

Wisdom and Love in Shakespeare's Tragedies

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I. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare was one of the greatest writers that ever lived. He created the foundations for what is now the English language. Many of the words that are spoken today came from the plays and sonnets that he wrote. Shakespeare is famous for his sonnets, tragedies, and comedies. He wrote many classic plays and created many classic characters that have lasted throughout time. They have been portrayed in the movies and re-written in other books, and there have been hundreds of editions of his plays published over time. His most famous works are his tragedies. Shakespeare wrote his tragedies according to three main types of structure: first, a historic or social tragedy that incorporates historic events or information, second, dealing with the conflict or separation of lovers, and third, dealing with the hero being taken away from their natural environment and placed in a completely different and unfamiliar environment (Frye 16). Characters like Macbeth, Hamlet, and Romeo are all noted characters that have stayed relevant in popular culture of today's time. Both wisdom and love are very prominent themes in Shakespeare's plays and are showcased in many ways, and sometimes the way that Shakespeare includes these themes have a lot of factors in common. They are shown as being both positive and negative, from being the driving force behind a relationship and decision making process to being the downfall that can potentially lead to death. By comparing and contrasting the way that both love and wisdom are treated in the tragedies in positive and negative ways, one can get the idea that Shakespeare meant these themes to be complex portrayals of the human mind and psychology. The positive and negative portrayals of love and wisdom are shown through variations of each nature, including as a reward or the potential for danger and death, respectively.

There are five major tragedies that showcase love and wisdom the most out of all of other plays. These are Macbeth, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, and Othello. Each of these plays displays a collection of characters who become tragic heroes and make decisions that take a toll on their lives and the way that the outcome of everyone else's lives happens. These characters do not deserve to be acknowledged as heroes, and do things that are unspeakable of someone who would be considered noble (Stoll 25). This is how Shakespeare wrote his heroes. They are not traditional heroes that one would think of today, such as a knight or a savior of mankind. Shakespeare wanted people not to suspect who would be a hero. These characters might show virtue at the beginning, but the opinion of them quickly changes once the story begins (Stoll 25). Shakespeare also defines themes differently by offering a distinct take on traditional meanings. Wisdom is defined as "the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others" (Nordstrom 185). In the sense of this analysis, wisdom will refer to the knowledge of the characters and the information that they obtain as the tragedy goes on. Wisdom in Shakespearean terms is described as the intelligence to think about something before one does it rather than simply going ahead and doing it (Nordstrom 186). Impulsive and irrational behavior are not common behaviors for a wise person, as someone who is wise has the intelligence to understand a situation before they act it and make sure that they have analyzed the situation. Wisdom is also associated with nobility (Nordstrom 190). Being a humble, moral, and noble person in this sense constitutes a wise character in Shakespeare's tragedies.

In the terms of this paper, love will be defined as both romantic as well as friendship and family style love. King Lear is largely about the familial love between King Lear and his three daughters. He becomes heartbroken by them in the same way that one would be heartbroken from the end of a romantic relationship. Shakespeare excelled at using the theme of love because he was very good at making people think and feel the human actuality (Knights 19). He knew how to write about love to make the reader understand and feel the pain or happiness that the character is going through. Shakespeare has used many themes relating to love, and often plays on the concept of love at first sight (Charney 9). This concept is presented as an experience that is not only unavoidable, but vital for his characters (Charney 10). This is how many of his characters fall in love. For example, this is what happens to Romeo and Juliet because they see each other but cannot speak to one another.

Yet, they cannot resist the temptation and almost instantly fall in love. This is portrayed in many other plays when Shakespeare writes that characters fall in love with one another quickly after an event happens (Charney 12). He also procures images of what love should be. Love in the extreme sense includes fondness and doting on one another to make sure that the needs of someone's partner are met (Charney 9).

Often, Shakespeare divides the roles of love among gender. There are specific parts that each gender must play in order to make a love connection and a romantic bond between two people. The women are usually the nurturing, loving, and emotional side of the situation, while men are the aggressive, tough, masculine characters who need to be tied down by a woman in order to settle down in his life (Charney 19). The female characters are more doting than the males, often there to pay attention to the needs of the males and make sure that they feel loved (Charney 10). In addition, women are occasionally displayed as temptresses who seduce the male characters and cause them to fall in love with them based on their excellent looks and charm. According to Shakespeare, an efficient cause or factor in falling in love is a woman's beauty (Charney 17). Male beauty is not very present in Shakespeare because the female characters do not ever really discuss male beauty in a context that would make sense for the plays (Charney 17). Women are depicted as the muses for Shakespeare's male characters and generally they always feel the same way for the male characters. Often women in Shakespeare fall in love with the idea of masculinity and men as a generalization instead of a specific male body (Charney 17). Shakespeare also uses a lot of imagery of the human eye in order to relate it to the concept of love (Charney 15). He treats the eye as an object of affection and showcases the senses through them. Many of the passages when lovers first meet discuss seeing each other through their eyes. For example, Romeo asks himself if his eyes are playing tricks on him or if he is really seeing such a beautiful woman right there in front of him. He tells himself, "Dis my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight!/For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (Romeo and Juliet 1.5.51-52). Eyes can certainly play tricks on someone, as is evident in Macbeth when Lady Macbeth begins going through hallucinations and Macbeth begins to see the ghost of Banquo. This ghost makes Macbeth very nervous and guilty, and he quickly dismisses it, "Hence, horrible shadow!/ Unreal mock'ry, hence" (Macbeth 3.4.106-107). In Hamlet, Hamlet sees his father's ghost and is overcome by love and emotion (Charney 15). He exclaims, "O, fie!-Hold, hold my heart;/ and you, my sinews, grow not instant old/ But bear me stiffly up" (Hamlet 1.5.93-95). The eyes are seen as a place of mystery that can show someone an insight into their mind and how they are thinking and processing the rest of the world. Shakespeare's use of eye imagery comes from an Elizabethan term "to look babies," which is used by him to refer to a gaze shared between lovers through which they can see each other's reflections in their eyes (Charney 15). Eye imagery is also used in Shakespeare's tragedies to teach the lesson that love is blind and human beings cannot control who they fall in love with or what love makes them feel (Charney 16).

The positive potentials of wisdom are portrayed in some of the tragedies. Wisdom is a valuable aspect of human life and many people strive to attain the knowledge that others have. Wisdom is what creates many characters and causes those characters to be able to foreshadow certain events or inform certain characters before tragedy occurs. For example, in Macbeth, Banquo is a wise man because he knows to send his son away to continue his life somewhere else. As the murders attach Banquo, he cries, "Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly!/ Thou mayst revenge" (Macbeth 3.3.20-21). Banquo is well aware that Macbeth has gone insane and knows that he must do something about it in order to have his son survive. This ends up being a very smart decision because Banquo's sons go on to represent wisdom themselves because they are all-knowing and can see the future regardless of the actions that Macbeth takes. They know how it is going to play out in any situation. They find amusement in Macbeth's crazy attempts to make the prophecies come true and use it as a source of entertainment.

The positive potentials of love are also portrayed in Shakespeare's tragedies. While there is no positive outcome for the majority of the characters in all of his plays, there are a lot of instances where love has been a good blessing. Even if this blessing happens just temporarily, it is still important to note that this is an aspect of life that cannot be changed. It is a factor in many of the major decisions that all of the characters make. In addition, all of the major characters that experience love are entirely happy, even if they die at the end. Temporary happiness is still important because it makes for a good quality of life while the person is still alive. When Romeo meets Juliet, he compares her to a religious icon and describes the experience as a pilgrimage to a shrine that is to be worshipped (Leggatt 836). He states, "This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this,/ My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand" (Romeo and Juliet 1.5.93-94). All of the characters also liken their romantic experiences with love to religion (Leggatt 836). In this sense, Shakespeare is creating a large scale of emotion that links the feeling of love to something that is related to a higher power. Othello and Desdemona's relationship is very strongly connected to religion and in the way that they speak to one another. (Leggatt 837). They, for example, speak to one another through a comparison to the Heavens. Shakespeare uses this type of language to create the connection between the two characters and showcase the love and emotion that they have for one another. In addition, he creates the image that Desdemona is put on a pedestal and is to be worshipped like a goddess, establishing her beauty and the amount of affection that Othello has for her. In the stage

directions for Othello, it dictates that several men are to kiss the hem of her gown (Leggatt 844). This signifies the worship element, and that it is not just Othello who is doing the worshipping but the rest of the town as well. For this reason, Othello spends the majority of the play in a "religious awe" of Desdemona, despite the fact that he kills her in the end (Charney 20). He sees her as a religious figure in his life and devotes many of his prayer-like thought processes to worshipping her.

Wisdom is also treated as a reward for those who become the heroes of Shakespeare's plays. When someone learns something that solves a mystery or answers questions that the protagonist might have, that wisdom becomes a prize for that character. In this sense, wisdom is valued because it is traditionally believed that the more wisdom you have, the wiser you are, and the more power you can have. Kings and queens are given powerful positions because they are wise enough to know what to do in order to get those positions. Each character is given wisdom in a different way. There is a theory that Shakespeare's heroes arrive at true self-recognition and that they come to self-knowledge at the end of the play (Bomwich 132). Self-knowledge is an important part of wisdom because it allows the character to come into their own and see the world the way they are meant to see it. In a way, the character is maturing and growing into their new role as hero. This theory of self-recognition and self-knowledge is caused by remorse and reflection that occurs when the character oversees the situation that has happened and what has been done (Bromwich 132). While many of the heroes die at the very end, they often come to some kind of revelation before their death that allows them to process the wisdom of what has taken place in their world. At the end of Othello, the titular character Othello comes to know himself and he realizes what he must do with his newfound wisdom (Bromwich 133). Since these plays are tragedies, they still have to end in death. Thus, Othello's wisdom has come too late and he realizes that he must destroy himself if he wishes to restore harmony (Bromwich 133).

Love has also become a reward in many situations because love is valued by Shakespeare over many other emotions. Love is a consistent theme within his tragedies. Romeo and Juliet serve as an example of this because it is made clear in the play that both of these characters' lives get significantly better once they meet each other and fall in love. Before they meet, they are both trapped in boring lives, contemplating why they exist and wondering what else is out there. When they meet by chance, they are instantly attracted to something that promises a new world and a new set of adventures for their lives. This is what they believe love will bring to them. When Romeo appears at Juliet's window balcony, he tells her, "I am no pilot; yet, wert thou as far/ As that vast shore washt with the further sea,/ I would adventure for such merchandise" (Romeo and Juliet 2.2.82-84). Shakespeare also makes the connection between love and knowledge. Love brings wisdom and knowledge through learned experiences (Knights 16). In addition, in Shakespeare's tragedies, love brings power. The passion that two lovers feel creates a motivation to do better and to perform to the lovers' ability regardless of what activity they are doing (Clement Marsh 49). Romeo is overcome by passion, which causes him to battle in the streets against Juliet's family. On the contrast, many of the characters are driven by love, but do not always receive it the way they deserve. Hamlet loves Ophelia, but she rejects him on the grounds that he was driven mad and would never love her the way she wanted him to. Her father warns her that she should not believe what he says to her because he is not to be trusted as he is beginning to go mad. He tells her, "Even in their promise, as it is a-making,/ You must not take for fire. From this time/ Be somewhat scater of your maiden presence./ Set your entreatments at a higher rate" (Hamlet 1.3.119-122). However, his love for her inspired him to keep trying to win her affections and make her love him. This is what serves as his muse, as he believes that he will one day become king and make Ophelia his queen.

Shakespeare often treated wisdom as a powerful source that could cause serious damage to the mind. Many of his characters go mad due to the knowledge and possession of information that has negative consequences. In Macbeth, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are both driven mad from their extreme guilt of their murder of King Duncan. Macbeth says, "I am afraid to think what I have done;/ Look on't again I dare not" (Macbeth 2.2.54-55). The knowledge and wisdom that they were the ones who did it is what drives them insane, causing them to make very irrational decisions that lead to their downfall. Duncan had been kind and affectionate, which makes Macbeth's actions even more tragic (Stoll 27). This is part of the reason that Macbeth becomes so mad, as he knows that Duncan has not done anything to anger him except for try to pass on the crown to his son. In King Lear, the knowledge that his daughters have betrayed him and done him wrong drives him insane. All three of his daughters are fighting over his will and what he left to them while he is on his death bed. He cannot bear to know that two of his daughters would do this to him, and Cordelia had been cast away. Since wisdom is heavily connected to nobility, many of his characters struggle between being wise and falling into temptation (Nordstrom 191). This is an internal battle within the character, knowing full well what the consequences are but being tempted by the temporary, yet instant outcome. In other words, the short term gains are more tempting than the long term consequences, leading many people to be tempted into doing something unwise. Hamlet becomes aware of the situation that happened to his father and his newfound wisdom inspires him to take up arms and reclaim his rightful spot on the throne. His mother has committed unspeakable acts, including having her husband murdered and then marrying his own brother so that she can stay queen.

Hamlet's knowledge is given to him by the ghost of his father, and he takes these words into consideration. This knowledge possesses Hamlet to become consumed by the task of avenging his father, so much so that he begins to lose touch with reality and he finds himself slowly becoming insane, just as Macbeth does. While Hamlet does not have feelings of guilt like Macbeth instead, he has resentment and feelings of vengeance toward his uncle.

These characters who become overpowered with wisdom are still considered heroes because their intentions are not completely evil. Heroes in Shakespeare's tragedies are called tragic heroes because of their tragic downfall. The tragic hero is likeable in the beginning of the play, and becomes slowly irrelevant as the play progresses. Each hero takes some type of action, whether on purpose or by accident, that causes their ultimate downfall. Heroes, according to the traditional view, are always responsible for their own downfall. Congruently, Shakespeare notes that all of his tragic heroes' mortality or tragic endings were caused by their own manmade mistakes. All heroes in many stories become tempted by certain desires and can be swayed easily by natural occurrences in the world. This is part of the hero's journey- to resist temptation and take the moral high ground toward achieving success. Macbeth becomes overwhelmed with guilt and shows that he still has a conscience despite his actions (Stoll 27). The fact that he does become so guilty means that there was a little part of him that regretted taking this course of action. Instead of feeling satisfied after he becomes king, Macbeth is tortured by the events (Stoll 27). He becomes unable to enjoy his time as king and instead becomes untrusting of everyone except Lady Macbeth. Macbeth knows deep down that he will pay for his actions. Othello, on the other hand, has fallen victim to his delusions and believes that he is truly helping restore justice (Stoll 31). Therefore, while Othello's actions were not good, he had good intentions and truly believed that he was doing the right thing. In addition, a hero is someone who changes throughout the play or story they are in, however these characters change for the worse. The issue that this causes is that the tragic heroes are remembered after their death for how they were at death instead of their accomplishments further in the past (Frye 3). Death is what defines an individual and sets him apart from the others who have died before him or her (Frye 3).

Love is also treated as a powerful source that can cause damage. Love often puts the characters of Shakespeare's tragedies into situations that cause their destruction (Clement Marsh 9). All lovers die, but it is the question of whether or not love is the thing that killed them that governs the way that Shakespeare wrote some of his works (Clement Marsh 9). An ongoing theme in the tragedies is that all who love must be defeated by their own mortality (Clement Marsh 52). In Elizabethan times, love was considered something that had the potential to cause weakness (Clement Marsh 11). Many marriages at this time were based on love, but many others were based on convenience or making trades. Therefore a lot of Elizabethan literature does not focus on love as a driving force between the governing of certain relationships. Love could cause someone to become highly or overly emotional and they would not become a functioning or valuable member in society (Clement Marsh 11). Elizabethans saw moral law as a governing factor in society, and love had to comply with the regulations set out by moral law (Clement Marsh 11). However, Shakespeare's characters do not follow moral law despite the fact that they are in love. In this sense, Shakespeare goes against the norm and creates situations where people do something or perform an action that society would not or does not approve of. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the two star-crossed lovers are tied together with their love. They risk their lives to meet each other in secret and vow that their love is more important than anything else in the world, including their families. By doing so, they abandon their families and their friends and give up everything for each other. However, this leads to their deaths as they become so obsessed with their love for one another they decide they cannot live without each other and die (Clement Marsh 51). *Romeo and Juliet's* love is particularly dangerous because it is first love (Clement Marsh 49). As a result, both characters believe that they are independent of time and do not have any other options (Clement Marsh 49). On the night he meets her, Romeo tells Juliet he desires "Th'exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine" (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.127). *Romeo and Juliet* also believe that the love they have is something they cannot find anywhere else or in another person that might be more accepted by their parents. They are paranoid that time will tear them apart, so they rush into rash decisions and make a tragic situation for themselves (Clement Marsh 49).

In addition, love can turn to hate because the line between the two emotions is very thin (Stoll 29). In *Othello*, love turns to hatred when Othello becomes consumed by it (Stoll 29). Love can also cause feelings of jealousy between characters, and this has traditionally led to the inclusion of death or at least a battle in many of his plays. In *King Lear*, Lear's daughters fight for his possessions, but get extremely mad when family love comes in to play and the ugly stepsisters do not have enough love for their father to be able to achieve what Cordelia does (Charney 15). Goneril also tries to seduce Edmund, who falls in love with Cordelia, angering Goneril and stirring up feelings of jealousy for her sister (Charney 15). Love is also what causes Othello to believe he has to kill Desdemona because of his irrational jealousy and thought process (Charney 21). In *Hamlet*, Ophelia rejects Hamlet's love letters and tells him to stop talking to her. She has been warned by her father about his lack of trustworthy qualities and he has also warned her that Hamlet is slowly going mad, not meaning many of the things that he says to her in person or via his love letters. After Hamlet kills her father, Ophelia goes

mad from the loss of her father's love. Therefore, she also experiences family love because she goes through a serious mourning phase when her father dies. Ophelia becomes a ghost-like creature in her final days, living her life as if she is a figment of everyone's imaginations.

The contrast between being wise and being a fool is not lost in Shakespeare's writing. Often, wisdom and folly go hand in hand for his plays. Many of his characters walk the border between these two states of mind. Often, there is a character in the play who serves as the fool and is someone to be joked about by the characters, causing a difference between the wise and the ignorant. Shakespeare's fools always know things that the wise do not, and often serve as a warning for the consequences that are about to come (Hancock 421). Many wise characters overlook subtle cues that are hidden within common sense and do not have the mindset to look for those hints. However, the fool is someone who notices because they do not overthink a situation and instead see things from a basic point of view. In this sense, the wise always turn into fools at some point or another. In addition, Shakespeare always makes people wise who either do not deserve it or do not possess the knowledge to be wise. Barring their differences, both St. Paul and Confucius state in their writings that wisdom relies on people admitting failure and coming to terms with it when they lose (Hancock 427). Shakespeare's characters often lack this sense of modesty and are too proud to admit that they are wrong. Macbeth lets pride become his downfall. He is so consumed by pride that he creates false assumptions that lead to wicked actions (Bromwich 141). The knowledge that he will become king in the future creates this sense of pride in Macbeth, connecting wisdom and pride. Additionally, the pride causes Macbeth to kill Duncan to become king and fulfill the prophecy. However, his actions cause him to become overwhelmed with paranoia and guilt and he is soon driven mad. Therefore, his pride caused him to become a proud fool who could not find it in his mind to listen to his conscience or his common sense. In *King Lear*, the Fool is a trusted companion of King Lear and he often advises the king, which is valued in return. By trusting a fool, King Lear is not being typically wise, but is allowing the acknowledgement that fools do have some kind of reliable knowledge. King Lear learns humility through going mad and it is only when he has completely lost his mind and caused damage to his entire kingdom that he discovers this. Hamlet takes foolish action when he kills Polonius due to an identity mistake. He thinks that Polonius is Claudius and makes an impulsive decision to kill instantly. Hamlet's knowledge of his mother and uncle's actions have caused him to become mad, like a fool, and he therefore begins to lose his mind and make irrational decisions. When someone has too much knowledge, they become more of a fool. They do not know what to do with all of the knowledge and slowly begin to slip away from reality. Some characters, like Lear, Macbeth, and Hamlet, believe that the world is out to get them and they are overly paranoid from daily activities. The wiser a character becomes, the more they are aware of how much of a fool they are being, and they are then able to laugh about it later on (Nordstrom 187).

There is also a contrast between love and folly in Shakespeare's writing, just as wisdom can create irrational thought in people who are involved (Charney 11). Love makes people become fools, according to the lessons learned from the tragedies. People become crazy with love and become willing to do things that they would normally never be willing to do. *Romeo and Juliet* are the best and most prominent example of this concept. They met and fell in love within a twenty four hour time period and decided that they were willing to give up their lives for one another. They soon make irrational and foolish decisions that ultimately lead to their deaths. Juliet pretends to die by taking a sleeping potion so she can run away to be with Romeo, but fails to tell Romeo of the plans. Instead of everything working out, Romeo rushes home to be by her side because he thinks she has died, and he cannot bear the thought of living without her. He kills himself by her side, still unaware that she is not actually dead. Juliet soon wakes up and realizes what he has done, and then proceeds to actually kill herself. Both of these characters kill themselves because of an impulsive decision that was not thoroughly thought through. Sexual passion causes reason to be discarded in favor of doing something that will satisfy within the moment (Quincy 104). Feelings of lust can also drive people mad. Those who have "sexless eyes," or are not wavered by sexual desires, see things much more reasonably (Quincy 104).

Out of both love and wisdom, love is arguably the stronger emotion or value. Both values possess the potential to cause both good and bad consequences, but ultimately one is more powerful than the other. Love can cause reason to be thrown out the window (Charney 11). Love causes many people do commit acts that they would never normally do, like murder or treason. When someone falls in love they are consumed by their love and do not consider outside consequences without regarding their lover. All of the tragic characters in Shakespeare's plays do something irrational or idiotic because of their love for a female. Wisdom is a strong value because it causes emotion and there is such a thing as too much of it. It can make people go mad and possess them to do crazy things, but the ultimate conclusion is that love is the more powerful element.

In Shakespeare's tragedies the themes of love and wisdom are presented in a parallel way; positive things that can come out of these themes as well as the destructive nature that they possess. Both love and wisdom possess the potential for good and bad, and this is showcased on both ends of the spectrum in five of Shakespeare's tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*. All of the main characters who embark on a tragic heroic journey result in a negative result that in some cases consists of death

or extreme sickness that in turn eventually causes death. Love and wisdom go hand in hand as two of the main themes that exist in almost every one of Shakespeare's tragedies. They are often the driving force behind many characters and the decisions that these characters make, and how the plays are structured. There is a deeper meaning to almost everything Shakespeare ever wrote, and it is worthwhile to engage in these themes to discover what he truly meant. Love makes people do crazy things, like Romeo and Juliet, but love can also cause extreme destruction, like Hamlet's mother and uncle. Wisdom can do these same things, like driving King Lear mad or Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The bottom line to these plays is that one must keep a healthy balance of love and wisdom and not let these values overcome one's life. The best and most successful characters in Shakespeare's plays are the ones who are not overly possessing of any specific characteristic or value and instead are the ones who use a combination of factors in order to save the situation and rise above those who have lost touch with reality.

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