

Tragic Heroes: Avengers or Victims

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If we present a tragedy, we include the fatal and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders, which is aggravated and acted with all the art that may be to terrify men from the like abhorred practices.

Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*

Tragedy must have a hero if it is not to be merely an accusation against, instead of a justification of the world in which it occurs.

Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Tragic Fallacy*

The quotation from Krutch is based on the assumption that tragedy must justify “the world in which it occurs,” rather than denounce it, through the hero.¹ If we must have a hero, the questions are what makes a character a tragic hero? Are there any tragic heroes in modern drama? In other words, could we talk about tragedy in the twentieth century? Titles of literary criticism such as *The Death of Tragedy* proclaim that there is no more tragedy in the literature of our times. But George Steiner too supports my own view that tragedy is not dead. He concludes: “tragedy is that form which requires the intolerable burden of God’s presence. It is now dead because His shadow no longer falls on us as it fell on Agamemnon or Macbeth or Athalie,” but then he admits: “perhaps tragedy has merely altered in style and convention.” (Steiner: 353)

If tragedy has not declined but merely changed, how has it changed? Since we need to have a hero so that tragedy can perform its function, this paper will focus on the conception of the tragic hero, from Aristotle through the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, to determine whether Joan of Arc, Mother Courage and Willy Loman fulfil the necessary requirements to be considered as such or not. Aristotle defines tragedy as:

an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Aristotle, in Kaplan: 27)

That is, Aristotle proposes catharsis as the aim of tragedy, rather than justifications of or accusations against society. He later states that “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man

like ourselves.” (Aristotle, in Kaplan: 33) So, he explains, if we are shown the downfall of an utter villain, our moral sense is satisfied but no pity—he deserves it—and no fear—he is not like ourselves—are aroused. Similarly, if we witness the downfall of a virtuous man, it merely shocks us, it does not produce pity and fear. The rise of a bad man neither satisfies our moral sense nor inspires pity or fear, since “nothing could be more alien to the spirit of Tragedy; it possesses no single tragic qualities.” (Aristotle, in Kaplan: 33) The hero, then, should not be eminently good and just. His adversity should be the effect not of depravity and vice but some frailty or error.

Heywood, in his *An Apology for Actors*, as seen in the opening quotations, uses Aristotle’s idea that tragedy should, as Bowers puts it, “reward virtue and punish vice” to support his opinion in the running controversy about tragedy in Elizabethan times. Detractors argued that representing revenge, murder and villainy on the stage encouraged the audience to violence in real life. On the other hand, defenders either denied such evil effects of the violence in the tragedies or claimed tragedy to be “inculcating virtue by showing the inevitable downfall of vice.” Aristotle’s argument, however, was not based on ethical, moral considerations, but on aesthetic grounds, as we can see from his description of the highest kind of tragic protagonist, a common man whose fall is brought about by some frailty or error, not by depravity or sin. Tragedy, Bowers concludes, “in the main was supposed to show God’s vengeance on sin and crime.” (Bowers, p.261)

According to Bowers, there are three sources for the characteristic Elizabethan revenge tragedy: Seneca, French Senecan plays and the Italian *novelle*. Seneca’s three major tragedies, *Medea*, *Thiestes* and *Agamemnon* show, like the rest of his canon, that “a serious revenge leading to a murder may be conceived for great injuries, rape or adultery, as a result of frantic jealousy or the necessity for self-preservation, or else for the murder itself.” (Bowers, pp. 263-4)

We can see in such early plays as *Gorboduc* or *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, a clear influence of Seneca, but they are probably more indebted to the French Senecan drama, which built its plays “on academic critical formulas. The unyielding demand for a more than classical decorum banished all action, blood, and violence from the stage. The subject-matter was correspondingly affected.” (Bowers, p.265) Some English playwrights, a small group of university graduates, were influenced by both the English medieval forms and the French dramatists, who, in turn, were influenced by the Renaissance Italian commentators on Aristotle and Horace.

Another kind of drama had a much stronger influence. The Italian *novelle* adds the essentials of plot, characterization and dramatic incident. Bowers goes on to say that

no Senecan drama had worked out for them a complete story of revenge or had provided the important lesson of a strong opposing force moving against the revenger. All Senecan revengers were villains, whereas the early Elizabethan stage revengers began as heroes. Finally, the hereditary expiation of evil to provide a reason for a tragic fate—so prominent in Seneca—was discarded under the influence of the Italian, and this change altered in a most fundamental manner the whole English conception of tragedy as compared to the Roman. Naturally, Seneca’s rhetoric was copied, since there was no Italian example to follow. (Bowers, 267)

Also from the *novelle* and its French imitations, they took “the use of accomplices in the intrigues of revenge, ...madness..., dramatic errors in poisoning, and the valuable tragic theme of romantic love ... a revenger who was weaker than his enemies and so was dependent upon devious and long-drawnout

intrigues for his eventual success.” (Bowers, p. 266)

The theme of blood-revenge was not the direct influence of either Seneca or the *novelle*. It was borrowed from “a primitive Germanic story which was found added to a series of Italian *novelle* translated into French by Belleforest” (Bowers, p. 267). Especially significant is the theme of “blood-revenge forced as a dedicated duty upon a revenger who was, at the start, comparatively helpless” (Bowers, p. 268), which had only partially been treated by Seneca and therefore offered no dramatic model. This theme is important because it “proved to be the motive which unified the form of Elizabethan tragedy and gave it a suitable tragic situation. The important formula was produced by fusing the Italianate and Senecan in the treatment of the Hamlet story” (Bowers, p. 268). To sum up, due to its derivation from the Hamlet story,

“the Kydian school of English dramatists adopted a hero as a protagonist, in sharp contrast to the three most important of Senecan’s plays and the normal Italian development from them. That these Elizabethan tragic revenger heroes gradually gave place to villains was not, in general, the result of any specifically Senecan influence” (Bowers, p.269).

Kyd, in *The Spanish Tragedy* gave the audience what they demanded, “the revenge for a murder which had been portrayed before the audience’s eye, he gave them characters with whom they could more directly sympathise and a situation which they could appreciate as an incident from real life. At that moment the Elizabethan tragedy became entirely a native drama” (Bowers, pp. 269-9).

Some critics distinguish two kinds of revenge tragedy: the Kydian, in which the protagonist is a hero who is a revenger of blood; and the Marlovian, in which the protagonist is a villain who is not necessarily the revenger in a play in which revenge plays an important role in resolving the catastrophe. *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Jew of Malta* are the basic plays of each type. The adoption of a villain as a protagonist would lead us to expect a greater and more specific Marlovian influence on the villain-play. Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603) owes nothing to either school. *The Revenge of Bussy D’Ambois* (1610), by George Chapman, and Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy* (1611) are both Kydian. John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) “provided in its plot structure the artistic climax to the particular kind of drama which had been in the direct line of descent from Kyd to Marlowe, Marston and Tourneur, and marked the temporary discard of the much modified Kydian formula” (Bowers, p. 178). With Fletcher, Webster is the bridge “between the older Elizabethan and the so-called decadent drama of Massinger and Ford” (Bowers, p. 178).

The approval of revenge by the audience is another problem to consider. Despite the fact that some critics say, as Prosser summarizes, that

the Establishment condemned private revenge, but history denies that its campaign had widespread influence. The tumultuous temper of the Elizabethan age stood in direct opposition to official platitudes about obedience, humility, resignation, patience. Far more influential than the orthodox code of the Establishment were two popular codes that placed the demands of revenge above the strictures of religion and law: an aristocratic counter—code of honor and a long—established folk code rooted deep in racial hungers. The popular Elizabethan revenge play arose in a theatrical tradition that appealed to popular, not official, attitudes. The Establishment’s condemnation of those popular attitudes is surely no guide in determining either the playwright’s intention or the audience’s response

(Prosser, p. 4).

Bowers adds that the English audience would not consider the un-English Machiavellian maniac anything but a villain, while sympathising with the Kydian type hero revenger and hoping for his success if he did not survive, and he explains:

His death was accepted as expiation for the violent motives which had forced him to override the rules of God and, without awaiting the slow justice of divine retribution, to carve out a bloody revenge for himself... whatever the outcome of the revenge, even the most sympathetic characters like Hamlet were so twisted and warped by the overwhelming experiences that they could never return again to a normal life on earth. Who but an incurable sentimentalist could conceive of Hamlet's receiving the crown after the death of Claudius, marrying and living happily ever after? The grand sacrifice -death in victory- was the revenger's only possible lot (Bowers, p. 184).

In the second period, revenge has no advocates, and disapproval of revenge, though more implicit than explicit, was shown by putting it in the hands of the villains. The interest of the revenge is

frequently shifted from the workings of this revenge to the general villainy of action and the evil intrigues of the protagonist. When revenge is undertaken by the good characters against the villain, it is usually hurried over and excused. The revenges of the villains, however, are portrayed with gusto particularly when they lead to mutual destruction (Bowers, p.185).

Bowers sees in *The Duchess of Malfi* the expression of the "retribution which befalls a villainous revenge" and in *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* and *The Atheist's Tragedy* "we hear the first didactic murmurings of the religious doctrine which bade the relinquishment of all vengeance to Heaven" (Bowers, pp. 185-6).

In *The Atheist's Tragedy* we see the cycle completed. It goes further than Bussy in the attack on the revenge tradition. We read Clermont's answer to his sister's urge for revenge, "we must wreak our wrongs / So, as wee take not more" (*Bussy*, p. 136), as an expression of the idea that a crime which is outside the law cannot right a wrong. Furthermore, Clermont regrets having accepted the burden of revenging his brother because an individual should not take on enforcing the law. This play seems to follow the line started by Heywood's domestic tragedy, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, where the betrayed husband, instead of exacting revenge on his wife and her lover, decides that the latter will have enough punishment feeling guilty the rest of his life every time he remembers how he paid back his friend's kindness. Anne, the wife, who expects death from her husband, is so ashamed of herself because of his kindness that she exacts his revenge for him by starving herself to death. Just before she dies, however, they reconcile.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the main idea is fatal retribution, which began with the murder of the duchess and ends with the punishment of the guilty parties. This retribution does not come from a Kydian revenger, since the villains bring it upon themselves. Ferdinand goes mad, the cardinal has no more power over his accomplice Bosola "and the resultant internecine strife works the havoc. The accomplice had always been the weak link in the Kydian villain's schemes" (Bowers, 179). Webster uses this tradition of the weak link, but stresses the irony of the catastrophe and provides "a more fitting doom for his villains by removing the element of accident from the accomplice's betrayal and founding such

betrayal on a psychological change in character. (Bowers, p. 179).

It is in the third period when clear, explicit attacks on revenge in any way, under any circumstances, with plays like Jonh Ford's *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore* (1627) and also *The Fatal Dowry* (1619), which attack different aspects of violence. The best works of the period, those by James Shirley, take the best of the older play's incidents and characteristics, so he used revenge as a leading motive, but "revenge in Shirley is usually far from the implications of the third period and is more nearly related to its functional use for plot complication and handy motivation in the second period, or to the interest in revenge for its own sake in Kydian drama." (Bowers, p. 217). For Bowers, Shirley had to turn to the past because "the age, in its literature as well as in its mood, had lost its freshness and inspiration. The drama was becoming worn out" (Bowers, p. 217).

Surely, such ideas as *just*, *vice*, *depravity* or *noble action* are not the same in Aristotle's society and ours. Northrop Frye discusses a reductive theory of tragedy according to which the violation of a moral law, human or divine, sets the tragic process in motion. To Frye, "it is true that the great majority of tragic heroes do possess hybris, a proud, passionate obsessed or soaring mind which brings about a morally intelligible downfall."

But Aristotle's idea of the error or frailty "is associated with Aristotle's ethical conception of proairesis, or free choice of an end," rather than with sin and wrongdoing, even though it is hybris that usually precipitates the catastrophe. Frye argues:

the conception of catharsis, which is central to Aristotle's view of tragedy, is inconsistent with moral considerations of it. Pity and terror are moral feelings, and they are relevant but not attached to the tragic situation. (Frye: 210)

In short, as Frye puts it, tragedy "seems to elude the antithesis of moral responsibility and arbitrary fate, just as it eludes the antithesis of good and evil." (Frye: 214) Frye defines tragedy as a contradictory association of "a fearful sense of rightness (the hero must fall) and a pitying sense of wrongdoing (it is too bad that he falls)." (Frye: 214)

Two other attractive theories are those of Raymond Williams and Arthur Miller. Williams states that tragedy is the conflict between an individual and whatever forces that destroy him. This is what he calls liberal –it emphasizes the surpassing individual– tragedy – recognizes the defeats or the limits of the victory. The hero is an individual at the height of his strength, aspiring and being defeated at the same time; releasing and destroyed by his own energies. In short, the hero is a victim. He is no longer the heroic liberating individual destroyed by a false society, which is the simpler pattern; as Williams puts it, society

is actively destructive and evil, claiming its victims merely because they are alive. It is still seen as a false and alterable society, but merely to live in it now is enough to become its victim. (Williams: 104)

Williams finds this sense of the victim to be very deep in Miller. Miller himself describes tragedy as the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly, his destruction in the attempt positing wrong or evil in his environment. This is the morality and the lesson of tragedy, the discovery of a moral law. In other words, we also have an individual's struggle against the forces that threaten the freedom he needs to grow as an individual. "The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy that exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment what terrifies." (Miller: 145) The tragic hero,

Miller says, is ready to assert his sense of personal dignity, in his struggle for his *rightful* place in his society. This brings about the question of the rank of the hero. Surely the common man is not debarred from such thoughts or actions.

As Aristotle says, the hero is “a man like ourselves,” in apparent contradiction to his establishing that the hero should be someone renowned and prosperous –requirement I interpret as a way to stress the hero’s isolation, which is necessary, according to Frye. Miller believes, as I do, that the common man is just as apt to be a tragic hero as kings and princes once were. Nowadays, the job of a king is not to rule, to make decisions, but to represent his country. To use Miller’s argument, “the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another, no longer rises our passions; nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king,” but it is precisely the common man, if anybody, who fears most to be displaced, “the disaster inherent in his being torn away from the chosen image of what and who we are in this world.” Today, Miller adds, “this fear is as strong, and perhaps stronger than it ever was.” (Miller: 145) The tragic flaw, for Miller, is the hero’s unwillingness to remain passive when facing what he feels is a challenge to his own rightful status. Most of us just accept our lot, thus have no tragic flaw.

To apply all this to the three modern plays chosen, let us consider Saint Joan in the first place. Bernard Shaw himself thought of the play as a tragedy, as he lets us know in the preface. First he states that Joan’s death would have not meant anything if she had not been sent to it by normally innocent, righteous people. Then he claims that the tragedy is that the murder is the judicial, pious act of innocent people. I agree in the consideration of Saint Joan as a tragedy, but it seems to me that the reason for it should be Joan herself, since it is hard to see her murderers as innocent. They find all kinds of charges against her –heresy, witchery...– but the following opinion about her and the response it draws, is an example of her being the tragic figure we need to read the play as a tragedy:

LADVENU: Joan: We are all trying to save you. (...) But you are blinded by a terrible pride and self-sufficiency.

JOAN: Why do you say that? I have said nothing wrong. I cannot understand. (Shaw: 123)

Williams sees *Saint Joan* as the typical tragedy pattern of a hero destroyed by a false society. Frye includes it in the second of six possible phases of tragedy. These phases go from the heroic to the ironic; the first three ones being related to the last three phases of irony. The second phase of tragedy, in which Joan is included, corresponds to the youth of the hero; that is, to the stage when the hero is inexperienced and usually young. Joan, besides being young, lacks experience and worldly wisdom.

She is afraid of war and death, almost to the point of giving it all up if it did not mean, first having foreign people in her still kingless country, and second being in prison for life. She tears her recantation, already signed, as soon as she hears about her life sentence replacing her death by fire. In other words, when she sees her personal dignity, which she attaches to her freedom, threatened, she “refuses to remain passive” and chooses death -or even the possibility of death in the war:

JOAN: (...) You think that life is nothing but not being stone dead. But without these things (light, fresh air...) I cannot live; and by your wanting to take them away from me I know that your counsel is of the devil, and that mine is of God. (129-30)

Even Steiner thinks that Saint Joan, apart from being a great play, comes nearer than many modern

plays “to a tragic ordering of life.” He adds: “Yet, one cannot help feeling that it falls short of the first rank by some small, subordinate margin,” (Steiner: 312) but he does not tell us what precisely that margin is that prevents Saint Joan from being a tragedy.

Willy Loman is perhaps one of the best examples of the hero as a victim, as Williams sees it. Loman brings tragedy down on himself not by opposing the lie that society is but by living it. He is the conformist rather than the non-conformist liberating but defeated hero. He has become a commodity which will be discarded “by the laws of economy.” Another element that Williams sees as tragically decisive is the relationship of parents to children, which is necessarily contradictory. I would add that it is precisely this relationship that sets Willy’s struggle against society in motion, as we will see later. This consciousness, as Williams concludes, is thus new: “that of a victim who has no living way out but can try, in death, to affirm his lost identity and his lost will.” (Williams: 124)

Miller, too, thinks that *Death of a Salesman* is a tragedy. Willy’s error is breaking the law that “says that a failure in society has no right to live.” (Miller: 169) Willy “is agonized by his awareness of being in a false position.” (Miller: 168) These two ideas are constantly apparent to him in Charley’s and Ben’s success. I also think that Loman tries to react against his personal failure, by making his whole life of the bringing up of Happy and Biff to be successes. Especially every time that Biff comes home, Willy is confronted with the reality of his two sons being as much of a failure as himself. We must remember that his eldest son hates him ever since the Boston affair. This aspect of the situation is overcome many years later when father and son embrace and Biff expresses his love for his father:

BIFF, *crying, broken*: Will you let me go, for Christ’s sake? Will you take that phony dream and burn it before something happens? (*Struggling to contain himself, he pulls away and moves to the stairs.*) I’ll go in the morning. Put him -put him to bed.

WILLY, after a long pause, astonished, elevated: Isn’t that -isn’t that remarkable? Biff -he likes me!

LINDA: He loves you, Willy!

HAPPY, *deeply moved*: Always did, Pop.

WILLY: Oh, Biff! (*Staring wildly*) He cried! Cried to me. (*He is choking with his love and now cries out his promise*) That boy -that boy is going to be magnificent! (Miller: 133)

Willy has been fighting for his son’s love ever since Biff was born. After the Boston episode, when Biff finds out about Willy’s infidelity, Willy thinks he has lost his son’s love for ever. This victory, years later, is limited. It does not change the fact that Willy is a failure as a father and a salesman—his two reasons for living. His identity and his will, as noted earlier, must be affirmed by death.

Mother Courage can be seen as a tragic heroine too if we avoid the temptation of asking whether we should admire or despise her, as Williams points out. Mother Courage’s apparent opportunistic, business-like attitude is countered by her concern for her children. She never leaves Kattrin, for example, when Lamb asks her to go with him to the inn he has inherited in Utrecht. It sounds tempting, but she does not go because Kattrin needs her. In her words:

MOTHER COURAGE: Cook, how could she pull the wagon by herself? The war frightens her. She can’t bear it. She has terrible dreams. I hear her groan at night, especially after the battles. What she sees in her dreams I don’t know. She suffers from sheer pity. The other day I found her with a hedgehog that we’d run over. (*Mother*

Courage: 97)

Katrin represents precisely this loving side of Mother Courage, and, like love, she is mute. This explains why she is in the climactic scene, and not Mother Courage. This also accounts for the paradox of a mute girl speaking for life and being killed and the living going on with a life that kills, with war. Mother Courage will drag her wagon for as long as she believes that Eilif, her eldest son, is still alive. Eilif stands for the aspect of bravery in Mother Courage's personality. As Williams points out, in *Mother Courage* "the action is illuminated by a tragic consciousness," we have a thrust for survival in a system that kills you, if not physically, psychologically.

I believe, with Richard Sewall, that the hero's suffering "makes a difference somewhere outside himself," (Levin: 180) and I would add, with Brecht, however useless it may seem. In the case of Joan it is obvious enough: the emergence of a modern, non-feudal France. In the case of Willy Loman, his son's forgiveness and understanding of his struggle. Mother Courage's suffering best represents a new sense of tragedy, as Williams puts it. He quotes Brecht: "the sufferings of this man appall me, because they are useless." (Williams: 103) That is, suffering is avoidable but not avoided. It breaks us but need not break us.

To conclude, I think these three tragedies represent at least one of the tendencies, if nothing else, of contemporary tragedy: the individual is a victim of the forces of society at work against him or her. To illustrate this, I found support, once again, in Steiner. He remembers being impressed by Helen Weigel's acting out, in the part of Mother Courage, of the scene where she is forced to identify Swiss Cheese's dead body. After giving no sign of recognition, she

looked the other way and tore her mouth open. The shape of the gesture was that of the screaming horse in Picasso's *Guernica*. The sound that came out was raw and terrible (...) total silence. It was silence that screamed and screamed through the whole theatre so that the audience lowered its head as before a gust of wind. And that scream inside silence seemed to me the same as Cassandra's when she divines the reek of blood in the house of Athens. It was the same wild cry with which the tragic imagination first marked our sense of life. The same wild and pure lament over man's inhumanity and waste of man. The curve of tragedy is, perhaps, unbroken. (Steiner: 354)

To me, it is definitely unbroken, and I could not have expressed it in better terms than Steiner, who also admits, though reluctantly, that tragedy "may have before it a new life and future." (Steiner: 354) Hopefully a bright one.

NOTES

¹ In Krutch's view, Nietzsche's opinion, that he shares, that there is a widespread inability to conceive of man as noble, accounts for the lack of tragedies in our times. Krutch summarizes Aristotle's definition of tragedy as the imitation of noble actions.

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