

Othello, a Hero of Passion

Introduction

Caught somewhere between a glorious and the tragic hero, Othello is one of the most controversial characters of Shakespeare who moved the imagination of millions of readers worldwide. Othello had everything to become a glorious winner, but for some reason, he had to fail and his story became a symbol of jealousy to exist as a reminder for all the generations to come.

First, the essay will introduce Aristotle's ideas of tragedy and of a tragic hero, before the actual analysis of how Othello meets with these ideas. Even though Aristotle's ideas regarding tragedy and a tragic hero are mainly introduced in *Poetics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* will also be used where necessary. Only through concerning the whole of Aristotle's philosophy can Othello be viewed as an Aristotelian tragic hero. However, due to the complexity of Shakespeare's most famous characters, he is not only that, but for example, he shares similarities with antiheroes as well.

Aristotle's tragedy

Aristotle's idea of tragedy was that it should be "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."¹

These ideas apply to Shakespearean plays, namely, to *Othello* as well. Shakespeare was a master of the English language and he created ever-lasting plays about the interesting ways of human nature. Othello's fall is that of a leader's. According to Northrop Frye whose book, the *Anatomy of Criticism* is largely based on Aristotle's philosophy, "[the leader] has to fall because that is the only way a leader can be isolated from society"². However, it is crucial to point out that his tragedy originates from his own actions, which will be explained at a later point in this essay. At the very end of the story when he and Desdemona die in their wedding

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, S. H. Butcher (Translator), Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1902, pp 23; <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Poetics.pdf> [11. 29. 2015.]

² Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy on Criticism*, Atheneum, New York, 1966, pp. 37.

bed, they indeed evoke pity in the reader and Othello's death can be regarded as a purgation as well, because he did deserve some kind of a punishment for being a murderer. In my opinion, this is why the readers had to see Othello dying in the end, instead of Iago. Even though Iago caused all the suffering, it was Othello who committed murder. Iago had a great insight into people and he used this against them, to manipulate people according to his liking.

Aristotle's tragic hero

According to *Poetics*, a protagonist of a tragedy should be “a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous, – a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families”³ or as a different translation says: a “man who is neither a paragon of virtue and justice nor undergoes the change to misfortune through any real badness or wickedness but because of some mistake”⁴. Thus, Aristotle considers a great man a good tragic hero, who is relatable to the audience, because of his goodness, but it is important to emphasize that he is not a perfect character.

One of the most controversial words of *Poetics* is the word “*hamartia*”, which has been translated in various ways. It has been described as “error” in the aforementioned quote and by Stephen Halliwell⁵ as well. In a footnote, he adds that it “could cover a range of possible factors in tragic agency”⁶. Even a simple Google-search reveals that some describe it as a general error or an error in judgment or a moral flaw.

It “embraces all the ways in which human vulnerability, at its extremes, exposes itself not through sheer, arbitrary misfortune (something inconsistent with the intelligible plot structure which Aristotle requires of a good play), but through the erring involvement of tragic figures in their own sufferings”⁷. It may be one of those words that got lost in translation, because of time

³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, S. H. Butcher (Translator), Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1902, pp 45–57; <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Poetics.pdf> [11. 29. 2015.]

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Gerald F. Else (Translator), University of Michigan Press, 1970, pp 38; <https://books.google.hu/books?id=UjSqROYikUMC&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu#v=onepage&q&f=false> [11. 29. 2015.]

⁵ Russell, Donald A. (ed.), Aristotle: *Poetics*; Longinus: *On the Sublime*; Demetrius: *On Style*, Halliwell, Stephen, Fyfe, W. Hamilton, C. Innes, Doreen, Roberts, W. Rhys (Translators), Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 71; https://books.google.hu/books?id=gG7GFipheDgC&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&ad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false [11. 29. 2015.]

⁶ Ibid., pp. 70.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 17.

and the cultural gap between today and Aristotle and it should be understood that we can only suspect its original meaning. Its vagueness, however, can be problematic from the point of view of an analysis of a single character, like Othello.

Othello

Compared to certain other characters of Shakespeare, like Macbeth, Othello may seem like a superficial character at first, but actually, he is a complex and round one with depth, and the problem of categorizing him as an Aristotelian tragic hero or not can be traced back to his complexity, mundanity, and real life-likeness. One of the traits that make him so intriguing is something Northrop Frye describes as being an *alazon*, “which means impostor, someone who pretends or tries to be something more than he is. [...] [T]he *alazon* may be one aspect of the tragic hero as well: [...] the touch of *miles gloriosus* even in Othello is unmistakable”⁸.

A *miles gloriosus* is someone Frye describes as the “learned crank”⁹. Aristotle’s first criterion is closely related to this, because he claims a tragic hero should be a respected man of high position. Othello is indeed the general of the Venetian military, which is a rank he earned through greatness on the battlefield. But on the other hand, he remains an outsider, due to his origins. Even though he is portrayed as a respected leader at first, most of the important figures keep a distance from him (such as Brabantio, who is horrified when he finds out that Desdemona and Othello got married). The reader has the idea that he is an unwanted, but valuable character who is only respected by some characters because of his abilities as the leader of the troops. Although, he is still a “good” character in the eyes of the reader (in the first half of the play, of course), because we see him as a responsible, brave, loving, and serious man who fights for good causes and wants no harm to anyone.

Aristotle’s next criterion (“whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty”) is the subject of a great number of debates. It is Othello who commits the murder and he is very much aware of his actions. Aristotle mentions Oedipus as a great tragic hero, but his error is different from Othello’s. Oedipus is indeed a tragic sufferer of his unconsciously committed actions, when he marries his own mother and kills his own father and it is emphasized in his story that he was aiming to avoid his tragic faith. But Othello acts differently: he is naive and gullible when he believes Iago’s claims about Desdemona and he

⁸ Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Atheneum, New York, 1966, pp 39.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 39.

allows himself to get blinded by the so called “green eyed monster”. He is aware of what he is planning to commit himself to, yet, he progresses with the plan. It is not an intellectual error he commits, but it is more similar to a moral one, because he commits murder on purpose. Even if the rumor was true and Desdemona did cheat on him, he should not have killed her.

Consequently, the following part of the essay aims at describing the main viewpoints on the Aristotelian “mistake”. It is academically accepted to understand and translate *ἁμαρτία* or *hamartia* as this, but Aristotle’s word-choice can be sometimes so concise that it might be hard to understand¹⁰. Probably this is the reason why there is an ongoing debate about the actual meaning of this word. There are two main endpoints to it: an intellectual error and a moral flaw. Between these two points there might be numerous possible ways of understanding.

As the *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Poetics* suggests, is actually Aristotle who contributes to this vague meaning, because his “discussion of tragic error in *Poetics* 13 appears to link *hamartia* to character, whereas his remarks in *Poetics* 14 appear to favor the view that tragic error is a mistake of fact”¹¹.

Considering another aspect, Bruce R. Smith’s idea seems to be a good approach: “[f]or Aristotle, *hamartia* is a “mistake” – no more, no less. It is not the mistake itself that engages his attention so much as the *results* of that mistake. When he sets out to categorize the different kinds of plots, Aristotle concentrates on the various kinds of outcome, not on the various kinds of mistake”¹². This might suggest, that it is not the form or kind of mistake that counts, but the fact that it happened. It is possible to suppose too, that the ancient Greeks looked at tragedy and tragic heroes from a different perspective than us and they did not consider making a clear distinction between an “intellectual error” and a “moral flaw” important.

A conversation with Alessandra Petrina after her Othello workshop seems to highlight the differences of Aristotle’s, Shakespeare’s and our times, because she said Aristotle’s world was a very different from today’s and even of Shakespeare’s and as a result it is not always possible to use Aristotle’s concepts for works of literature born after his time¹³.

¹⁰ Adorjáni, Zsolt, personal communication, [03. 25. 2016.]

¹¹ Curran, Angela, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Poetics*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 195; https://books.google.hu/books?id=pQOpCgAAQBAJ&hl=hu&source=gbs_navlinks_s [11. 29. 2015.]

¹² Bruce R. Smith, *Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage, 1500–1700*, Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 42; https://books.google.hu/books?id=4QEABAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false [11. 29. 2015.]

¹³ Alessandra Petrina, personal communication, [11. 16. 2015.]

On the other hand, it is important to point out that according to Aristotle's philosophy, character and action are closely related. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he states: "states of character arise out of like activities"¹⁴. Furthermore, as the aforementioned *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook* explains, character (*ēthos*) and reasoning (*dianoia*) "are the two causes of action"¹⁵. It is also drawn to attention that Aristotle thinks character "reveals moral choice"¹⁶, something that "is a fixed and established disposition to choose and to avoid certain actions"¹⁷.

In this regard, Othello is indeed a tragic hero when he commits the mistake of believing Iago. He seems to be a flawed character, because as stated by Aristotle, the reason why he committed murder of passion is due to his character. Therefore, what this suggests is that Othello is not a virtuous character with almost knight-like traits who is a tragic victim of a mistake, but actually someone whose personality can be blamed for his actions.

Yet, some problems arise with the term "tragic hero". According to Aristotle, "Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life"¹⁸. István Bárány puts forward an interesting thought here: tragedy might be either a fall of a person holding a high social position, but also a fall of a morally high and virtuous person¹⁹. Even though Othello seems to be a person with a high social position, and in the beginning he is represented as an honorable and principled man, he actually holds neither of these titles. It was previously concluded that even though he is the leader of the army, many people fail to have honest respect for him, and as a result, his rank is not actually a true title. And the analysis also revealed that his character is far from being morally flawless. The fact that he committed crime of passion, suggests a moral failing.

Northrop Frye suggests a different approach: "[t]he particular thing called tragedy that happens to the tragic hero does not depend on his moral status. If it is casually related to

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, W. D. Ross (Translator), Batoche Books, Kitchener, 1999, pp. 21; <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/aristotle/Ethics.pdf> [03. 20. 2016.]

¹⁵ Curran, Angela, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Poetics*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 126; https://books.google.hu/books?id=pQOpCgAAQBAJ&hl=hu&source=gbs_navlinks_s [19. 06. 2016.]

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, S. H. Butcher (Translator), Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1902, pp. 29; <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Poetics.pdf> [03. 20. 2016.]

¹⁷ Curran, Angela, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Aristotle and the Poetics*, Routledge, 2015, pp. 126; https://books.google.hu/books?id=pQOpCgAAQBAJ&hl=hu&source=gbs_navlinks_s [19. 06. 2016.]

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, S. H. Butcher (Translator), Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1902, pp. 13; <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/sites/default/files/attachments/files/Poetics.pdf> [03. 20. 2016.]

¹⁹ Bárány, István, "Bevezetés a Görög Bölcséletbe.", *Szabadbölcsészeti Bevezetés a Görög Bölcséletbe V. Ellentmondások Arisztotelész Poétikájában.*, N.p., n.d., Web.; http://mmi.elte.hu/szabadbolcseszeti/mmi.elte.hu/szabadbolcseszeti/indexd8ea.html?option=com_tanelem&id_tanelem=827&tip=0 [19 June 2016.]

something he has done, as it generally is, the tragedy is in the inevitability of the consequences of the act, not in its moral significance as an act. [...] Aristotle's hamartia or "flaw", therefore, is not necessarily wrongdoing, much less moral weakness ..."²⁰ Based on Aristotle, he claims, an event triggers certain reactions from a person and by this, without liberating the character from the weight of his actions, he takes the judgment away.

The many debates and findings all contribute to the understanding of this fascinating character. In my opinion, he cannot fully be put into either box of being an Aristotelian tragic hero, or not being one, based solely on *Poetics*, but a more in-depth analysis of Aristotle's works reveals evidence that claims he is indeed an Aristotelian tragic hero. Even so, he is strikingly different from Aristotle's example of Oedipus. This is where Shakespeare's true greatness lies: among one of the first artists doing so, he was capable of creating unique, multi-dimensional, and real life-like characters. Because of the nature of these characters, maybe it is not possible, and not even necessary to label them. Since categorizing can simplify understanding, there are situations we should not aim so.

Accordingly, Othello shares traits with antiheroes as well, besides tragic heroes. There are numerous definitions to this term and based on which viewpoint we choose, many different characters can belong here. Just to provide a few of these definitions, some will be listed here: [1] "someone who does not seem like to have what it takes to become a hero, but he/she ultimately still becomes one, for example: Frodo, and Harry Potter"²¹; [2] "[i]nstead of manifesting largeness, dignity, power, or heroism, the antihero is petty, ignominious, passive, ineffectual or dishonest. [...] The antihero is especially conspicuous in dramatic tragedy, in which the protagonist had usually been of high estate, dignity, and courage"²²; [3] "a protagonist of a drama or narrative who is notably lacking in heroic qualities"²³.

Not all of these descriptions and attributes apply to Othello, but it is especially the last one that is applicable. Previously, it was concluded why he can be viewed as a character with a moral flaw or rather, as a character who commits a moral flaw, by acting gullibly. Othello has so much passion deep down in his character that he oppresses in everyday life. Besides this, there is also frustration due to the fact that he is an outsider. Iago recognizes these traits and

²⁰ Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy on Criticism*, Atheneum, New York, 1966, pp. 38.

²¹ Füzessy, Tamás, lecture, ELTE BTK., Budapest, [11. 05. 2016.]

²² Abrams, M. H., Harpham, Geoffrey (eds.), *A glossary of Literary Terms*, Wadsworth Publishing, 2014, pp. 14; <http://www.jasabiza.ir/file/file-13926700722.pdf> [11. 29. 2015.]

²³ <http://www.britannica.com/art/antihero> [11. 29. 2015.]

uses them against Othello. But it is important to note that it is not only Iago who is responsible for his fall, because Othello lets himself to be tricked into failure. Iago serves as a tempting, devilish figure, but it is Othello who gives in to these “dark temptations”. Personally, I think one of the most important elements that create a hero is that when they are tempted by evil, instead of giving in, they choose the harder path. This is where Othello fails, because it is really hard to believe that such a man who is capable of leading an army, does not realize the weight of murdering someone. (It is possible too, to view him as a fallen hero, who is “someone who was appointed with the role of a hero, but fails to meet with this fate”.)

He makes a hasty decision when he resolves to end Desdemona and Cassio’s life and he does not change his mind, even when his commitment is challenged by Desdemona’s begging for life. This event seems like an act of a wicked hero, or to give a better description, a hero who is torn between good and evil. Othello’s greatness is challenged by the deep frustrations of his personality and it is this point where he fails. Therefore, his mistake comes from an inner failure that he should be aware of, but maybe he suppresses the voice of his consciousness and commits a crime of passion.

Conclusion

In the previous chapters Aristotle’s ideas of tragedy mainly according to *Poetics* were introduced. In order to provide a better insight into his philosophy, in connection with Othello’s analysis *Nicomachean Ethics* was also used to better describe the information regarding the link between character and action. During the analysis of Othello, important approaches to *hamartia* were also introduced. Taking Aristotle’s whole philosophy into consideration, Othello’s understanding as a tragic hero was recognized. Due to the complexity of the character, Othello cannot be understood solely as a tragic hero because he does share similarities with antiheroes as well, due to the kind of *hamartia* he commits, which is a combination of a moral flaw and acting too passionately in pain.

I am truly convinced this is a master play of Shakespeare that allows many different ways of understanding and through this it will further inspire generations yet to come to engage in literal debates. No matter what we choose to consider Othello as (if we choose anything), it must be admitted, that he is one of the genius creations of Shakespeare, who will stand the upcoming test of time in the literary canon.

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