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'ROTA FORTUNAE' AND THE SYMBOLISM OF EVIL IN SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

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THE PURPOSE of the present paper is to investigate the phenomenology of Shakespearean tragedy. It is the premise of the paper that this tragedy is both a universal vision of human existence[1] and a structure or form inherited from the Middle Ages. The literary or imaginative critics of our century have explored the vision-aspect of the tragedy and the evidence-respecting historical critics have been at work to substantiate their hypotheses by proofs. The fact that both use their own languages leads to mutual suspicion or misunderstanding, and this occasionally results in fierce debates.[2] Nevertheless it is my assumption that the often intuitive insights of the imaginative critics can be reconciled with the findings of historical research. Moreover, I should like to demonstrate that they can mutually support or illuminate one another. It is our hope that we can graft imaginative criticism into historical research and vice-versa. Therefore I shall start by discussing how the literary critics define the problem of evil in Shakespearean tragedy and then go on to discuss aspects of the medieval heritage and its impact on Shakespeare's imagery and vocabulary. In conclusion I should like to illustrate how the imagery determines the structure and how we can apply the ideas of Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* in a poetic-structural analysis of the tragedies.

Some twenty years ago Frank Kermode, in an ingenious essay, wrote as follows: 'When tragedy established itself in England it did so in terms of plots and spectacle that had much more to do with medieval apocalypse than with the *mythos* and *opsis* of Aristotle.'[3] Apocalypse, as we know, means revelation: something that has been hidden for long is suddenly revealed, very frequently in forms of visions. Indeed, the radiating force of the apocalyptic vision of evil, as Joseph Wittreich has recently demonstrated, conspicously left its imprint on the imagery of Shakespeare's tragedies, particularly *King Lear*.[4]

The problem of evil in Shakespearean tragedy has frequently been discussed. Even the well-known Hegelian critic A. C. Bradley touches this aspect when discussing 'the substance of Shakespearean tragedy':

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> Evil exhibits itself everywhere as something negative, barren, weakening, destructive, a principle of death. It isolates, disunites and tends to annihilate not only its opposite but itself. That which keeps the evil man prosperous, makes him succeed, even permits him to exist, is the good in him. ... When the evil in him masters the good and has its way, it destroys other people through him, but it also destroys him.[5]

As is well known, the 'character-critic' Bradley was heavily attacked by the influential poetic or imaginative school of critics and interpreters.[6] While discarding the psychological, 'life-like' approach of Bradley, they re-emphasized the importance of the tragic vision of evil. G. Wilson Knight stated as early as 1930 that '*Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most profound and mature vision of evil.'[7] Still in the 1930's, L. C. Knights wittily argued that instead of the ridiculous and irrelevant question 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' we should explore the drama as a statement of evil that has greater affinity with *The Waste Land* than with *The Doll's House*.[8] Last but not least, Caroline Spurgeon in her analytical inventory came to the conclusion that evil in Shakespeare's imagination is reflected as something dirty, black and foul; it appears as a blot, spot, stain, infection, contamination, corruption or bad smell. Moreover, evil frequently disguises itself as good in Shakespearean tragedy:

> Thus in these pictures as a whole we see evil as something corrupt, horrible and repugnant, which is to the world as foulness and disease to the body or rank weeds to the garden; it is a condition, a growth, which if health or fruitfulness are to be attained, must at all costs be expelled.[9]

Some of the extravagant insights of poetic criticism have frequently been balanced by the calling cards of historical scholarship. Scholars exploring the antecedents of Shakespearean tragedy have contributed much to form principles on the structure of the tragedies. Farnham's pioneering book *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1936)[10] was the first to emphasize the medieval tradition, i.e. the Boethius-Boccaccio-Chaucer-Lydgate-*Mirror for Magistrates* line, and his thesis was supported by Margeson in 1967.[11] Farnham attributed a great deal of importance to the 'narrative tragedies' of the *de casibus* tradition, particularly to the influence of the iconography of the wheel of fortune. A protagonist mounts the wheel of fortune mainly by way of *hybris* and is thus naturally exposed to its vicissitudes. This process involves a 'pyramidal structure' of rise and fall which is the image of human ambition and the consequences of this boundless aspiration. The tragic hero reaches an apex or zenith from where his downfall is inevitable. In Shakespeare such a figure becomes 'Time's fool' or 'fortune's fool'. This traditional view of a retributive mechanism was challenged by Professor J.

Leeds Barroll in 1974.[12] He found that it was both 'naive' and 'simplistic'. Instead of the wheel of fortune iconography Barroll stresses the influence of a 'much more important visualization', i.e. *The Table of Cebes*, which more vividly reinforces 'the usual prose statements about Fortune'. He also rejects the critical reappearance of this configuration, namely Freytag's pyramid, by questioning the pyramidal structure in the tragedies that would involve a 'pinnacle' as a relevant turning point that is followed by a 'fall'.

Interesting as Profesor Barroll's analytical approach is, it did not persuade me to reject the presence of a circular or pyramidal structure in the tragedies. While I am not in a position to judge the historical relevance of the wheel of fortune iconography, my thesis is that the circle or the wheel is still a useful and applicable configuration for a poetic-symbolic interpretation of the tragedies. I agree with Professor Barroll insofar as the structure of the tragedies cannot simply be confined to the rise and fall pattern of the career of a human protagonist. In my opinion, however, the poetic images testify to an underlying symbolism of evil, a phenomenon which I would call a 'figurative and supernatural protagonist' whose birth, growth and decline suggests a pyramidal or circular structure. A symbolical reading of the plays seems to converge with Farnham's thesis on the medieval origins of Elizabethan tragedy. In order to argue for the presence of this type of medievalism, I propose to elucidate three points.

1. Historicity, with temporality, is a basic attribute of Elizabethan tragedy. Shakespearean tragedy is an outcome of histories, and the wheel of fortune constitutes the link between histories and tragedies. Theoretically, the tragic structure is a 'downward movement' or a 'fall'. This notion creates a generic link between the medieval narrative and the Elizabethan dramatic tragedies.

2. Shakespeare's imagery frequently echoes the medieval notions of 'circle', 'wheel' or 'fall'.

3. Some of the tragedies can also be structured by the pattern of the circle or the wheel. This is not simply shaped by the ascent and descent of the human protagonist but by the movement of the 'figurative protagonist'. There *is* a crucial turning in the movement and the progress of the play. This is the point when the gradually unfolding aggression of evil reaches its culmination and begins to destroy itself. This is the point when the figurative protagonist has attained to its height and is 'ready to decline' (*Julius Caesar* 4:3:216). This might metaphorically be called 'the orgy of Evil' when 'confusion now hath made his masterpiece' (*Macbeth* 2:3:71). However, in accordance with the Elizabethan proverb 'When things are at worst they will mend'[13] we can quote from *Macbeth*: 'Things at the worst will cease, or else climb upward / To what they were before' (4:2:23–24). It is

my intention to reflect upon this *crucial point* in *Richard III, King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

I. HISTORY AND TRAGEDY

In the Elizabethan age tragedy still preserved a 'reality principle', as its plot was relying on history, while the plot of the comedy was generally fictitious. The idea goes back to the distinction by the fourth century writer Evanthius which was often included in the Renaissance editions of Terence.[14] A similar definition was given by Scaliger's *Poeticae* in 1561.[15] It is also known that there was much uncertainty in the Folio-edition with regard to what exactly constituted tragedy or history.[16] Some of Shakespeare's histories were registered as tragedies and some of the tragedies were entitled histories. I would stress that there is an organic interrelationship between Shakespeare's histories and tragedies. The images of the tragic are already present in the histories, and the historico-political setting is also relevant in the tragedies. In the tragedies, however, the time-scale of events has suddenly shrunk, and what was acted out in the epic flow of history is now condensed upon a single character or situation. History merges gradually into tragedy. Discussing Shakespeare's historical plays, Raymond Chapman and Walter Schirmer[17] have shown that the wheel of fortune was a moralizing cliché in the dramas, and the plays were in fact dramatic variations on the theme of the fall of kings.

While the wheel of fortune was a theme in the histories, it became absorbed into the structure of the tragedies. Some recent theories seem to support this view. Susan Langer calls tragedy a 'cadential form'[18] and Northrop Frye says: 'The downward movement is the tragic movement, the wheel of fortune falling from innocence towards hamartia and from hamartia to catastrophe.'[19] Moreover, in his book on Shakespearean tragedy, Frye suggests that the two organizing conceptions of Elizabethan tragedy are the order of nature which corresponds to Nietzsche's 'Apollonian vision' and the wheel of fortune 'rotated by the energy and ambition of man'—the latter being the complementing 'Dionysian' or heroic vision.[20] Frye also stresses the view that tragedy is deeply rooted in history. History, however, is an aspect of time as time is the 'stuff' of history. Time is indeed an indispensable category of tragedy since temporality is the very basis of human existence: 'time is itself tragic,'[21] and the consequence of Adam's fall was described by Sir Walter Raleigh as being driven out in *exilium temporalis*, into the banishment of temporal life.[22]. Frye says that 'the basis of the tragic vision is being in time.'[23] David Kastan draws our attention to the 'fall' of Antony which is the moment when 'time is at his period' (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4:12:106). 'Tragedy', he writes, 'finds shape in the temporality of the individual life.' I would conclude that the temporality of human existence is perhaps the basic *a priori* of the image of the tragic.

These theoretical remarks also tend to support the view that Shakespearean tragedy, being a condensed outcome of his vision of history, is conspicuously indebted to 'medieval tragedy'. The medieval narrative tradition, as we know, provided historical examples of the ambition and downfall of the individual. Chaucer's translation of Boethius marks the first use of the word 'tragedy' in English. His famous gloss on the margin of his translation defines it thus: 'Tragedye is seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme that endeth in wrecchidnesse' (*Boece*, II, Pt 2). Chaucer's other allusions to tragedy are well known.[24] It is the *Monk's Tale* that provides some seventeen examples 'falls' as 'tragedies', and the most pregnant definition of the idea of medieval tragedy is to be found in the Monk's *Prologue*:

> *Tragedy* means a certain kind of story,
> As old books tell, of those who *fell in glory*,
> People that stood in great prosperity
> And were *cast down* out of their high degree
> Into calamity, and so they died. (Nevill Coghill's translation, my italics)

2. IMAGERY ('CIRCLE', 'WHEEL', 'FALL') IN SHAKESPEARE

Did Shakespeare ever have Chaucer's definition of tragedy in mind? If we want to investigate Shakespeare's potential debt to 'Chaucerean tragedy' and to the *de casibus* tradition we should turn to studying his imagery. It is quite obvious that the historical plays record the rise and fall of kings, their ambition for power and glory. The crown as the symbol of glory is the central object of aspiration in all these plays. In *King John* it is called 'the circle of glory' (5:1:2).

Shakespeare's most expressive image concerning the essence of power and glory is put into the mouth of Joan of Arc in the first part of *Henry VI*. This image describes most graphically the transitory and illusory nature of human glory, its unfolding, triumph and annihilation:

> *Glory* is like a *circle* in the water,
> Which never ceases to enlarge itself,
> Till by broad *spreading* it disperse to *nought*.
> With Henry's death the English *circle* ends,
> Dispersed are the glories it included. (1:2:133–7)

In *King Lear* the 'circle' and the 'wheel' images are identified in Edmund's line when he acknowledges the end of his early success: 'The *wheel* is come full *circle*, I am here' (*King Lear* 5:3:174). John Doebler mentions that this image is a notable *de casibus* icon[25]. Rolf Soellner, in a recent article on 'King Lear and the Magic of the Wheel', provides an explanation of the complex iconography of this image. He alludes to the 'wheel of life' iconography illustrating the different ages of life ('Cycle of Life') on the one hand and the wheel of justice or nemesis on the other hand. This wheel, just as the ancient 'Dike' denotes retribution, illustrates the punishment of the wicked.[26] Concrete images of the wheel occur several times in *Lear*[27] and Soellner notes six 'serious' allusions to the 'major tragic icon' of the wheel of fortune.[28]

We are, however, mistaken if we disregard 'dramatic propriety' and only hunt for the occurrence of certain words. Shakespeare's allusions to the cyclic rotation of time are in most cases metaphorical and implicit rather than literal or explicit. In *Julius Caesar*, for example, Cassius says:

> This day I breathed first, *time is come round*,
> And where I did *begin*, there shall I *end*;
> My life is run on his *compass*. (5:3:23–25)

Brutus' stoic observations on the 'tides of time' also contain a hint at fortune, expressing the pyramidal career of the hero:

> We, at the *height*, are ready to *decline*.
> There is a *tide* in the affairs of men,
> Which, taken at the flood, leads on to *fortune*. (4:3:216–18)

The idea of retribution is expressed by the image of the 'whirligig of time' meaning the change of fortune that comes with time. The phrase is said to have been first used by Shakespeare.

> And thus the *whirligig of time* brings in his revenges. (*Twelfth Night*, 5:1:385)

Similarly, Margaret in *Richard III* uses the image of justice 'whirl'd about' when she gloats over the 'fall' of Queen Elizabeth. The *New Penguin* edition, however, prefers the image of the wheel:

> Thus hath the course of justice *wheel'd about*
> And left thee but a very *prey to time*. (4:4:105)

Both 'whirl'd' and 'wheel'd' have the same implication about the circular motion of a retributive justice.

The histories especially abound in powerful images on the quintessence of 'fall'. This fall is an inevitable consequence of ambition and *hybris*. '*Pride* must have a *fall*', we read in *Richard II* (5:5:88). This is the only use of the

Elizabethan proverb[29] that ultimately derives from the *Old Testament*: 'Pride goes before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall' (Proverbs 16:18). The human fall is analogous to the fall of the angels, and to that of Lucifer in particular: 'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning' (Isaiah 14:12) It is Wolsey in *Henry VIII* who most rhetorically laments his fall:

> I have touched the *highest point* of all my *greatness*;
> But from that full meridian of *glory*,
> ... I shall *fall*
> Like a bright exhalation in the evening. (3:2:223–6)

Wolsey depicts his growth and greatness in terms of natural-organic images when he recites his 'farewell-speech' to greatness (3:2:350–71). Describing the state of man, he uses the images of 'leaves of hopes', 'blossoms' and 'frost'.

> His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,
> And there he *falls*, as I do. (3:2:358–9)

The imagery here is strikingly similar to the organic pictures of the circular motion of life in Sonnet XV.[30] In fact, Wolsey compares his downfall to that of Lucifer:

> And when he falls, he *falls like Lucifer*
> Never to hope again. (3:2:370–1)

Wolsey recognizes that his downfall is due to his 'ambition', which corresponds to the original rebellion of the angels.

> Mark but my *fall*, and that that ruined me.
> Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away *ambition*.
> By that sin *fell the angels*: how can men then,
> The image of his maker, hope to win by't? (3:2:439–42)

The ambition-fall scheme is also depicted in *Macbeth*:

> *Vaulting ambition*, which o'erleaps itself
> And *falls* on the other. (1:7:25–26)

In *Richard II* the old king's power is compared by Salisbury to a falling star.

> I see thy *glory* like a shooting star
> *Fall* to the base earth from the firmament! (2:4:19–20)

The peril of overambition and climbing high is perhaps best expressed by the prophecy of Margaret in *Richard III.*

> They that *stand high* have many blasts to shake them
> And if they fall, they *dash themselves to pieces.* (1:3:259–60)

In conclusion, to quote from *Antony and Cleopatra*: 'The star is *fallen.* / And *time* is at his *period*' (4:14:105–6). The fall is the time or the period of the tragic, whether it is caused by ambition or *hubris*, whether it is deserved or undeserved. It is related to the fall of angels and the fall of Adam in the line of the definition of Chaucer. Milton, indeed, considered the story of Adam (the fall in Eden) as the *archetypal human tragedy.*

3. STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS: THE TURNING POINT

Neither the word 'tragedy' nor 'fall' occurs as a relevant image: in the context of the great tragedies. Shakespeare seems to have translated these commonplaces into dramatic form and thus the images became intrinsic constituents of the structure of the poetic drama.[34] It would, of course, be far beyond the scope of this paper to provide convincing interpretations of the tragedies that would argue for the pyramidal structure brought about by the rise and fall of Evil, the figurative protagonist. Therefore I only wish to reflect on the turning point in three plays.

Turning to *Richard III*, I would like to grasp the crucial point, the 'turning of the wheel'[32] in the movement of the drama's process. Gloucester has failed in the moment of his triumph. Having reached the top, his career has immediately taken a descending line. He is crowned in Act 4, Scene 2, but that is the moment when his chief accomplice, Buckingham, proves reluctant to give support to kill the young Princes. Moreover, Stanley informs Richard that Dorset has defected to Richmond and in addition his wife is going to die. As in Richard's case, the literal and figurative protagonists happen to coincide, the apex of his own career marks the pinnacle of Evil in the tragedy.

In *King Lear* there is a similar circle, yet it is ascending for the figurative and descending for the literal protagonist. Recent studies by Frederick Kiefer[33], Rolf Soellner[34] and James Dauphiné[35] have extensively argued for the abundant allusions in this tragedy to fortune and to the wheel in particular. The most exhaustive analysis was provided by Dauphiné, who suggested that Shakespeare found the wheel of fortune adaptable enough to hold the unity of the action. Thus the wheel, as an image of eternity, encircles all the characters who constantly struggle with it and want to overleap it, but never succeed. In this sense the wheel of fortune reflects the tragic organization of the story.[36]

I would suggest that the turning point or the moment of triumph and fall of the figurative protagonist can be grasped in Act 3, Scene 6—the plucking out of Gloucester's eyes. This scene is the point of culmination in the acceleration of Evil. However, this moment of orgy is that of defeat as well. This is marked by some sudden and unexpected events: Cornwall mortally wounded, Oswald killed, the letter captured by Edgar, the so-far hesitant Albany taking side with the Lear group, the sisters' mutual jealousy gradually unravelled. Evil turns against itself, the snake bites into its own tail.

Finally, the drama most pregnantly representing the beginning and the end of evil is *Macbeth*. At the very beginning of the play it is the magic circle of the three weird sisters that make the 'charm' 'wound up', i.e. set in readiness for action. (1:3:37) It is *Macbeth* that most intensively suggests a symbolism of evil as contagion, infection and stain. The encounter with the witches is the time of the intersection of the evil and the human world. The moment of infection is the conception of evil which takes place when they eat 'on the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner' (1:3:84–85). From here onwards the circle of evil is set in motion. Macbeth is fully aware that it is going to be a 'swelling act' (1:3:128). The overall symbolism of the 'thickening air' and 'growing darkness' testifies to this frightening cycle. The gradual growth and intensification of evil reaches its final climax before the murdering of Banquo. Evil's climate here is even more tense than before the murdering of Duncan. Macbeth's monologue 'Come, seeling Night' (3:2:46) echoes Lady Macbeth's invocation before the first murder: 'Come you Spirits' (1:5:40) and 'Come thick Night' (1:5:50). Macbeth's soliloquy, however, is a much more condensed, compact and concentrated poetry. The intensity of this symbolism is in proportion to the total emanation of evil.

The triumph of evil again entails its own defeat. The turning point is the murdering of Banquo, since Fleance manages to escape. Macduff flees to England. The powers of regeneration have been conceived. Macbeth knew from the very beginning that Evil would destroy itself—'Bloody instructions ... return / To plague th' inventor' (1:7:9–10). The villain as hero is by now so much permeated by evil that he has completely lost his freedom and has become enslaved by the figural protagonist.

Macbeth exemplifies the gradual internalization of evil, a process that is profoundly described by Paul Ricoeur in his *The Symbolism of Evil*.[37] According to Ricoeur, the most archaic symbol in the experience of evil is that of 'defilement' (stain, filthiness). *Macbeth* provides excellent examples: 'foul is fair'; '*filthy* air'; 'O, damned *spot*!' The symbolism of defilement is the representation of something that infects, contaminates by contact ('insane root'). The next link in the chain of symbol is 'sin' which is the experience of a power that lays hold of a man ('why do I yield to that suggestion', 1:3:131). Contrary to defilement that infects from without, sin is internal. The third link, 'guilt', is the subjective moment, as it is already a completed internalization of sin, the result of which is 'conscience'[38]. Guilty conscience may eventually end up in the 'sin of despair' which is not a transgression any more but, in Ricoeur's words, a 'desperate will to shut oneself up in the circle of interdiction and desire' [39], like Lady Macbeth. Ricoeur concludes that the symbolism of evil can be recapitulated in the concept of the *servile will*. This is the stage of captivity, enslavement and being bound in the circle. This is the state of both Macbeth and Richard III.

> I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far, that should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er. (3:4:135–7)

And:

> I am in
> So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin. (*Richard III*. 4:2:63–4)

At this final turn of the wheel the villain's fight is hopeless, perhaps desperate, but not without heroism:

> They have tied me to a stake: I cannot fly,
> But, bear-like I must fight the course. (5:7:1–2)

This heroism does not leave Macbeth even after Macduff's fatal blow: 'Despair thy charm' (5:8:13). The heroism of evil 'will not yield' (1:8:27) and 'will try the last' (1:8:32).

I have tried to follow the birth, growth and the zenith of the figurative protagonist. Having reached its height, evil is already in decline. The decline, however, does not yet mean the complete blotting out of evil from the 'rotten' land. The wheel can come 'full circle' and time can be 'free' only if there is another circle, though of a different kind, which has already been set into motion.

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[30] Cf. Fabiny, 'Theatrum Mundi', p. 279.

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