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Sophocles And Shakespeare: A Comparative Study Of Classical And Elizabethan Tragedies

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Sophocles And Shakespeare: A Comparative Study Of Classical And Elizabethan Tragedies

Abstract

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The dramatic arts, has through the years, produced notable practitioners in the various ages. A great many of these practitioners have creatively churned out works that have not only highlighted the peculiarities of their periods of dramatic history, but have also outlined the time confines of their ages, and the relevance of their works have defied geographical boundaries. Such works continue to have profound influence even on the 21st century socio-political and economic scenes, and are subjects of discourses to this day. Two of such practitioners have been Sophocles, (496 – 406 B.C.), whose works, constitute an epitome of the classical tradition, and William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616), a veritable exponent of Elizabethan drama, and ‘probably the greatest dramatist of all’. (Brockert: 1978:164) This essay is a comparative study of the works of Sophocles and tragic classism as well as Shakespeare and Elizabethan tragedy, with illustration principally from Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*.

Sophocles And The Classical Tradition

Sophocles was the second of the great Greek playwrights. He was younger than Aeschylus, but older than Euripides. Born about 469BC at Colonus, a village near Athens, his father, Sophillus, was a rich armour maker. Sophocles had a good education. He also had a good physique and was very good in athletics. Because of these, and in recognition of his skill in music, he was selected at 16 to lead the choral chant to a Greek god in celebration of Greek victory at sea over the Persians at Salamis.

Sophocles was an active participant in the political and artistic activities of his community. He got elected as one of the senior officials commanding the Athenian armed forces. In fact, he was a junior colleague of the famous Pericles. He later became one of the ten commissioners empowered to reorganize Athenian finances and internal affairs, after the city suffered a humiliating defeat at Syracuse.

In 406, he led a chorus in the public mourning for his colleague, Euripides. Paradoxically, Sophocles died in the course of the same year. He first won the dramatic festival in honour of Dioysisus, in 408 B.C. defeating hitherto invincible Aeschylus. On his death he had written 123 plays, sometimes putting out about four plays at each festival, winning 24 victories. This was a remarkable record compared to Aeschylus’ 13 and Euripides’ four. He is reputed to have received nothing lower than second place in the competition he participated.

Oedipus Rex: This is the most popular of Sophocles’ plays, and indeed, the foremost classical tragedy. Webster et al, (198 – 344) describes the play as ‘a structural marvel that marks the summit of classical Greek drama’s formal achievements’. In the play, Oedipus, the main character, is the king of Thebes. He is courageous and wise, but proud and ill-tempered. He mistakes himself to be the son of Polybus, the king of Corinth. He became the king of Thebes as a reward for rescuing the city from the sphinx by answering correctly the riddle it had used in tormenting the hapless Thebans. He had also inherited Jocasta, the Theban queen as wife. His flight from Corinth was a reaction to a prophesy by an oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Incidentally, while on his flight from Corinth, he had an encounter with an old man and his train, and in a fit of anger, he succeeds in killing the man without knowing that he had played the script of the gods by killing his father. The man he had killed was the last occupant of the Theban throne he later inherited.

The plot of the play is principally centred around his attempt to discover the mysterious killer of his predecessor as a means of saving his people from a plague that has afflicted them as a result of the hideous crime. He plunges his entire pride and hot-temper into the search, only to discover that he is actually the man he is searching for. Jocasta, his mother/wife kills herself when she discovers the incestuous relationship. Oedipus blinds himself, and abdicates the throne.

Oedipus At Colonus: This is a continuation of *Oedipus Rex*, but a complete play in its own right.

In it, Oedipus, blind and old, who has been wandering from place to place, having been rejected by his family and townsmen, arrives at a holy ground in Colonus with his only companion, his daughter – Antigone. He is later joined by his other daughter Ismene. On arrival at the sacred grove at Colonus, he is guaranteed protection by Theseus, the king of Athens. Oedipus is protected by Theseus in spite of the attempt by Creon, Oedipus brother-in-law, to lure him back to Thebes as a spiritual protection buffer, for the city. Polyneices, Oedipus son who is bent on attacking Thebes for selfish reasons, earns the father's curse. Oedipus meets a mysterious death at Colonus. He is to become a great power and source of protection for Colonus, the land that finally granted him refuge.

Sophocles' two plays are clear testaments of classical tragedy. Although *Oedipus at Colonus*, does not have Prologue, Episode and Exodus, as *Oedipus Rex*, it has another special ingredient of the classical tragedy form – the chorus. The tragic action in the two plays are wound around one person – and that a royal person as demanded by the rules of classical tragedy. Although Oedipus at Colonus is poor, old, tattered and beggarly, it could not be denied that this is a former king. The king of Athens accords him respect as a fallen royalty.

The actions of the plot in the two plays, are completed within one single circuit of the sun. The playwright craftily starts his plot at a point in the story where the action would develop to the end within the same day. He artistically scatters the previous actions into various points of dialogue within the present action.

An elaborate analysis of the two plays as specimens of classical tragedy shall be undertaken during the comparative study of the four plays. However, it is pertinent to draw attention to the intrinsic relationship between the two Sophoclean works. The question that readily results from a close study of the second play is whether Sophocles actually meant this as a play on its own or wrote it as a supplement to the first. What with the absence of physical features like Prologue, Episode, and Exodus. The play also lacks some tragic features. For instance, the *hamartia* or tragic flaw which is the propelling force energizing the action is not highlighted. The hot temper of Oedipus, which he also exhibits at Colonus, is not what actually leads to his death. His final death in this play seems detached from the main act as Oedipus is already aware of his impending death. His poor temper, in this play, only aids in progressing the tragic action, creating the tragic situation in the next play *Antigone*. The vituperation and curses on Creon

and Polyneices help to prepare, the launching pad, for the tragic action in *Antigone* - the last play in the trilogy. Oedipus' stubborn decision to stay in Colonus cannot also qualify as a tragic flaw. And Oedipus' seeming acceptance and eager expectation of his end and the profit it portends for his host does not seem a tragic consequence of his decision to remain at Colonus. It does seem therefore, that *Oedipus at Colonus*, is suffering from the hang-over of the first play, and seems like an artistic filling of the transition gap between the first and third tightly - knit plays. In spite of these observations and lapses, the two plays deal with segments in the Oedipus family history, and

There is no unity of theme or treatment between them, and except for the obvious links of fact connecting them, each constitutes a fresh approach to a distinct, and self-contained, problem (Watling: 1947:13)

Oedipus, in this second play is older, and of course, wiser. Although he accepts his fate, he is always ready to explain the bizarre acts of his past, exonerating himself, and attributing them to the conspiracy of the gods against his lineage. It is worthy to note the 'melancholic serenity in the play, and the spiritual and moral authority with which it invests on the figure of Oedipus'. (Webster et al: 1998:346)

Shakespeare And Elizabethan Drama

William Shakespeare was born on the 23rd April, 1564. The register in the Holy Trinity Church, Stratford – upon – Avon, indicates that he was baptized on the 26th April, 1564. His father John Shakespeare was the bailiff (mayor) of the borough of Stratford. He must have had his education there at Stratford. His father was comfortable enough to pay his fees even as the grammar school education in the area was relatively free. His education must have entailed

latin studies, learning to read, write, and speak the language fairly well and studying some of the classical historians and poets. (Bartlett: 1998:254)

Shakespeare is not known to have attended any university. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway of Stratford. He became a school master and later left for London where he was employed to mind horses for their owners when they were inside the theatre hall. This must have marked his entry into the theatre business. From 1594 onward, he was an important member of the Lord Chamberlain's company, later known as the kingsmen, after the ascension of King James In 1603. The group prospered as it had the best actor in Richard Burbage, the best theatre in Globe, and

the best playwright in Shakespeare. He later became the owner of his own theatre. He died on the 23rd of April, 1616. An epitaph erected in his honour on the chancel wall of the church at Stratford, attributes to Shakespeare the wisdom of Nester, the genuity of Socrates and the poetic artistry of Virgil.

Julius Caesar

This is a historical play on the Roman general whose conquest, disposition and death, fascinated the English of Elizabethan days.

In the play, Julius Caesar has just returned from a victorious battle over his rival Pompey, to meet a conspiracy with his trusted friend – Brutus, as a principal participant. In spite of the prophetic warning on the ides of March, and the entreaties of his wife Calpurnia, he stubbornly elects to go to the capitol, as an expression of his courage and careless disdain for fear. There, he is assassinated by the conspirators. His friend Mark Anthony succeeds in persuading the Roman public to rise against the conspirators. In the camp of the conspirators, a quarrel ensues between the two principal generals, Brutus and Cassius. They are able to make up before their final defeat and suicidal deaths at the warfront.

Although Julius Caesar, against whom the play is titled, appears in only three early scenes, and is then murdered almost half-way in the play, his image still looms large in the succeeding scenes. Other characters

respond to and reflect upon the central fact of the great man... In fact, Caesar influences the whole play, for he appears after his death as a blood - stained corpse and as a ghost before battle. Both Brutus and Cassius die conscious of Caesar and even speak of him as if he were present. And then his heir takes command to "part the glories" of what is for him a "happy day". (Bartlett et al; 1998: 261)

Macbeth: Macbeth and Banquo, two Scottish generals and close friends, meet three witches on their return from a victorious battle. The witches foretell Macbeth's impending Kingship and address Banquo as father of Kings. These 'prophetic' words profoundly affect Macbeth, and aid his acceptance of his wife's prodding to murder King Duncan. As the most powerful of the generals, he becomes King. Unsure of the safety of his reign, he murders Banquo and embarks on the elimination of anyone he suspects could be a threat to him. In another meeting with the witches, they give him a false assurance, telling him that no one borne of a

woman would kill him, and that he will not die until Bernam forest move to Dunsinane. His wife, haunted by the murderous act she contrived, suffers from sleep-walking and eventually dies. Macduff, Banquo's son, and Malcolm, Duncan's son, combine forces against Macbeth. Macbeth soon finds out that the witches' assurance was a trick. Macduff eventually kills him and Malcolm ascends the Scottish throne.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was an attempt to piece together some events in Scottish and English history. There had actually been a Macbeth, who lived in the 11th century Scotland. His name with those of Macduff, Duncan and Malcolm are prominent in the old books on Scottish history. Shakespeare must have picked some bits from the *Chronicle of England, Scotland and Ireland*, written by Raphael Holinshed. Although he does not follow the trend of Holinshed's story, he however taps the murder of a Scottish king from there, 'and the circumstances of this murder are taken over by Shakespeare to support his history of the murder of Duncan'. (Bernard Lott: 1965: xiii)

Macbeth is the only play of Shakespeare's that was closely related to the contemporaneous situation in England. The play had been written to meet the interest of James I of Scotland, who had been crowned King of England, and who was the owner of the theatre company Shakespeare belonged. *Macbeth* portrayed the crime of regicide and assassination of governmental leaders, which are commonly regarded as the highest crime in most societies. And

the Elizabethan public had been profoundly moved by an attempted regicide in November 1605- the famous 'Gunpowder plot' – which the English people, even after three and a half centuries have not forgotten. (Bartlett: 1998:265)

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth upon whom that period in history is named, dramatic interest especially in universities and schools, shifted from classical plays to productions based on the history of native England and contemporary works from Italy. In the 1580s, a group of scholars, popularly known as the university wits, wrote extensively for the stage, bringing English drama to an era of true greatness. These scholars included Thomas Kyd (1558 – 1594), Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593), John Lyly (1554 – 1606) and Robert Green (1558 – 1592). And by 1590, England had produced many other dramatists who wrote for both learned and public audiences. They successfully blended classical and medieval dramatic devices, with interesting stories from diverse sources. This was the foundation upon which Shakespeare built.

His plays were therefore true Elizabethan expositions – free from terms of classicism, the dramatic restrictions of the medieval age and the noose – tightening rules of neo – classicism. Elizabethan theatre was not a theatre of strict rules. Shakespeare therefore felt no guilt when he ‘abused distance’ by jumping from one location to another (within the same play), and when he created differences in time of action up to months and even years. Another concern of the Elizabethan playwright was the use of rhyme. Some of the commentators of the period, like Thomas Campion (1602) spoke against it accusing its users of vulgarity and unnecessary straining of metaphorical symbols at the expense of subject matter. But most others, rose to defend it. Samuel Daniel (1603) cited it as a matter of custom and stressed that rhyme helps people remember what they have heard or read. Shakespeare was an accomplished poet and the Elizabethan taste for rhymes suited his poetic temperament.

Comparative Analysis Of The Four Plays

Although Sophocles and Shakespeare are products of two separate eras of human and dramatic history, there are glaring similarities between their works as could be seen in the four plays under study.

These four plays all have the attributes of traditional tragedy. First, they conform to the classical concept that tragic action should be built around royalty. Oedipus is the King of Thebes, Macbeth is a Scottish general who later becomes King, and Julius Caesar is a conquering general and head of the Roman government. Thus, the four plays adhere to the nobility terms of traditional tragedy. The heroes of these four plays like in most other traditional tragic works, are not mere characters and individuals, but representative symbols of an entire cultural entity. In *Julius Caesar*, the fall of the hero after the treacherous stab from his friend Brutus, is described as a communal fall thus:

Oh! what a fall was there, my country men, Then I, and you all of us fell down. (p. 85)

Oedipus, Macbeth and Caesar are caught in a series of situations, which eventually lead to their destruction. Oedipus kills an old man without knowing that he had just snuffed life out of his own father. Macbeth, hitherto loved and respected, is prodded to kill King Duncan and ‘sleeps no more’, as he knows no peace until he pays with his life. Caesar is driven by his love of valour and stubborn show of courage to spurn the warnings by the soothsayer and his wife – Calpurnia, to walk into a perfect trap of the capitol, where he is assassinated. The presence of this common characteristic in these

four plays lends credence to Wilson’s assertion that ‘in traditional tragedy, the universe seems determined to trap the hero or heroine in a fateful web’. (1991:260).

Another glaring similarity in the four plays is that the tragic heroes are carried away by the swift current of the tragic action so much that they are utterly unable to free nor reverse themselves. Oedipus’s tragic flaws - pride and arrogant quest for the truth, have already set him on a course he cannot restrain nor control. At Colonus, he steadily moves towards what awaits him, making no efforts to stop nor postpone it. He had already learnt his lessons, so this time, he eagerly awaits the denouement, with a subtle sense of resigned fulfilment. In *Julius Caesar*, the hero follows the course of his stubborn show of valour to the tragic end. Even when the soothsayer in reply to his taunt, warns that the ides of March has not yet gone, he still presses unto the capitol, the scenes of his death. And in *Macbeth*, the influence of the witches’ ‘prophesy’, and Lady Macbeth’s persuasion, leads the hero to commit regicide, and from that moment there is no hindrance to his tumbling to the final fall.

The tragic heroes in the Greek and two Elizabethan plays under study, are presented as brave and courageous, even at the face of death. They seem to accept responsibility for what has befallen them, experiencing their calamity with dignity. In *Oedipus Rex*, the hero embraces the consequences of his action and inaction enduringly. It is only in his defences at Colonus, that he tried to pass the responsibility of his calamity to the gods. However, he goes to his death bravely, acknowledging his end as the consequence of his commissions and omissions.

In the Shakespeare plays, the heroes – Julius Caesar and Macbeth are valiant and courageous to the end. They are not feeble-minded to ascribe responsibility for their actions to others. Macbeth, in the last dwell of his life exhibits raw courage and dignity. He states:

I will not yield ...yet I will try to the last: (p.231)

In terms of diction, the four plays are written in verse. Apart from the little narrative bits like the one by the Messenger in *Oedipus At Colonus*. (p. 119 – 121), they all are basically in verse. The two writers must have felt, like their counterparts in the traditional tragic mould, that because tragedy deals with lofty and strong ideas

with men and women at the outer limit of their lives, tragedy soars to the heights and descends to the depths of human experience, ...and feel that

such thoughts and emotions could best be expressed in poetry. (Wilson: 1991: 20)

Traditional tragic plays produce two central contradicting reasons. In the first place, it produces pessimism, where the heroes suffer calamity irrespective of their choice of action. But these writers also present an optimistic view of human existence. In the first place they write using their themes as suggestions for the betterment of the society. Their writing therefore constitutes optimism and faith in the continuity of human existence. These writers

although telling us that world is chaos and utterly lost, at the same time affirmed just the opposite by creating such carefully shaped and brilliant works of arts. Why bother if all is hopeless...the answer must be some residual hope in the midst of the gloom. (Wilson 199: 261)

Although the Sophoclean hero – Oedipus is portrayed as a plaything of the gods who is incapable of doing anything to free himself from the pronouncement of the gods, the writer also shows us how tragic flaws lead him to his calamitous end, a subtle suggestion that such ends could be avoided if one learns to curb his eccentricities. Thus, even without stripping the play of the concept of destiny by the gods, the lessons of Oedipus' indiscretion are too obvious to be ignored. And these are the more universal human issues in the play. The character, Oedipus, is

too complacent in his prosperity, too confident of his sufficiency, too ready to take offence, or to impute blame when 'rattled' by the approach of trouble (Watling (ed): 1974:15)

A wholesome reliance on destiny as the only viable method of unravelling meaning in this play, is capable of leading to hardened pessimism, as man is presented as incapable of anything other than being 'play the script of the gods'. But a study of the human factors in the play, is capable of striking an optimistic chord necessary for the continuity of life, as man is assured that good deeds ensure good life.

The two plays of Shakespeare under study, also treat human failings. The playwright shows the cruelty of life, through his exhibition of man's inhumanity to his fellow man. Brutus' participation in the conspiracy and the final stabbing of his bosom friend – Caesar, are pessimistic comments on the unsafe nature of human life, and the unreliability of friends. So also does Macbeth's dishonourable act of killing a royal guest in his house. It raises a question mark on human trustworthiness. But on the other hand, the

retributive consequences of these inhuman acts are clear pointers to the playwright's optimism that life is worth living as those who practice evil shall always receive the negative recompense commensurate with their deeds.

Differences

As representatives of different peoples and eras, there are notable differences between the writings of Sophocles and Shakespeare, as illustrated in the four plays in focus.

Although the two writers, as exponents of traditional tragic concepts, centre their tragic actions on nobles and royal persons, they differ in their treatment of their heroes. Sophocles presents his royal tragic heroes in the two plays, as prisoners of the gods. In spite of their royalty, and the esteem with which they are held by their subjects, they are mere pawns on the chessboard of the gods. That is why the efforts made by Oedipus to free himself from the Delphic prophecies come to nought. The further he attempts to run away from the horrible fulfilment of the prediction, the more he plunges into their realization. It is pertinent to ask why the Greek presented a King in this wise - so distinguished, yet so lowly-brought. Was it just for the ordinary portrayal of every human as mere mortals irrespective of their office or status? Renie Rapin (1674: 264) suggests an explanatory line of thought on this:

The Greeks who were popular estates, and who hated monarchy took delight in their spectacles to see Kings humbled and high fortunes cast down, because exaltation grieved them.

The Greeks, were highly republican. Athens, the city-state where the Dionysian festival was always celebrated, was a proud prospering polis by the sea. The people valued their freedom. They had, earlier in history, been ruled by Kings whom they later overthrew. The rulership of the state then became the responsibility of a body of noble men, one of whom once tried to usurp the collective powers, and enthrone tyranny. The people revolted against him and

established the rule of the people from which comes the modern word democracy... Athens was the leading Greek city in which the people governed themselves... Athenian democracy reached its highest point of development in the fifth century B.C under the great leader Pericles. (Strong: 1954:28).

Sophocles had worked with Pericles. In 440 B.C he was elected one of the ten Strategoi (high executive

officials who commanded the armed forces) 'as the junior colleague of Pericles'. (Webster: 1998: 344). His presentation of his tragic hero as an over glorified mortal, but with behavioural flaws, could have been a paradoxical expression of communal apprehension on how the failings of one person could frustrate the fortunes of an entire society- a major characteristic of monarchies. This then explains the ironical situation where a society that saw the human person as specially-endowed with limitless intellectual capacity, could present man as one 'rat-holed' by the whims of the gods.

The Greek with the Sophoclean-phobia for one man rulership, must therefore have presented his royal Oedipus as a representative of monarchy- an arrogant system, which the gods could demystify at any point in time.

On the contrary, the English had lived under monarchical rule for many centuries. Their monarchy has however, undergone various revisions. From the era of the acceptance of divine rule of Kings and the attendant arbitrariness, to the period when their excesses were questioned, to the present where monarchs only reign, but do not rule. The major pre-occupation of the English, nay the British, has not really been the substitution and denigration of monarchy, but its reformation. That, it has achieved over the years.

For Shakespeare therefore, *Macbeth*, concerned itself with the portrayal of the excesses of monarchical power and the unorthodox quest for its acquisition. After all, manipulations for power, palace intrigues and usurpation attempts were near-regular occurrences in British history. His play, therefore depicts the negativity and unorthodoxy in the Macbethan acquisition of power. He concludes the play with the purification of the monarchical stool that must have been desecrated by Macbeth, and restores the system to its appropriate spiritual position, through the installation of Malcolm. While in *Oedipus Rex*, the play ends with the king deprived and divested of pomp and pageantry, in *Macbeth*, the usurper is thrown off, and the sacredness of the throne is restored in majestic galore. Among the last dialogues in the play is 'Hail, King of Scotland', and among the last words is 'Flourish', all of which indicate the joyous rejuvenation of monarchy, through the ascension of Malcolm. (p. 235)

Sophocles kept bloody and death scenes off the stage. The death of Laius is carefully kept as previous action. Jocasta's suicide is committed offstage and then reported on stage. Oedipus' pricking of his eyeballs with needles is done offstage and the manifestation brought to the stage. These were in keeping with the Greek dramatic

tradition of keeping death and horror off the stage. The Greeks were warriors. Sophocles himself had been one of the military superintendents. But they may have felt that blood and bloody scenes should be left for the battlefields, while the stage should be left undefiled from such horror.

But the Elizabethan audiences seemed quite comfortable with the sight of blood on stage. Though the murder of King Duncan is done offstage, the killing of Macbeth in a fight by Macduff is done right in front of the audience. The killing of Banquo is also done on stage. And in *Julius Caesar*, the assassination of Caesar is publicly exhibited. So also are the suicides by Brutus and Cassius. According to Rene Rapin (1674:267) 'The English ...loved blood in their sports by the quality of their temperament'

Although Sophocles does not have the gods walk the stage in *Oedipus Rex*, their pervading influence is felt through the dramatic action of the play. They are presented as overbearing beings whose fingers are strung to the day-to-day activities of the humans, and most especially, a man they want to expose and disgrace. The homeless and beggarly state in *Oedipus at Colonus*, shows one humbled by the gods. They 'thought of their gods as the founders of their cities and as the inspirers of the heroes who made Greece great and famous' (Strong: 1954: 25). It has been argued that Sophocles failed to show that the gods could be sacrificed to, and propitiated. Yet, that is not the major issue in Oedipus' travail. They gods had warned earlier that if he was allowed to live, he would kill his father and marry his mother. The gods had, from the outset decreed that he be destroyed at birth. His continued existence was therefore a flagrant disregard of their instructions, and his problems principally-caused by those who flouted the Delphic injunctions.

Shakespeare has no gods in his plays. His tragic characters are therefore total masters of their fate. The English society of Shakespeare's time had just survived the protestant-catholic turbulence that followed the breaking-up with Catholicism by King Henry VIII. The unsuccessful attempt by the cantankerous Mary of Scots to re-introduce Catholicism to the English state had led to skirmishes among the nobles. The quelling of these, and the English defeat of the Spanish Armada gave the British society a greater confidence, and sense of religious freedom. It created an enablement for the exploits in philosophy, literature, etc, etc. It was during this period that Shakespeare emerged. The period of 'great dramatic output coincided with the upsurge in national confidence' (Brockert: 1978: 162). And because drama had negatively been used as weapon

in the preceding eras, Queen Elizabeth forbade playwrights from treating religious and political issues. Thus, the gods of the classical, and the puritanical religious posturing of the medieval periods, were kept out of dramatic circles.

Besides, at this moment of great national confidence and freedom of learning, the ability of man to soar beyond familiar frontiers, became a more important issue of concern, than the fettered relationship with gods, especially ones with inhibitive human eccentricities of jealousy, hate and covetousness. That was the period that Shakespeare lived in. His tragic heroes, rather than exist as playthings of the gods, were real human persons, whose flaws led to their tragic consummation. Such is Macbeth – a fine soldier, promoted in the course of the play to the worthy title of Thane of Cawdor, but a wicked host, and one who cannot withstand the devilish proddings of his ambitious wife. These are purely human failings that have little or nothing to do with ‘cobweb-contriving’ gods. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the tragic hero has an excuse for his previous commissions. He blames his failings on the gods. But Macbeth has none-‘the gods are not to blame’. So it is with Julius Caesar, - a gallant military leader, a conquering hero, but one whose pride, and careless display of valour has blinded his sense of discretion. After boastfully declaring that danger knows fully well that he was more dangerous than it, he ignored all entreaties and gets consumed by the very danger he claimed to supercede. These are clearly human failings. Failings that cannot be excused with such Oedipus questions like; ‘How can you hold the unwitting act against me?’ (Sophocles cited in Watling: 1954:101). The Elizabethans provided Shakespeare with no gods to blame, but humans whose resort to unorthodox, blind ambition and reckless display of valour, leads them to catastrophic ends. Cassius sums it up by telling Brutus that the faults of humans were not in their stars, but in themselves.

Although Shakespeare made ghosts appear on stage, that could not be rightly interpreted as a substitution for the role of the Sophoclean ‘strings-pulling’ gods. That the Shakespearan ghosts could predict what would happen to their enemies, was not an indication that they would be responsible for the fate of their enemies (e.g. when Caesar’s ghost spoke of meeting the conspirators at Philippi). Rather, it was an expression of the confidence in retributive justice. Shakespeare’s use of ghosts was much more a result of Elizabethan love for spectacle and things that appeal to the human eye. Voltaire (1731:280) says this of the English theatre and audience:

it is certainly more difficult to write well than to bring upon the stage, assassinations, wheels of torture, mechanical powers, ghost, and sorcerers.

The ghosts in Shakespeare were mere spectacles while the gods in Sophocles, seen on stage or dramatically-implied, had deep spiritual significance. Among the classical tragic traditions that were absent in Shakespearan drama, was the unity of action. While Sophocles concerned himself with the action of one tragic hero or ‘mono-plot’, Shakespeare’s play had ‘poly-plots’. For instance, besides the main plot in *Julius Caesar*, there is another plot: the Brutus – Cassius relationship. John Dryden, (1668:325) condemns this as having ‘two distinct webs in a play, like those of ill-wrought stuffs; and two actions, that is, two plays, carried on together’.

Classical tragedies had their sources in history. But as is conscious of the verisimilitudinal concepts of unity of time and action, their dramatists started their plots at a particular point in the story where the action could conclude itself within the circuit of the sun. They were thus able to interweave truth with probable fiction in a pleasing and convenient manner. But Shakespeare had no such restriction. His actions could span many years within a production of two and a half hours.

Shakespeare, like most English writers preoccupied himself with ensuring that the wronged are entitled to commensurate rewards from those they have hurt them, by their proxies or even agents contrived by the playwright. Brutus, Cassius and the other conspirators are hounded out before the end of the play. Macbeth is routed by Macduff. This must have been borne out of the just society ideal that Queen Elizabeth tried to entrench. Joseph Addison (1711:388) judges this unnatural, comparing it with the classical system.

Notwithstanding this criticism, the Shakespearan example seems to conform more to artistic considerations. Arts is not life, but a representation of life. Art-forms should therefore not pretend to be real life or montages of real situation. Even naturalism that sees art works as slices of life, advocates that art should delight as well as teach. A dramatic work that shows the triumph of evil over good could rightly claim to be representing some real life actions but it does not delight nor teach. It does not uphold goodness and moral living, neither does it encourage hope and faith in the continuity of human existence.

The classical believe in the purity of genres. They did not encourage mixed genre tendencies of tragedies with comic time-outs. This was a defilement of the tragic spirit, in their estimation.

The two Sophoclean plays under focus, are straight serious from the beginning to the end. But Shakespeare cross-mixed the genres in his plays. He created room for comic moments in his tragedies e.g. the Porter's scene in *Macbeth*. The Elizabethan period was preceded by the Renaissance, during which writers like Giovan Guarini had made strong cases for tragi-comic art forms. Some Elizabethan playwrights also advocated for and defended this mixed genres. Samuel Johnson in his 'Preface to the plays of William Shakespeare' (1765:408) ruled that this system should be

readily allowed... The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing. That the mingled drama may convey all the instructions of tragedy and comedy cannot be denied, because it includes both in its alterations of exhibition, and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life...

As a 'post-neo-classical' playwright, Shakespeare dispensed with the services of the classical chorus, a major characteristic of Sophoclean works. The neo-classical dramatists who preceded Shakespeare, has struck down the chorus with the weapon of verisimilitude, arguing that it was unnatural for a man to bare his mind to a group of twelve to fifteen men. And in its place, they advocated the use of confidants. Shakespeare and his contemporaries again went neo-classical by adopting this. Hence, Cassius had Brutus, and Lady Macbeth had Gentle woman.

The use of chorus had suited the pure poetic form of classical drama, after all Greek drama originated from the chorus. But as drama progressed and the need arose for it to shed more of its weight of ultra-illusion, the chorus had to give way to more realistic and believable experiences. Schiller (1803: 474)

In the opinion of Schiller, the chorus grew out of the poetical aspect of life. The modern poet no longer finds the chorus in nature. He must resolve on such adaptations of his story as will admit of his retrogression to those primitive times, and to that simple form of life.

In contrast to the well-knit, compact plays from the Sophoclean stable, Shakespeare's works have loose plots. This sometimes makes some parts of his plays wobbly-especially while moving close to the denouement. Johnson (1765:411) condemns his negligence of the latter parts of his plays. He accuses Shakespeare of 'shortening the labour to snatch the profit'. These are evident in the war scenes in both *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*.

General Observations

Generally, Shakespeare represented an era free from rules and traditions. It should be noted that Sophocles wrote almost all his plays for the Dionysiac drama competitions. He therefore had to conform to the rules as the success of the playwright of the period was dependent on the number of prizes won at the festivals. Sophocles conformed and carted away more prizes than any other of the playwrights of his time.

Though Shakespeare had to contend with his contemporaries and dramatists from other playhouses, he had no formal competitions to enter for. This, with the enterprising freedom of his age made him free from restrictions, and his works reflect this.

These two great writers like their colleagues through the ages, therefore lived as representatives of their societies and their ages. Their worth could only be justifiably measured by the societal resources available to them – in terms of religion, tradition, form of government, economy and well-being of the citizenry. It would not therefore be totally justifiable to judge dramatic works devoid of the state of the general society within which the dramatist worked. After all, arts is a societal chronicler and a culture-carrier.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it could be seen that these two great dramatists gave good account of themselves, within their periods, in their works.

In a typical mathematical progression, there must be a 'one' to get to 'two' and 'three'. So it is also in dramatic history. There was a Greco – Roman classical period with set literary traditions, in order to set the scene for the Elizabethans, who as latter-day operators and inheritors, had the freedom to conform with, discard, revise and revitalize. The primacy is therefore not that of which age is greater (as it is the operators that make an era great), but how well the artistes in the ages have developed their creative endowments. Sophocles and Shakespeare have exhibited great mastery of their arts, and in the process, made their ages prime discourses in dramatic circles. Sophocles's play *Oedipus Rex* has been generally accepted as the epitome of traditional tragedy, indeed, the cradle of formal drama. The dramatic genre went through various changes and revisions until Shakespeare uplifted it to a stage no other dramatist had ever done. It could therefore be rightly said that while Sophocles laid a good foundation for the dramatic arts, Shakespeare built the edifice, taking the imitative arts to its highest peak. The relationship

between these two dramatists could therefore be linked to that which existed between Sundiata and Mansa Musa of old Mali empire, where one built the foundation of the empire, while the other built the edifice.

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