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13 June 2017

### Tragic Villain

Tragedies often star a tragic hero who falls as a result of their own hand. In Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the story follows the downward spiral of its protagonists, caused by their fatal flaws. The suffering that Richard and Oedipus experience during their fall from grace incites pity and fear in the audience, leading to catharsis. Richard is not able to incite emotions as a result of his villainy, which contrasts with Oedipus' nobility. Richard and Oedipus also are distinct and opposite in their motives and moral compasses. Oedipus' reasoning and morality stems from his virtue, while Richard's stems from his jealousy and selfish desires. Comparing *Oedipus Rex* to *Richard III* reveals Richard's inherent evil, seen through his selfish motives and lack of morality, which leads to an absence of catharsis for the audience, thereby proving that he does not display the characteristics needed to qualify as a tragic hero.

The protagonists in both works commit actions that are morally wrong. Richard orders the murders of many nobles, and marries Anne for power rather than love. Oedipus is responsible for the death his father, and marries his own mother. Although both kings commit clear crimes, their intentions reveal more about the nature of the character than actions do. *Richard III* begins with a soliloquy in which Richard expresses his disdain for the country's peaceful times. He claims that he cannot enjoy the festivities because of his "dissembling nature"

and will instead “prove a villain”(1.1.19, 30). This initial goal contrasts with Oedipus’, who after learning from Phoebus that “[he] was fated to lie with [his] mother” and “doomed to be murderer of the father that begot me”, leaves Corinth to protect his parents (922, 924-925). Unfortunately, this concern results in the fulfilment of the first half of the prophecy for “as [he] journeyed [he] came to the place where...this king met with his death” (931-932). Although he does kill his father, it was his worry for the wellbeing of his parents that led him to that situation, not a thirst for power; as was in Richard’s case. Richard reveals that he has laid plots to “set [his] brother Clarence and the king / In deadly hate the one against the other” in hopes that “this day should Clarence closely be mew’d up”(1.1.34, 38). He announces these plans during the opening soliloquy, showing his initial evil intentions. After the murder of Clarence, Richard continues his deceitful path to power. Oedipus, on the other hand, has a selfless and unintentional rise to the throne. He arrives in Thebes after obviously fulfilling part of his prophecy, and discovers the city in a dire situation. From the citizens’ perspective, “[he] came and by [his] coming saved our city, freed us from the tribute which we paid of old to the Sphinx, cruel singer" (39-41). Oedipus chooses to face the Sphinx to save Thebes, resulting in his unwitting fulfillment of the latter half of his prophecy and also showing that he has morally redeeming characteristics. Oedipus falls victim to his fate despite acting to protect his family or the city, while Richard’s crimes are rooted in his selfish thirst for power.

An intrinsic difference between Richard and Oedipus is their sense of morality. Richard recognizes how unlawful his actions are, but instead of trying to redeem himself, he claims “I am in/ So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin” (4.2.66-67). This quote reveals his lack of conscience and inability to feel remorse. Oedipus’ marriage to Jocasta was a reward for saving

the city from the Sphinx, so unlike Richard, he is unaware of the sin he is committing. When the blinded protagonist realizes the consequences of his unintentionally immoral actions, he weeps for his daughters recognizing that his reputation will ruin their lives. Before his exile, he goes as far as to ask Creon to “not allow them wander like beggars, poor and husbandless” (1693-1694). Richard, on the other hand, orders Anne’s murder as part of his plot for his personal benefit, as he must “stop all hopes whose growth may damage me” (4.2.62). He no longer needs Anne, preferring a more beneficial match in his niece. He expresses that “tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye” as a result of his actions, accentuating his lack of morality (4.2.68). Throughout the play, Richard’s actions all work towards his climb to power. Although Oedipus is similar in that he also claimed and lost the crown, as well committed immoral acts, he tried to help the city rather than forcing himself into power. The contrast in morality reveals a lot about the characters, and Richard’s true villainy is emphasized by Oedipus’ noble persona.

An integral aspect of tragedies, and in turn tragic heroes, is the creation of catharsis: “According to Aristotle's Poetics, tragedy, through pity and fear, produces a catharsis of those emotions” (S. H. Butcher). A clear difference between the two kings is their ability to elicit emotions that lead to catharsis. Oedipus’ prophecy, which the audience has previous knowledge of from Greek mythology, creates tension in the theatre because those watching fear for Oedipus because they know that he will eventually meet his inevitable downfall. The audience does not feel the same for Richard, who deserves the misfortunes he encounters. No pity, which is caused by “the sight of underserved suffering of others”, is felt for Richard because of the knowledge that Richard’s sufferings are justified by the sins he has committed (S. N. Gillani). The extent of Richard’s wrongdoings are evident in the reactions of characters such as Anne and his mother,

who says he is a “foul devil” and “therein my shame”, speaking of him with disgust because of the pain he has caused them (1.2.51, 2.2.30). The lack of pity the audience feels for Richard is contrasted by what Oedipus receives. Oedipus’ life is dictated by a prophecy he attempts to escape, but instead entirely fulfills because he leaves Corinth. At the end of the play, he succumbs and allows “[his] fate [to] go where it will”, asking to be exiled to the mountains (1644-1645). The audience feels pity as the king’s inevitable downfall reflects the lack of free will that may be present in their life as well, which creates catharsis as they purify themselves of that emotion. The audience cannot sympathize with Richard, whose problems are as a result of his inherent evil. Oedipus’ suffering evokes catharsis, highlighting the lack of pity and fear Richard elicits. The absence of this characteristic in Richard’s character is emphasized, proving him not a tragic hero.

The contrast in Oedipus and Richard’s character makes Richard’s villainy more apparent. A character that is inherently evil does not fall due to a fatal flaw they are unable to escape; they fall due to the consequences of their immoral actions. An evil character does not evoke sympathy, and offers no catharsis in the classical sense of tragedy. Oedipus is pitied because he started with good intentions and maintained a sense of morality throughout the play. The juxtaposition of the two fallen kings emphasizes the qualities Richard lacks to be a hero, and like the title implies, one cannot be a tragic hero without first being a hero.

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