longer wag” (V.i.247-48). And in the teeth of his
opponent’s rantings he blurts out:

'Swounds, show me what thou’lt do:
Woo’t weep? woo’t fight? woo’t fast? woo’t tear thyself?
Woo’t drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?
I’ll do’t. Dost thou come here to whine?
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I:
And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart! Nay, an thou’lt mouth,
I’ll rant as well as thou.

(V.i.255-64)
The graveyard scene then influences Hamlet in a two-fold way. While on the one hand, it confounds him with the awareness of the insignificance of any human action -- as paths of glory but lead us to the grave -- it incites him, on the other, into committing himself to a life of meaningful action by finding his own definition of himself -- ("This is I, / Hamlet the Dane").

When, therefore, we meet him in the final scene of the play Hamlet's mood is governed by both acceptance and resignation. While his acceptance of the responsibility of restoring the political health of Denmark through a general improvement in the quality of life is prompted by the dictates of his conscience, his resignation, on the other hand, comes from a heightened awareness of the providential influence in the shape of things to come. As the scene opens Hamlet is seen confiding to Horatio:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutinies in the bilboes. Rashly,
And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
Our indiscretion sometime serves us well,
When our deep plots do pall. And that should learn us.
There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will --

(V.ii.4-11)

Quite transparently, the passage refers to the gradual emergence of Hamlet as a man of action taking recourse, when demanded by the occasion, even to such extemporaneous
emotional attitudes like “rashness” and “indiscretion” to do away with forces that threaten to frustrate his purposes. At the same time, it also indicates his growing awareness of the existence of a divine system of control guiding human affairs. However, Hamlet at this stage at least, does not look upon the providential interference as a curtailment of freedom and power. On the contrary, his experience with providence on the ship has taught him that once the will to act is guided by conscience and honesty of purpose the designs of providence serve to corroborate the act. For in Hamlet’s sense of values conscience has a prominent role to play. Claudius, for Hamlet, is a murderous villain and anyone found abetting his designs, consciously or unconsciously, is equally guilty of the crime. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in his eyes, therefore, are abettors of a crime inasmuch as they are the tools of Claudius. Hence, his conscience is clear in sending them to their deserved ends:

Why, man, they did make love to this employment,

They are not near my conscience; their defeat

Does by their own insinuation grow.

’Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes

Between the pass and fell incensed points

Of mighty opposites.

(V.ii.57-62)

And that is why, when Horatio has misgivings about the nature of Hamlet’s action, “So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to’t” (V.ii.56), Hamlet himself sees the act as divinely sanctioned:
Why even in that was Heaven ordinant.

(V.ii.48)

But whatever be the ethical import of the providential connection, Hamlet's experience on the voyage certainly brings him to a first-hand acquaintance with the malevolent motives of the villain thereby exciting his passion for revenge all the more. The revenge itself, of course, takes a new meaning now. For, Hamlet is not so much bent on fulfilling a personal vendetta as he is prompted by a socio-political necessity to take up the cudgels for thwarting the “corrupted currents” (III.iii.57) of the state. His primary concern, therefore, is the restoration of political order by extirpating what he considers to be detrimental to the health of Denmark. What is important, however, is the fact that the decision to accept public responsibility follows from an inner discipline of the self and is not governed by the dictates of any external authority. But, again, the task ahead must be in keeping with his conscience:

is't not perfect conscience
To quit him with this arm? And is't not to be damned
To let this canker of our nature come
In further evil.

(V.ii.67-69)

Hamlet, at this point of his career, then, is a man much mellowed, more rational, more temperate, more sure of himself and less perturbed than he ever was before the voyage to England. And so, even when he is aware of the rottenness of Denmark infested as it is by such corrupt social climbers like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Osric and where but:
Claudius is master of this world, through cunning, resource, a smooth and deceptive affability, and a complete severance of scruple from action.\textsuperscript{11}

Hamlet believes that all is not lost as yet and that meaningful creative action could still make life purposeful. Denmark, he knows is diseased. But the disease is Claudius himself and the mission ahead for Hamlet is to root out the disease at any cost if Denmark should not come to further evil. There is also the implicit suggestion throughout the conversation between Hamlet and Horatio in this scene that the institution of kingship itself has been terribly vitiated by Claudius. Horatio, for instance, asks:

\begin{quote}
Why, what a king is this!
\end{quote}

(V.ii.62)

Hamlet has already identified Claudius as

\begin{quote}
... a vice of kings,
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket.
\end{quote}

(III.iv.99-102)

Consequently, Hamlet's decision to "quit him with this arm" is also suggestive of his commitment to the cause of the rectification of the sacred institution of kingship so stigmatized by the crimes of Claudius by eliminating the king himself. He is thus settled, once for all, to face the consequences of the action, come what may. When Horatio tries

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
to draw his attention to the fact that there is really not much time left for him to execute the deed contemplated as

It must be shortly known to him from England

What is the issue of the business there

(V.ii.71-72)

assuming a posture of cool confidence Hamlet replies:

The interim is mine.

(V.ii.73)

In claiming the “interim” -- the intervening period, that is, between the utterance of the word and the news from England -- to be his, Hamlet is unequivocally trying to assert his confidence in his ability to rise to occasion. He has learnt from his experiences of the voyage that “our deep plots” have a tendency to deceive us in the long run. Consequently, it is more judicious in his view to wait for the appointed moment and strike when the opportunity should come. All that is important, however, is the will to act. The same attitude to action marks Hamlet’s response to Osric’s invitation to the duel with Laertes:

I am constant to my purposes, ...

If his fitness speaks, mine is ready, now or

Whenever, provided I be so able as now.

(V.ii.202-05)

When Horatio advises him to postpone the proposed duel, his answer is:

Not a whit, we defy augury. There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to
come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

(V. ii. 202-06)

What the speech purports to suggest is a decisive change in Hamlet's attitude towards death. Death ceases to be a terror for him in that "the dread of something after death" (III.i.78) does not bother him any more now. Instead, he is quite willing to embrace death if that is what lies in wait for him in his struggle ahead. His awareness of the human limitations vis-à-vis the shaping power of providence also takes a new dimension now. Death, Hamlet now knows, is a reality no individual can escape and that the moment when it will actually come will be designed by providence. But the interim certainly belongs to the individual. And upon the handling and the management of this interim depend the dignity and nobility of man. "The readiness is all," therefore, is not necessarily a readiness to die but a readiness to act as well. And as Arthur Kirsch observes:

... what makes Hamlet's acceptance of Providence finally intelligible and credible emotionally, what confirms the truth of it to our experience is our sense, as well as his, that the great anguish and the struggle of his grief is over and that he has completed the work of mourning. He speaks to Horatio quietly, almost serenely, with the unexultant calm that characterizes the end of the long, inner struggle of grief.12

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But even when "the great anguish and the struggle of his grief" seems to be over, his struggle with the external world of corrupted currents remain. Consequently, the reconstruction of the subjective world enables him to reinforce his sense of commitment to the responsibilities of the world outside him but of which he is an intrinsic part. Finally the opportunity to act presents itself before Hamlet and he does accomplish the mission of his life by destroying the "canker of our nature" (V.ii.69) but not before he too is mortally wounded. And as J.M.Gregson would have us believe:

Hamlet the Renaissance individual with his contempt for rank and his mind so conscious of the possibilities of man, has achieved at last the one sordid deed of the state which has so perplexed him. But only when events left him no escape: to the last he has scorned to force circumstances to his own purposes.13

Hamlet thus authenticates his role by offering himself as a sacrificial victim at the altar of public duty and underlining as well the value of a life absolutely dedicated to the honesty and integrity of purposes. As such, even when he is dying his public concerns prompt him to request Horatio to report his cause aright. Death, now being a felicity for him, he knows that it is something devoutly to be wished for. But before attaining that felicity he has to be absolutely sure that he does not leave a wounded name behind for he can now well take cognizance of the fact that all that would remain of him after his death would be his name. Hence, he tells Horatio:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name

Things standing thus unknown shall live behind me
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity a while,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.

(V.ii.326-31)

Hamlet also considers it his duty to set right the political order of the state, especially, in the aftermath of the vacuum created by all the big slaughters that have just taken place. He thus announces his choice of Fortinbras as the next successor to the throne of Denmark:

O, I die Horatio;
The potent poison quite o’er-crows my spirit.
I cannot live to hear the news from England;
But I do prophesy th’ election lights
On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice,
So tell him.

(V.ii.334-39)

With this tremendous affirmation of his identity, the life of the “sweet prince” (V.iii.341) comes to an authentic end. The rest is of course, silence.

II

Whereas in Hamlet the kind of importance attached to the role of the hero is indicated
through the perception and experiences of the other characters in the play, in King Lear the fact of his eminence is clearly demonstrated by the hero himself right at the beginning of the play. As the play opens, therefore, Lear is the unmistakable Master of Ceremonies dressed in boastful authority, making demands upon his daughters of fidelity and love and putting to shape the dictates of his most royal will. He is thus presented as one supremely conscious of his royal position and of the kind of prerogatives attached to it. For it is not only the "cares and business" (I.i.38) of his age that he talks of conferring on younger strengths but also

... my power,

Pre-eminence and all the large effects

That troop with majesty

(I.i.130)

Lear then betrays a tendency at this juncture of the play to see and interpret all his actions in the light of his notion of kingship and royal authority. Thus warning Kent of the danger involved in interfering with his wrathful decisions, he declares:

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.

(I.i.121)

Again,

Hear me recreant;

On thine allegiance, hear me.

That thou hast sought to make us break our vows --

Which we durst never yet -- and with strain'd pride
To come betwixt our sentence and our power --
Which nor our own nature nor our place can bear;

(I.i.166-71)

What is transparent from Lear's behaviour at this stage of the play is the fact that he relies as Sugnet puts it:

... on a scheme of values which arises from outside himself ... he confuses self with role and identifies himself with the values implicit in the Elizabethan notion of Kingship. Just as the earth is at the centre of the macrocosm, so he is at the centre of the social microcosm, and he regards this status not as social accident but as natural fact. He is paternal authority. Because of the insulating effect of his social status, he has never had any experience that would call it into question.14

The “insulating effect of the social status,” then, is what prevents Lear from seeing the nature of things below the surface reality of his appearance -- a fact remarkably underlined by his disowning of Cordelia in favour of his “Pelican daughters,” (III.iv.74) Goneril and Regan. Lear at this stage simply knows that he is “every inch a king” (IV.vi.108) and that it is the prerogative of his status to be loved and obeyed in absolute terms. It will not do for him, therefore, to be loved, as Cordelia declares:

According to my bond! No more, nor less

(I.i.92)

Instead of accepting the speech in its originality, he would rather have it mended a little:

14op.cit. pp. 326-27.
How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little
Lest you may mar your fortunes

(I.i.93-94)

So that it would appear to be in character with the speeches of his elder daughters. It is then the appearance of truth rather than the truth itself that Lear would fain accommodate within the framework of his royal prerogatives unmindful of the consequences. When, therefore, Cordelia fails to approximate herself to his expectations he disinherits her immediately. Inspired thus by a scheme of values arising out of a role which he has been accustomed to playing Lear fails to see the self hidden below the trappings of that role thereby insulating him from all knowledge of the natural world of man of which his uncrowned self is an integral part. Kent, for instance, realizing the blindness of Lear’s actions makes the appeal:

See better, Lear; and let me still remain
The true blank of thine eye.

(I.i.157-58)

But his appeals simply fail to have any effect on Lear. For Lear at this stage not only fails to recognize the handicap set upon him by his role in that it prevents him from acquiring new knowledge but in the height of his hauteur and authority offers, as Alexander Leggatt points out, “his titanic resistance to it.”

But once the formalities of apportionment are over Lear's illusions are all shattered. And terribly shocked by the kind of inhuman treatment received in the hands of Goneril he repents his folly:

-- O most small fault,

How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show

Which, like an engine wrench'd my frame of nature

From the fix'd place; drew from my heart all love

And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear!

Beat at this gate and let thy folly in

(I. iv. 266-71)

In the next scene with the Fool the recognition of his folly is complete as he declares openly:

I did her wrong.

(I. v. 23)

Lear also makes the excruciating discovery that in giving away the kingdom he has himself been reduced to “an O without a figure” (I. iv. 192) and that a snail has a house

... to put's head in; not to give

it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.

(I. iv. 29-30)

He is thus afflicted both by:
...the voice of worldly wisdom which knows that a snail has a house to put’s head in, and the voice of the soul struggling with its knowledge of guilt and passion.\textsuperscript{16}

As the action progresses through the middle scenes Lear is driven through a series of such shocking experiences that not only leave him completely stripped of his royal trappings but brings him into actual contact with the “little world of man” (III.i.10). He is thus:

Contending with the fretful elements;

Bids the wind blow the earth in the sea,
Or swell the curled water ’bove the main,
That things might change or cease; tears his white hair
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of;
Strives in his little world of man to out-storm
The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and main.

(III.i.4-11)

But Lear’s exposure to this world marks the turning point of his career as it enables him not only to feel the actual nature of the “art of our necessities” (III.i.70) but also “to feel his way towards a new freedom.”\textsuperscript{17} For no more in possession of the robes,
crown, power or any of the attendant signs of his former role Lear discovers for the first time that "true knowledge is born of what is felt in the flesh." \(^{18}\) He, therefore, declares:

Expose thyself to feel what the wretches feel,

That thou mayst shake the superflux to them

And show the heavens more just.

(III.iv.34-36)

And finally when the onward rush of events drive him insane or when, as Kettle suggests, Lear shows "his incapacity to deal with reality any longer within the framework of his accepted standards of sanity," \(^{19}\) what we witness is a mind decisively set on its quest for knowledge. For it is during this period of his insanity that Lear makes some of the most penetrating revelations about the character of man as well as about the kind of hypocritical pretensions and attitudes of the social institutions of order and justice. And in the scene in which mad Lear meets the blinded Gloucester, as Kenneth Muir perceives:

... there is a wonderful blend of 'matter and impertinency' ... and precisely because he is mad Lear is freed from the conventional attitudes of the society. He is able at moments, to see more clearly and piercingly than the sane, because the sane buy their peace of mind by adjusting themselves to the received ideas of society. Lear recognizes the way he has been shielded


\(^{19}\)op.cit. p.24.
from reality by flattery. He also sees the hypocritical pretensions of society with regard to sex and with regard to its treatment of criminals.20 Lear sees the corruption of justice as so universal a phenomenon that he is led to declare:

None does offend, none -- I say none, I'll able 'em
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power
To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes
And like a scurry politician, seem
To see the things thou dost not.

(IV.vi.168-72)

In other words, corruption in the Lear world is so wide and rampant that Lear considers the rooting out of offences an impossible reality. As a matter of fact, if "none offends," it is because in Lear's consciousness all are offenders, all equally corrupt. There is strictly speaking, therefore, no choice for the individual sufferer but to accept and be patient. For

Thou must be patient, we came crying hither.

Thou knows't the first time that we smell the air

We wawl and cry.

(IV.vi.179-81)

When the great rage in Lear finally passes away his regeneration is complete. For after his exposure to the sufferings on the heath his personality undergoes so drastic a change that he becomes every inch a man. In the reconciliation scene with Cordelia, for instance, the sense of compassion and humility that he shows establishes the fact at once

20Kenneth Muir, Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence (Hutchinson University Library, 1972) p.132.
that “he finds his human identity again, though in a very different context from kingship.”

And just as the experiences of the sea-voyage as well as of the graveyard scene contribute significantly to the emotional and political attitude of Hamlet in the denouement of Hamlet, so also, Lear’s exposure to the tempest serve to explain his conduct in the final scene of the play.

Liberated from all conventional attitudes and the compulsions of role-playing, Lear is once again his sovereign self; but in a context entirely different from what we saw at the beginning of the play. In a sense, Lear repeats his early behaviour once again in this scene, especially after the death of Cordelia, as he rages and commands and resists all interference. But the emotional imperatives driving him to such behaviour now differ greatly from the early occasions. For whereas in the early scenes, the kind of insularity imposed upon him by his rank prevented him from empathizing with any emotional experience of others, his concerns now are firmly rooted in the life and well-being of the very same daughter he had earlier at the peak of his self-defeating pride held as “stranger to my heart and me” (I.i.114). Moreover, if the expressions of stubborn rage born out of arrogant self-love distanced him earlier from the earlier characters, in the final scene not only does he win our sympathy and love through the very human expressions of passionate fury but in the kind of stiff resistance offered by him to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune he evokes our admiration as well.

As the scene opens Lear is of course the “pattern of all patience” (III.ii.37).

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And if anything in life has any meaning for him now, it is only the redeeming power of love. But even love as an abstract concept will not do. Instead, what he desperately longs for is the kind of love as concretely represented by Cordelia. For it is only love in its purest form that can redeem all his past sorrows and sweeten all his adversities. As such, he looks forward to the days in captivity with Cordelia as a blessed pretext for doing away with the cares and anxieties of terrestrial pressure as the state of their togetherness in prison would afford them the opportunity to “pray, and sing, and tell old tales and laugh” (V.iii.12). In this centering of all his attention upon a particular relationship, there is, of course, a kind of contraction taking place in Lear’s mind in marked contrast to the wide expanse of his experiences in the storm scenes. But Lear’s new experience is so complete in itself that it can well afford to ignore the existence of all other realities. Referring to Lear’s state of mind at this moment V.Y. Kantak makes the interesting observation that:

All rage has subsided and Lear has already gained that distance implied in those profound words which come out of his ‘madness’:

When we are born we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.

Somewhat like the ‘Sthitaprajña’ of the Indian conception, he now sees life as a stage, himself remaining untouched, beyond its pale, in a particular state of being which which we may call ‘love.’ That love is deeply personal and yet at the same time, it is deeply impersonal.22

However, for all our sympathies with him, it is not for the kind of conduct at this point of the play that Lear excites our admiration. On the contrary, what does evoke our admiration for him is the very quality of his refusal to accept the shocks and blows of a hostile universe even when he knows that the battle of life is well lost for him. In other words, it is the sheer ability to confront the hostile circumstances by the inherent strength of his stubborn endurance that makes him a purely tragic figure capable of winning our admiration.

After the defeat of Cordelia’s army in the hands of the British forces, Lear, as we have seen, withdraws into his own private world contemplating a state of bliss and happiness in prison in the companionship of Cordelia. But within moments comes the instruction from Edmund to the captain “carry it so / As I have set it down” (V iii.38). And it does not take long for us to see the immediate result of the instruction as we witness the most unbearable sight of Lear’s entry with Cordelia dead in his arms, crying:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:

Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so

That heaven’s vault should crack. She’s gone for ever.

I know when one is dead and when one lives;

She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass;

If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,

Why, then she lives.

(V.iii.257-63)

Commenting on this passage Barbara Everett observes:
The last scene of all ... forms a second climax, but the tragic mood is altered by the addition of understanding to Lear's character. The pressure of purely tragic pain -- the desire to "crack heaven's vault" and deny inevitability by a powerful outcry of feeling -- is rarefied, as it were, by a more precise knowledge of the source of that pain: the universal issues are intensified and clarified to the form of a single dead body.¹³

Unable, then, to reconcile himself to the fact of Cordelia's death, Lear, from this moment onwards keeps continually shifting between alternating hope and despair accordingly as Cordelia lives or dies in his imagination. For if at one moment Lear recognizes that:

She's gone for ever
I know when one is dead and when one lives
She's as dead as earth.

(V.iii.259-61)

the very next moment he refuses to believe that she is as dead as earth:

This feather stirs. She lives. If it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.

(V.iii.265-66)

Lear is in these moments so concerned with the fate of Cordelia that he cannot see anything beyond her inert body. For nothing else matters. When Kent, for instance, tries

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to divert his attention away from Cordelia, Lear not only fails to recognize him but turns
on both Kent and Edgar with the brutal cry:

A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!

I might have sav'd her, now she’s gone for ever

(V.iii.269-70)

and becomes a prey to delusion once again as he discovers symptoms of life in Cordelia’s
body:

Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!

What is’t thou say’st? Her voice was ever soft,

Gentle and low -- an excellent thing in woman

I kill’d the slave that was a-hanging thee.

(V.iii.271-74)

In his bid to resist any knowledge -- in his characteristic manner -- confirming the death of
Cordelia he deludes himself into believing that Cordelia could still hear him and that she
could still be consoled. His declaration “I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee,”
therefore, is a pathetic attempt on his part at reassuring Cordelia. And, so painful, indeed,
is the cost of his delusion that he relapses into insanity which leads Kent to declare:

He knows not what he says; and vain is it

That we present us to him.

(V.iii.292-93)

and Edgar rejoins:

Very bootless
But, as J. Stampfer contends:

... agonized sanity breaks through Lear’s madness once more, as the words of Kent, Albany and Edgar could not. Albany sees it rising, ominously convulsing Lear’s features, and exclaims, ‘O, see, see!’ (1. 304) as Lear cries out:

    And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
    Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
    And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more.
    Never, never, never, never, never

The repeated cries of ‘Never!’ are the steady hammering of truth on a mind unable to endure it. Lear’s life-blood rushes to his head. He chokes and asks someone to undo the buttons of his collar (1. 309). Then, against the unendurable pressure of reality, the counterbalancing illusion that Cordelia lives rushes forth once more. Once again, it is at her lips, breathing or speaking, that he seeks life and dies:

    Do you see this! Look on her, look, her lips,
    Look there, look there! (dies).\(^{24}\)

The last scene of King Lear thus presents the hero, even when he is stripped of all the royal accoutrements, as reenacting many of the emotional attitudes of the earlier scenes of the play. But the experiences that drive him to the kind of behaviour witnessed

in the ending of the play bring us all the more close to being one with him. For what we find here is a sense of person emerging out as we witness Lear struggling frantically through one shock after another, to retain the one thing that matters to him now, viz., his image of man. As such, the change that we notice in him is "a change not just in fortune and circumstance but in values and quality of being."  

25 If, therefore, he wants Cordelia to live, it is because, in his scheme of values, she seems to represent in her person the only compensation for all that has been lost and suffered by him as well as the only alternative to the monsters and fiends of the new order. And even in the face of all his sufferings, Lear can afford to rely on his schemes without any alien props, whatsoever. That is why even when his experiences seem to be so analogous with those of Gloucester's, his responses are much more instinctive and much more energetic than Gloucester's. For unlike Gloucester, even in the height of all his adversities Lear needs no Edgar to trick him to go on living. Lear, it is true, does have his moments of despair like Gloucester, but his energy always returns. His decision to live, therefore, is his own. And, finally, when he is released from the "rack of his tough world" (V.iii.313) he dies strongly affirming his sovereign self upon the momentous question:

> Why should a dog, horse, a rat have life,
>
> And thou no breath at all.

(V.iii.306-07)

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Othello is the only Shakespearean tragedy where the hero is not only a Moor but a man of alien race who comes to be most prominently associated with the political fortunes of another state in a way that he becomes its most trusted general. The very fact that Othello, the Moor with his wild Berber ancestry rises to the position of the military general of the Venetian state in preference to the native incumbents at once underlines the importance and precariousness of his role. Although the tragedy does not arise out of any political issue, the context in which the hero acquires the sense of importance is eminently political. For, it is essentially the role assigned to Othello as a general that comes to determine his conduct not only in affairs public but even in those areas which, by definition, are intimately private. It is, of course, true as Helen Gardner argues that:

His status in Venice is contractual. The Senate are his ‘very noble and approv’d good masters’ because he and they have chosen it should be so. His loyalties are not the tangle of inherited loyalties, but the simple loyalties of choice. His duties are not the duties of his station, but the duties of his profession.26

But at the same time it is difficult to agree with her view that “Othello is free as intensely as Hamlet is unfree.”27 For under the very terms of the contract that Othello makes with the Senate it becomes incumbent upon him to surrender the needs of the self in the greater

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27ibid,
interest of his public duty. In this sense, Othello is not much different from the other great tragic heroes like Hamlet or Lear in that his greatness like theirs is also conditioned by a role. For, again and again, we do come across instances where Othello’s greatness is weighed in terms of his service to his Senate. Othello himself refers to the worth of his “parts” and “title” as he decides to confront the raging Brabantio and his friends contrary to Iago’s suggestions to avoid them. Thus he states:

Not I; I must be found.

My parts, my title and my perfect soul

Shall manifest me rightly.

(I.ii. 30-32)

Similarly, the Duke’s first address to Othello in the council-chamber while highlighting the fact of Othello’s importance as a general also serves to underline the nature of the role he is expected to play in the affairs of Venice in order to preserve his greatness:

Valiant Othello, we must straight employ you

Against the general enemy Ottoman

(I.iii.48-49)

And the role also demands of him that he ignores the necessities of the subjective world in compliance with the terms of the contract that Gardner refers to. So pressing, indeed, are the demands of service upon him that he is even forced to stay away from his wife on the very first night of their marriage as the Duke asks him to leave for Cyprus that very night itself, saying:
The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus.
Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you; and though we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion a sovereign mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice on you. You must therefore be content to slubber the gloss of your new fortunes with this more stubborn and boisterous expedition.

(I.iii.220-28)

Othello, too, is so conditioned by the demands of his role that he learns to subordinate the needs of the private life to those of the public. Accepting the Duke’s command, therefore, he says:

The tyrant custom, most grave senators
Hath made the flinty and the steel couch of war
My thrice-driven bed of down. I do agonize
A natural and prompt alacrity
I find in hardness; and would undertake
This present war against the Ottomites.

(I.iii.229-34)

Again,

And heaven defend your good souls that you think
I will your serious and great business scant
For she is with me. No, when light-wing’d toys
Of feather'd Cupid seal with wanton dullness
My speculative and offic'd instruments,
That my disports corrupt and taint my business,
Let huswives make a skillet of my helm,
And all indign and bare adversities
Make head against my reputation.

(1.i.ii.266-74)

Later on, again, in harmony with the expectations set upon him by his position, he consoles Desdemona thus:

Come Desdemona, 'tis the soldier's life
To have their balmy slumbers wak'd with strife.

(II.i.ii.249-50)

What is transparent, then, both from Othello's demeanour in these early scenes and from the kind of expectations set upon him by others is the fact that Othello's responses to circumstances are being guided by a set of values adopted from an alien culture that expects him not only to be a warrior aristocrat but also to restrain himself from expressing a normal human attitude towards even such absolutely private concerns like sex and marriage despite his tremendous natural capacity for love. And it is this tendency on the part of Othello of privileging the imperatives of his role that ultimately gets him ensnared into the web of the evil machinations of the slimy Venetian Iago. Othello's dedication to his service also blinds him to the fact that despite the kind of importance he is invested
with, it is only as a pawn of defence that he really matters to the thoroughly mercantile world of Venice. He also fails to notice that in a society where his worth is measured only on utilitarian terms it is only Desdemona who feels attracted towards him for his intrinsic worth and loves him as a real human being. Thus explaining the nature of her attraction towards him, she declares before the senate:

I saw Othello’s visage in his mind.

(I.iii.252)

But, Othello, for whom, there is “no store of patient wisdom stemming from rootedness in a particular culture” fails to take cognizance of her ungrudging loyalty to him and betrays in the process a most lamentable sense of inadequacy vis-à-vis the world of human relations. Throughout the entire course of his tragic peregrination, therefore, he fails to be guided by the dictates of his conscience in sharp contrast to, say, Hamlet, who shows a strong aversion to having to do anything with actions not in commerce with conscience. As a matter of fact, Othello’s suspicions concerning Desdemona which lead to his fall ultimately, are not based on what he honestly believes to be true about her but flow from his propensity to lean on suggestions coming from unholy quarters. And, as G.R. Hibbard would have us believe:

... he draws the words and actions of others into the private nightmare world of confusion and uncertainty in which he now lives, and there they go a hideous distortion.

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The tendency to rely on others for decisions and actions also demonstrate in no uncertain terms as to how miserably Othello lacks a capacity for introspection. The result is, Othello, the unvanquished hero of the battlefield turns out to be a hopeless tyro in love. But it is only in the ending of the play that Othello is ultimately able to recover the self as he breaks himself free not only from the devilish possession of Iago but also from his monumental delusion with regard to the fidelity of Desdemona, but not before the world itself is divested of meaning and purpose for him in the absence of Desdemona.

We have already discussed in the last chapter how the fabricated "ocular proof" provided by Iago in respect of Desdemona's infidelity convinces Othello of the rightness of his decision to eliminate Desdemona. And, therefore, as Gardner observes:

The solution which Othello cannot accept is Iago's: 'Put up with it.' This is as impossible as Hamlet should, like Claudius, behave as if the past were done with and only the present mattered. Or that Lear should accept Goneril and Regan's view of the proper meekness of the old and, in Freud's words, should 'renounce love, choose death, and make friends with the necessity of dying.' Or that Macbeth should attempt a tedious returning. The heroic core of tragedy is in this refusal of the hero to accommodate himself: it is why he can always be treated as a moral warning.\(^3\)

Unable to accommodate himself, then, to Iago's 'Put up with it,' as Gardner points

\(^3\)Helen Gardner, op.cit., p.159.
out, Othello finally "resuming his role of high-priest at the sacrifice" commits the fatal deed as he strangles Desdemona to death. But things take a different turn with the death of Desdemona. For despite the manifest attempt to vindicate his position in killing her, Othello now steps into a more than ever turbulent whirlpool of agony and despair as he encounters a terrible void in his subjective world. For he realizes that in killing Desdemona he has not killed Desdemona alone but has partly killed himself too. There is of course an indication already present about the kind of tortuous consequences Othello was likely to face in the event of Desdemona’s absence from his world in the famous soliloquy, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul / ..." (V.ii.1-22). Even at this critical juncture when Othello is all set to extinguish the flame of her life and with all the perfidies attributed to her, she remains to him, "my soul." But in spite of the tremendous pressure exerted upon him by his love for her -- which reasserts himself -- to spare her, he is driven by a sense of justice, which again is governed by a tribal or feudal sense of honour to eventually kill her. But this justice again torments him because of his love. For having put Desdemona to death he makes the startling discovery that "in attempting to champion honesty, he has destroyed the epitome of honesty."

In a moment of appalling recognition, with Emilia’s revelation of her motiveless complicity in making the fateful handkerchief available to Iago and with Cassio’s narration of the chance discovery of the same, Othello finds himself stripped of everything that constituted his world -- his honour, his reputation, his pride, his sense of moral values and


above all his love. His one negative move, in fact, steals away from him, in a flash, all the positive virtues he stood for and ironically, for the sake of which he felt constrained to make that fatal choice. Out of sheer disgust and frustration, therefore, he invokes the denizens of hell to inflict punishment on him for committing the terrible and unpardonable blunder:

Whip me, ye devils
From the possession of this heavenly sight
Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire
O Desdemona! Dead! Desdemona! Dead! O! O!

(V.ii.280-85)

Yet at the height of his tragic despair, Othello makes a last desperate attempt to reaffirm his authority as a military general as addressing Gratiano, he says:

Behold, I have a weapon;
A better never did itself sustain
Upon a soldier's thigh. I have seen the day
That this little arm and this good sword
I have made my way through more impediments
Than twenty times your stop.

(V.ii.262-67)

But very soon he realizes the futility of his "vain boast" (V.ii.267) and its powerlessness to reconstruct a world well lost for him. Unable to bear the sense of loss and guilt anymore,
therefore, he sets out to be his own judge and executioner. Thus, assuming a posture of extreme self-composure he sinks into a kind of self-retrospection and recounting the circumstances leading to the murder of Desdemona implores the Venetians present to speak of him as they would relate “the unlucky deeds” (V.ii.344), as

... one that lov'd not wisely, but too well;

Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought

Perplexed in the extreme,

(V.ii.347-49)

Finally, continuing in the same vein of calculated exhortation he suddenly takes everyone by storm with a rare show of cool-headed resolve as asking them to report his cause aright he tells them:

And say besides that in Aleppo once

Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk

Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,

I took by the th' throat the circumcised dog,

And smote him -- thus.

(V.ii.355-58)

So saying he stabs himself to death. In thus pronouncing his own judgment upon himself Othello not only compensates for the false justice he had meted out to Desdemona but, more importantly, he asserts once again, as it were, his magnificent authoritative self with remarkable vigour and a sense of noble bearing. And the native nobility in him that
reaffirms itself at this moment of personal crisis will not let him subject himself to the whimsical laws of a foreign court. The truth is he has found himself out and, therefore, he must be, in accordance with his concern for justice -- not of the perverted kind as seem in his dealing with Desdemona, but this time, of the true and genuine form -- his own scourge and minister. And as Ruth Nevo most succinctly argues:

... Othello executes sentence upon himself, exacts from himself the ultimate penalty. He will wait upon no court of law to pronounce sentence and determine punishment. No court of law can fathom his case to its depths as he does. No court of law can ever be possessed as he is of the ultimate, authentic knowledge of the goodness of the good which he has thrown away, and of the folly of the evil which possessed him. It is to this his suicide bears witness, to this recognition that he commits himself, as he reenacts a consummating action of the past in the blinding light of present agony.33

Othello's last speech has, however, been severely criticized by T.S. Eliot as an attempt on the part of the hero at "cheering himself up" in a bid to escape the reality of the situation he finds placed in. Eliot thus remarks:

What Othello seems to me to be doing in making this is cheering himself up. He is endeavouring to escape reality, he has ceased to think about Desdemona, and is thinking about himself. Humility is the most difficult of virtues to achieve, nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of

33op. cit., pp. 212-13
oneself. Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an aesthetic rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment. He takes in the spectator but the human motive is primarily to take in himself. I do not believe than any writer has ever exposed this bovarysme, the human will to see things as they are not, more clearly than Shakespeare.34

Similarly, referring to the later part of the speech F.R. Leavis states:

With

Then must you speak

Of one that loved not wisely but too well,

the epigrammatic terseness of the dispatch, the dictated dispatch, begins to quiver. Then, with a rising emotional swell, description becomes unmistakably self-dramatization — self-dramatization as un-self-comprehending as before:

Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought,

Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,

Like the base Indian threw a pearl away

Richer than all his tribe;...

... drawing himself proudly up, he speaks his last words as the stern soldier

who recalls, and re-enacts, his supreme moment of deliberate courage .... It is a superb coup de théâtre. 35

What, however, has been unfortunately missed by both the critics is the fact that the evasive impulse of the hero as seen by them in his attempt at “cheering himself up” or in his “bovarysme” or in his “self-dramatization” after all pertains to an individual who is absolutely aware of the inescapability of the unbearable reality consequent upon the hideous crime committed by him. In fact, so tellingly painful is the reality of the situation brought about by his own misdeed that the only escape from it now lies in his own death. If at all, therefore, there is ostensibly a bold attempt at drawing the audience’s attention towards himself it is purely owing to his concern with the kind of treatment to be meted out to him by the Venetians in their “letters” after his death to secure which he has already made up his mind. So, like Hamlet, Othello too, in his dying moments is concerned with the “story” of his life that the Venetians would get to hear after his death. For, like Hamlet, he does not wish to leave a wounded name behind him. So, if at all there is any trace of “bovarysme,” or “the human will to see things as they are not,” discernible here, it is the “bovarysme” of the survivors of Venice that Othello seems to be worried about. It is precisely because of this fear of being misrepresented after his death that he seeks to give a true account of himself. Consequently, his request to the audience is to present his case as in itself it really is:

nothing extenuate

Nor set down aught in malice.

the speech strikes us as significant also in that it is for the first time that Othello expresses his true understanding of the irreplaceable worth of Desdemona. For he has known her now for what she really had been, much in the manner of Lear’s recognition of Cordelia’s worth; and not simply as his mirror for seeing his own image. It is, therefore, difficult to subscribe to Eliot’s view that “he has ceased to think about Desdemona.” On the contrary, all his thoughts in this speech centre round Desdemona. For instance, the expression in Othello’s last speech, like “of one that loved not wisely, but too well,” or ‘of one not easily jealous,” cease to have any meaning if they are not read in the context of Othello’s remembrance of Desdemona. For who else did he love “not wisely, but too well,” if not Desdemona? And as Kenneth Muir puts it:

What Othello means by saying he loved too well is that his whole life had been transformed by his love. His total commitment meant that if he believed that he had lost Desdemona’s love, life would become a desert. His tears express his grief and his repentance and the medicinal gum may hint at atonement. The final anecdote is not merely to distract attention so that his auditors cannot prevent his suicide.\[36\]

Hence, Eliot’s contention that Othello is here “endeavouring to escape reality” also fails to satisfy us. For Othello, at the moment when he is making this speech has already looked upon death as “happiness” (V.ii ) just as Hamlet considers it as “felicity.” The question, therefore, of “endeavouring to escape reality,” whatever be the nature of that reality,

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simply does not cross his mind. Moreover, his “nothing extenuate,” itself suggests his readiness to accept reality in its true colours. Similarly, in recognizing that he has been like

one whose hand

Like the base Indian, threw away a pearl

Richer than all his tribe

(V.ii.349-51)

Othello admits that in failing to comprehend the nature of the truth represented by Desdemona, he had in fact relegated himself to the level of the Turk, the chief enemy of Venice. And now that the Christian in him asserts once again, he takes “by th’ throat the circumscribed dog” (V.ii.356) and eliminates him totally.

Roy Battenhouse, preferring the Folio “Judean” to the Quarto “Indean,” makes the interesting suggestion that

the Judas who betrayed with a kiss, and whose bargaining away of Christ-the-pearl inverted tragically the parable of the merchant of Matthew 13:45, resembles Othello all too obviously.37

Battenhouse further states that Othello

... in his self-righteousness, turns from Desdemona because he is resentful of her Christlike hope for atonement, and makes a covenant with her envious adversary, Iago. At a Last Supper during which Christ speaks of his body as a memorial unto the “forgiveness of sins,” Judas arises from the

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table to go out into the night to keep his bargain of betrayal with a kiss. Likewise Othello, in a final scene of bedroom communion with Desdemona, has no mind for forgiveness but instead in loyalty to his own blind sense of justice, mocks the reality of a communion by celebrating it perversely with a deadly kiss. Judas discovered afterwards to his shame, that he had betrayed "innocent blood;" and because he was unable to undo the earthly consequences of his act he hanged himself .... The same is true of Othello, even though he too has seen forgiveness exampled before his very eyes in the spirit of the righteous one he has victimized. Thus Othello's tragedy involves not merely the "mistake" of having conspired against and slain an innocent person but the deeper sin of rejecting grace -- by neglecting the "mercy" to which Desdemona was dedicating her alabaster body while also preserving this "vessel" (V.i.83) for Othello.38

Battenhouse in comparing Othello with Judas of course presents the Shakespearean hero as the damned betrayer fit to be roasted "in sulphur" (V.ii.280) as a "deserved retribution for his crime."39 But what Battenhouse's criticism fails to recognize is the fact that it is Othello and not Shakespeare who sees himself as the arch-betrayer. And once we accept the allusion to the arch-betrayer as coming from Othello, the sense of his suffering at his recognition of the colossal blunder committed by him strikes us as all the more poignant.

38ibid. pp. 96-97.

39ibid. p. 102.
The fact that it is Othello who sees himself not merely as a heathen barbarian but as Judas himself indicates the depth of despair experienced by him at this point of time. For the greater the realization of his folly, the more is the intensity of his pain. And, as Nevo remarks:

The final metamorphosis of the figure of the arch-betrayer into the infidel traducing Turk of Aleppo, unto himself, sets into perfect relation, in the context of his own role as Moor of Venice, his utterly unexonerating self-judgment.40

It is in this ability to pronounce “unexonerating self-judgment” that we recognize the essential greatness of Othello. And it is, we believe, this “unexonerating self-judgment” again that exonerates him from Eliot’s charge that “he has ceased to think about Desdemona” in his last speech as the very context for the judgment that Othello passes upon himself is provided by Desdemona herself.

It is thus through the heroic self-assertion at the moment of his death that Othello convinces us of the breadth and nobility of his soul. As he falls, then, what we experience is a sense of massive human waste. And the experiences of the hero bring upon us the realization of the inescapable reality of the tragic condition that encompasses all humanity within its fold. It is this realization on our part that makes possible an empathic identification of the audience with the hero and enables us to recognize him as the sacrificial victim disbursing his admirable heroic vigour among the survivors he leaves behind.

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40 op. cit. 212.
Macbeth as a tragic hero differs significantly from the other tragic heroes of Shakespeare like Hamlet, Othello or Lear in that the career he embarks upon is so smeared with blood that at the end of the play he comes to be recognized by his survivors as nothing less than a “dead butcher” (V.ix. 35). Yet his crimes notwithstanding, it is still possible to place Macbeth within the same paradigmatic design we have been considering in connection with the role and career of the Shakespearean tragic hero. To begin with, therefore, Macbeth, too, in line with all the other great tragic heroes of Shakespeare emerges at the beginning of the play as the cynosure upon whom all eyes are rivetted. And much like them, Macbeth’s greatness too at the early stages of the play is dependent on his public image and the role he is expected to play. For instance, like Othello, his greatness is weighed in terms of the services he renders to the state of Scotland. The very first impression that we receive of him in the Captain’s account of him, therefore, is that of a brave and trusted general, loyal to the cause of his country and putting down rebellions by unqualified military prowess. Thus referring to his valiant exploits the Captain states:

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,
Which smok’d with bloody execution,
Like Valour’s minion, carv’d out his passage
Till he fac’d the slave;
Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,

And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(I. ii. 16-23)

Similarly, Duncan too referring to Macbeth's valour exclaims:

O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman.

(I. ii. 24)

Again,

Thou art so far before,

That swiftest wing of recompense is slow

To overtake thee: wouldst thou hadst less deserv'd,

That the proportion both of thanks and payment

Might have been mine! only I have left to say,

More is thy due than more than all can pay.

(I. iv. 16-21)

It is thus the heroic image of a man of rare courage and honour that is being presented in almost all references to Macbeth at the beginning of the play. This leads G. Wilson Knight to comment:

Macbeth is from the first a courageous soldier. His warrior-honour however is emphasized. He is 'brave Macbeth' (I. ii. 16), 'valour's minion' (I. ii. 19), 'Bellona's bridegroom' (I. ii. 54), 'noble Macbeth' (I.i.67). ... He is a 'peerless Kinsman' (I. iv. 58) -- the Duncan-Macbeth relationship is always stressed. Courage in war is a thing of 'honour' (I. ii. 44). So Macbeth is rewarded for his valour by a title, earnest of an even
greater 'honour' (I. ii. 104). At the start Macbeth's honourable valour is firmly contrasted with the traitor's ignoble revolt. There is no honour in absolute courage: it must be a service or it is worthless.  

Macbeth is thus looked upon as the saviour who must deliver the Scots from the evil stemming from the rebellion of Macdonwald. His position at the initial stages of the play, then, is not different from Hamlet who the Danes look up to for dealing with their crisis or from Othello on whose military valour the Venetians seem to be so dependent. Macbeth himself is also aware of the opinions held about him by the people around:

We will proceed no further in this business:
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

(I. vii. 31-34)

But from the outer battle where he wins "Golden opinions" we see him turn inward into a battle of conscience where he loses. For even while Shakespeare does not present his hero as a man of conscience he is certainly presented as a man with a conscience. That is why the vertiginous inner warfare between the sinister dictates of his ambitious heart and the admonitory promptings of his moral nature become so crucial to the understanding of the character of Macbeth. Again and again, we come across instances in the play where

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41 G. Wilson Knight, The Imperial Theme. (Methuen. 1931, Rpt. 1968) pp. 125-26
Macbeth is seen torn between forces that seem to highlight this inward battle. The very first soliloquy, for instance, that Macbeth utters immediately after his encounter with the witches on the heath is a clear illustration of the process at work:

This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill; cannot be good:

If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature?

(I. iii. 130-37)

Michael Long commenting on the significance of this speech remarks:

He tries to call up the sacred things which give structure and significance to the world, but the pellucid Macbeth sound, poignantly sought in talk of the ‘seated heart’ and the ‘single state of man’ is ‘smother’d in surmise’ and overtaken by ‘horrible imaginings’. The structure of his world is being dismantled, with him fully conscious of the appalling process.42

We have already stated in the last chapter as to how this speech reveals the overturning of hierarchy as thought instead of leading to is action here “smother’d in surmise”. But the speech as Long’s analysis makes it clear also shows the kind of inner torment

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experienced by Macbeth under the influence of the "supernatural solicitings". The fact that the "horrid image" of the "suggestion" does "unfix" his hair and make his "seated heart" knock at his ribs "against the use of nature" indicates Macbeth's anguished awareness of the moral implications of the act contemplated. Similarly, the crucial 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 this surcease success; that but this blow

Might be the be-all and end-all here

But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,

We'd jump the life to come.

(I. vii. 1-7)

expresses the torture of conscience that Macbeth is experiencing. It is important that even when he is being troubled by his "vaulting ambition" (I. vii. 27) as the speech goes on to show, Macbeth's human attributes are still intact. This is precisely the reason why he can recognize the fact that Duncan is not only his king, his kinsman and his guest but is also one against whose murderers, he should "shut the door" (I. vii. 15). And what is more significant is the recognition on Macbeth's part:

... that his virtues

Will plead like angles, trumpet-tongu'd against

The deep damnation of his taking-off;

(I. vii. 18-20)
The picture that emerges of Macbeth at this stage, then, is of a man who in spite of all temptations has not yet depleted his basic humanity. Moreover, we already have the evidence of Lady Macbeth that the Macbeth she knows is in possession of a nature that is "too full o’th milk of human kindness" (I.v.17) and lacks the kind of "illness" (I.v.20) which should attend ambition. But it is Lady Macbeth again who, as Long argues:

... with the witches’ poison raging in her blood as if she had inhaled it from Macbeth’s letter ... derides his lack of manliness and boasts of her won will-power in a display of extravagant glamorous violence. Her performance brings him to submission, though not before he has made his noble statement about the proper limits of audacity:

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

(I.vii. 46-7)

... Macbeth still knows that it is a ‘terrible feat’. He is neither hardened like Iago nor fortified with a sense of grievance like Edmund. He must do it gratuitously, which will require immense will-power and leave him with dreadful memories. We may safely surmise already that, a man of his sentience will in the end be unmade by it.43

Macbeth’s resolve to commit the “terrible feat” however, is followed by a horrible phase of psychological turbulence as the “valour’s minion” who had once earned the reputation of unseaming a traitor “from nave to the chops” (I.ii.22) now comes to be

43 Ibid., pp 73-77
racked by the hallucinatory vision of

A dagger of the mind, a false creation

Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain

(II. i. 37-38)

Macbeth is also terrified by the thought that the very stones upon which his footsteps should fall would make his deed public:

Thou sure and firm set earth,

Hear not my steps, which way they walk for fear

The very stones prate of my where-about, ...

(II.i.57-58)

What is striking about Macbeth’s agony is that with all his experiences of killing people in the battlefield he should feel so distressed at the thought of murdering the king. The fact is, Macbeth who has not yet completely lost the basic potential of his humanity knows the difference between the state patronized killing of an enemy in the battlefield and the highly illegitimate act of committing a regicide. It is this knowledge of the kind of evil involved in the performance of the “terrible feat” that makes him suffer all the torment in his soul and necessitates the assistance of a diabolic force like Lady Macbeth for the actual enactment of the deed. But once the regicide is committed, it is important to note, that Macbeth also murders his own humanity. Obviously, therefore, for the subsequent murders committed by him, Macbeth does not feel the need to work out his strategies with his wife any more. For, the regicide has turned him into a committed murderer. And as Robert. B. Heilman argues:
... it is plain that once he has taken the excruciatingly difficult first step on
the new route, discovers in himself the talents for an unsurrenderable
athleticism in evil.44

The truth, in other words, is Macbeth loses the inward battle of conscience the moment
he takes "the excruciatingly difficult first step on the new route" and becomes a pawn in
the hands of the witches’ designs and his own evil impulses. Shakespeare makes it clear
that Macbeth becomes a fool in the hands of evil forces to the extent that he abandons his
moral imagination. He thus plunges into a life of such crime and vice that the noble
warrior now resorts to so despicable an act like hiring thugs for eliminating Banquo, "a
noble man with whom he once shared chanson de gestes bondings of the most sacred
kind"45 and his son Fleance. The escape of Fleance makes the situation even worse. For
it leaves Macbeth so tormented by a sense of constriction that he finds himself

... cabin'd, cribb'd, confind, bound in

To saucy doubts and fears.

(III.iv.23-24)

But unable to reconcile himself to this awful state of "saucy doubts and fears", Macbeth
begins a desperate search, as Michael Long suggests, for:

... some fixed point of certitude by returning to the witches. It is

44Robert B.Heilman, “The Criminal As tragic Hero: Dramatic Methods” in

45Michael Long. op.cit., p.86
impossible to live long in these hovering mists of doubt and dislocation. Something must come to his aid; so he returns to the witches as an adept, or addict, to be offered such fortification as gives strength to a novice ‘young in deed’, only however to be further sapped and undermined.\textsuperscript{46}

Macbeth knows that he is

... in blood

Stepp’d in so far, that should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o’er.

(III.iv.135-37)

However, as he visits the witches Macbeth settles his allegiance in favour of “going o’er” to the extent that he is resolved to destroy all forces of procreation:

Though castles topple on their warders’ heads;

Though palaces, and pyramids so slope

Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure

Of Nature’s germens tumble all together,

Even till destruction sicken, answer me

To what I ask you.

(IV.i.56-61)

Wilbur Sanders in this regard makes the important suggestion that Macbeth at this point:

... has discovered the secret that actions, once performed, will help to deaden and cauterize that inner sensitivity which is his great torment.

\textsuperscript{46}ibid., p.93.
Since the mind, he learns, has a knack of accommodating itself to that to which it has been accessory, he will act first, and thus surgically remove the sensitized zone of self-doubt and self-accusation, which the performed action will turn out in any case. ... The chosen evil leads naturally to an imaginatively debauched surrender to the forces of annihilation loose in his own mind. All restraint is to be broken ... It is the wild dream of a cosmic anarchy where his own internal anarchy will be swallowed up in the roar and shriek of universal disintegration.47

As we come to the last act of the play, Macbeth's degeneration touches its abysmal depth. For not only does he cut himself loose from the commonwealth of humanity itself but is also held in fear and contempt by the people around him. We already have Macduff's description of the kind of scornful hatred in which Macbeth is now held by others:

Not in the legions
Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd
In evils, to top Macbeth.

(IV. iii.54-56)

But the last act of all shows the degeneration of Macbeth at its worst. For the blood-bolstered career embarked upon by him not only results in the smothering of his conscience but brings him to a stage where he can no longer feel any normal human fear:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.

The time has been my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and stir,
As life were in't. I have supp'd full with horrors:
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.

(V.v.9-14)

Macbeth's confession that "The time has been my senses would have cool'd / To hear a
night shriek" and that his "fell of hair / Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and stir, / As
life were in't" is an indication clear enough that he was capable of experiencing fear so
long as his conscience was alive. But he has come to a point in his life now where all the
kind promptings of nature seem to have so deadened in him that nothing can startle him
any more. Referring to this state of Macbeth's "insensibility" Kenneth Muir observes:

This state of insensibility is a sign that Macbeth has succeeded in
deadening his conscience. His fears had continued as long as he was
wrestling with evil ... Macbeth's freedom from fear is also a freedom from
feeling. This can be seen from his reception of the news of his wife's
death. 'She should have died hereafter' is the only epitaph he can utter on
the woman for whose sake she killed Duncan; and in the lines that follow
he expresses the conviction that life is meaningless --

a tale,

'Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury

Signifying nothing.
... In their context the lines reveal that Macbeth believes that life is meaningless because he has damned himself by his crimes.\textsuperscript{48}

The ending of the play then shows Macbeth as not only totally demoralized and sentenced to solitary confinement but as also profoundly conscious of his own role in bringing about his calamitous degeneration. He thus confesses that he has lost the right to that which should accompany old age,

As honour, love, obedience, troops 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.

(V.iii.24-28)

But the more Macbeth realizes the state of his abject desolation the more resolute he becomes to preserve his life even when he knows that life itself for him now is emptied of its meaning. And the sense of his desperation manifests itself as he lets the tension of his mind explode on hearing from the messenger the news of the movement of the Birnam wood:

If thou speak'st false,

Upon the next tree shalt thou hang alive,

Till famine cling thee:

(V.v.38-40)

Even at this stage of his life when all his crimes have virtually reduced him to zero Macbeth hangs on to his frantic efforts at preserving his “single state of man”. And, therefore, even when he begins

\textsuperscript{48}Kenneth Muir, \textit{Shakespeare’s Tragic Sequence}. p.150.
To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend,
That lies like truth: "Fear not, till Birnam wood
Do come to Dunsinane";

(V.v.43-45)

he will not yield without fighting. He thus calls for arms in spite of the knowledge that he
has been taken for a ride by the witches:

-- Arm, arm, and out! --

If this which he avouches does appear,
There is no flying hence, nor tarrying here,
I'gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish th'estate o'th' world were now undone --
Ring the alarum bell! -- Blow, wind! come, wrack!
At least we will die with harness on our back.

(V.v.46-52)

But this desperate move on the part of Macbeth fails to impress us as the heroic defence
of a courageous soldier. Moreover, the decision "to die with harness on our back" far
from arousing our admiration only succeeds in highlighting the level of Macbeth's
degeneration. Michael Long, for instance, commenting on Macbeth's despair-bound
resolve in these closing moments of the play, states:

The nadir is reached when he resolves to die with 'harness' on his back.
The giant's robes he tried to wear always looked as though they were on a
'dwarfish thief', but even more humiliation is involved in his seeking to
put on the trappings of an animal. The animal will fight, to be sure, and
there is defiance in that. ‘I will not be afraid’ is a brave statement in any circumstances; but the keynote of this part of the play is despairing weariness.  

Long goes on to show how in the next phase of the denouement Macbeth stands dwarfed in comparison to his adversaries Macduff and Siward:

Macduff is an adult, seasoned, fine-conscieneced man, and the venerable Siward an iconic figure, drawn with the usual Macbeth economy. Both are fathers to issue, men highly placed in the ‘valued file’ of things. The hunted issueless tyrant is sad and dwarfish by comparison.

But Macbeth does show his soldierly courage as eventually he is brought face to face with Macduff, the man who “was from his mother’s womb/untimely ripp’d (V.viii.15). For with all his knowledge of the way in which the “juggling fiends” (V.viii.19) have paltered with him as well as of the consequences of a fight with Macduff, he makes a final desperate effort to reassert the last vestige of his warrior’s pride, viz, courage in the face of disaster:

I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet
And to be tainted with rabble’s curse.
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppos’d, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last: before my body

49Michael Long, op.cit., p.108
50ibid.
I throw my warlike shield: lay on, Macduff;
And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"
(V.viii.27-34)

It is through this undeluded soldierly bearing that Macbeth succeeds in the end in gaining our sympathy for that is what humanises him for us. He becomes once again the courageous soldier of Act I but in a context much different from that of the earlier. For whereas the courageous exploit of slaughtering the traitor Macdonwald was dictated by a role with nothing independent about the act itself, his decision to fight Macduff now is his own even though the price is death. And as Arthur Sewell quite succinctly puts it:

In these last moments Macbeth, not perhaps for himself but for us, is brought back to the daylight world. Social order, daylight order reasserts itself. He himself admits that the juggling fiends have paltered with him in a double sense, and, as he confesses this, he opens his eyes to the world and to his audience. He becomes a man once again behaving in the presence of men, and that is how Shakespeare represents him. One social virtue he can still exhibit, not redeeming him, but giving him distinction and pre-eminence -- the virtue of courage, however desperately called upon.51

As in the case of the other heroes discussed in this chapter, the ending of Macbeth too, then, shows a certain inwardness about the hero that enables us to situate him in the

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context of ordinary humanity. The emergence of a sense of person that comes to define
the hero at the end of these plays remains a prominent feature of Macbeth as well. For
however much we may abhor the villainous acts of Macbeth we certainly admire him for
the kind of courage he displays at the end of the play with nothing but only a sense of
personal freedom to back up his cause. Moreover, the ending also shows Shakespeare
endowing Macbeth with a poetry that brings him immediately into a close communion
with the audience. It is this poetry that enables us to recognize his horror-filled
imagination. It is true that he is haunted by a terrible sense of loneliness and feels sick at
heart. But the very fact that he realizes this at the height of his monstrosity brings him
back into the pale of humanity once again. By exercising his freedom of choice in favour
of evil he had of course repressed his natural sensibilities and choked his human
kindness. But the ending of play now shows him as not only breaking himself free from
the spell of the witches’ words but also as retaining a vision of a fuller and healthier life
than he had ever lived. Finally, as his career draws to a close Macbeth fights even though
Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane and when a man not born of woman challenges him
he decides not to run away. It is the assertion of this minimal human dignity and the
tragic acceptance of his folly in listening to the witches that prevents Macbeth from
turning into a monster and retains his tragic stature for us.

Our discussion of the characteristic career of the four tragic heroes of
Shakespeare thus shows how the ending of the tragedies of Shakespeare contribute to our
appreciation of the idea of the tragic hero inasmuch as the tragic ending reveals for us the
true import and significance of the final gestures of the Shakespearean tragic hero. For it
is through his gestures at the closing moments of the play that the tragic hero finally comes to assert his essential inwardness and is brought into a close communion with the members of the audience. We have already seen at the beginning of the chapter how Aristotle himself in his definition of tragedy invests the hero with a sense of greatness in terms of his humanity. But the tragic career embarked upon by the Shakespearean hero goes on to show that the kind of greatness enjoyed by him at the initial stages of the play is governed by a role he is expected to play. In other words, his greatness at this stage depends on his capacity to deal with the kind of crisis afflicting the society to which he belongs. In spite of his importance, therefore, the hero is invariably constrained by such external compulsions that it becomes well-nigh impossible for him to carry out the dictates of his sovereign will. With the progress of the action, however, he is brought under circumstances that expose his inner conflicts and weaknesses. But such states of inward suffering also serve to evoke empathic vibrations in us thereby making it possible for us the establishment of a sense of our identification with him. Eventually, the ending of the plays shows a truly human greatness emerging as the tragic hero breaks himself free from all his alien constrains and asserts, as it were, his own definition of himself by serving an inner discipline under the most trying circumstances. By the end of the plays, therefore, the hero is not only seen as becoming an identity by pitting his resources against the constraints of circumstances but also as acquiring through his torments and struggle a spiritual character. Our identification with him thus becomes a pre-condition for gaining an insight into the spiritual dimensions of the tragic conflict.