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Strumpet Fortune

A Study of Shakespearean Tragedy

Kazuhiko Murai

Today Shakespeare's four *great* tragedies seem not to be regarded as tragedies. It is a popular belief that they are similar not so much to Greek tragedies as to Samuel Becket's plays and they are tragedies *manqués* at most. Yet, we cannot deny the fact that many people have accepted them as tragedies. In this essay, we will re-discover the classical tragic patterns in them examining the role of fortune in tragedy.

Horatio, at the very first scene of *Hamlet*, indicates that Fates are bound up with earthly events. He says that the super-natural events on earth are the 'harbingers preceding still the fates' (I, i, 118) and the 'prologue to the omen coming on' (119). This close relation between nature and fates enables men to have the presentiment of their future, but what they can have is only a presentiment and they cannot know the final consequences. So the dilemma causes men to ask questions. Horatio frankly asks the ghost:

If thou art privy to thy country's fate
Which happily foreknowing may avoid,
O, speak! (I, i, 133–135)

His words represent well the typical attitude of man who has the presentiment of his fortune. He wishes to know the future consequences and tries to 'avoid' them if he can. But man cannot know the complete consequences after all. Hamlet explains this fact reciting 'the pious chanson':

'As by Lot, God wot,'
and then you know,
'It came to pass, as most like it was...' (II, ii, 420–422)

This attribute of fortune that enables man to foresee his fortune and never tells him the whole consequences gives man the room for his voluntary

will. In other words, man can have the hope to be an agent of his fortune. The typical attitude of man who has such a hope is to try to be supported by his fortune. This attitude appears most conspicuously when man is to challenge the unknown. When Hamlet follows the ghost despite Horatio's advice, he says:

My fate cries out
And makes each petty artere in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve. (I, iv, 82–84)

Of course, it is only an illusion that man can be an agent of his fortune or be supported by it. He must notice this fact sooner or later. Hamlet, suspecting the truth of the ghost, says, "The devil hath power t'assume a pleasing shape" (II, ii, 603–604). We can parallell their relation with that of Macbeth and the witches. The language of the ghost is not clear, so Hamlet must interpret his words by himself as Macbeth does:

Ghost. The serpent that sting thy father's life
 Now wears his crown.
Hamlet. O my prophetic soul! My uncle? (I,v,39–41)

Thus, Hamlet, foretold his ambiguous fortune, is forced to make his plot of revenge. That is, he is rolled up in the wheel of fortune. On the other hand, the very ambiguity of fate causes his questioning. A tragic hero must choose whether to meet his fate with resignation or to challenge it:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing, end them. (III, i, 57–60)

This sort of question is felt only by Hamlet. The words of the Player King make a clear contrast with his question. The Player King can see fates objectively by his conventional role:

Our wills and fates do so contrary run,
That out devices still are overthrow'n,
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own. (III, ii, 210–212)

On the other hand, Hamlet cannot understand why he lives to say 'this thing's to do' while he has 'cause, and will, and strength, and means to do 't' (IV, iv, 44–46). This absurd situation makes him a tragic hero. And the tragedy of Hamlet begins when he resolves to 'make mouths at the invisible event, exposing what is mortal and unsure to all that fortune' (IV, iv, 50–52). Immediately after it, the madness of Ophelia that breaks down his plot emerges on the stage.

With Ophelia's madness as a turning point, Hamlet abandons his role as a revenger and meets his fate with resignation. This situation inherent in tragic heroes is common in Shakespearean tragedy as well as in Greek tragedy. A tragic hero wishes to be supported by fortune and tries to take advantage of it, if he can, but he is betrayed by catastrophe. Fortune is always an 'equivocator' for men. We can find brief comments on the double sense of fortune in *Julius Caesar*. Cassius and Caesar depict each respect of fortune:

Cassius. Men at some time are masters of their fates. (I,ii,137)

Caesar. What can be avoided

Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods? (II,ii,26–27)

A tragic hero's view changes from Cassius' view to Caesar's. In Shakespearean tragedy, the chance of this change is brought on by a sort of accident. The madness of Ophelia, which is the sign to indicate the change of Hamlet's attitude to his fortune, results from the accidental murder of Polonius. After his death, the play is ruled by chance or fortuity, to use Horatio's words, 'these things' came about:

Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th'inventors' heads. (V, ii, 380–384)

Here, we must admit that chance is an attribute of fortune. A tragic hero is finally submitted to fortune by that attribute and is led to a tragic end. The most clear symbol of this fortuity in Shakespearean tragedy is Desdemona's handkerchief. Yet, A.C. Bardley says:

Any *large* admission of chance into the tragic sequence would certainly weaken, and might destroy, the sense of the causal connection of character, deed, and catastrophe.¹

Bradley did not know the intricate relationship between chance and fortune. The 'blindfold' fortune was often painted in the emblems of the Middle Age as well as Cupid. E. Panofsky, analyzing 'Blind Cupid', introduces the common characteristic of Love, Fortune, and Death:

They were blind, ... as personifications of an active force behaving like an eyeless person: they would hit or miss at random, utterly regardless of age, social position and individual merit.²

We can find some vestiges of this tradition in Shakespeare's works.³ We may recollect the Player King's long lecture on 'love' and 'fortune' in Act III of *Hamlet*. Fortune is blind, so her behaviour seems accidental. Bradley's misunderstanding is that he did not notice the affinity between chance and fortune. Chance is an attribute of fortune. Around Desdemona's handkerchief, everyone is subject to chance. Even Iago who tries to be an agent of fortune miscarries. A tragic hero must fight with the inevitable fortune and his ultimate defeat is brought by some kind of chance. Hamlet does not notice the danger. He goes to the tragic end by himself.

So does Othello. While believing Desdemona's unfaithfulness, he must deal with his tragic fortune. The qualification for the tragic hero is that Othello is an exceedingly jealous and simple-minded man. Though his being is finite because he must die in the end, his experience is infinite compared with ordinary man, as Northrop Frye says, 'this something infinite' makes him a hero if 'he is big enough to anger or frighten the gods'.⁴ So the excess of jealousy makes him a hero. His jealousy has him curse gods. Having heard from Iago that Cassio wiped his beard with the handkerchief, Othello blasphemes for the first time:

Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell,
Yield up, O love, thy crown, and hearted throne,
To tyrannous hate, swell, bosom, with thy fraught,
For 'tis of aspicks' tongues! (III, iii, 454–457)

These words qualify him as a tragic hero. He must challenge his fortune. If he were an ordinary man, he would never suffer the tragedy, because Iago ironically advised him:

O, beware jealousy; ... That cuckold lives in bliss,
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger. (III, iii, 169–172)

But he must step in the tragic world because of the fortuity of fortune, and is finally defeated as well as other tragic heroes. He declares his defeat:

Who can control his fate? (V, ii, 267)

Thus, we can find in *Othello* too the basic tragic pattern that a tragic hero, conscious of the necessity of his own fortune, fights with it and is ultimately defeated.

Lear's mentality draws from the same locus as the two heroes whom we have discussed. Noticing his daughters' evil minds, Lear appeals to the gods:

If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely. (II, iv, 272–274)

He tries to be supported by his fortune and revenge himself in the manner of Hamlet and Othello. But his revenge 'shall be the terrors of the earth' (280) and his supporter is only 'his little world of man' (III, i, 10). His existence on the Heath no longer keeps the neo-platonic balance. His situation is at the opposite pole of Hamlet's famous words which E.M.W. Tillyard cited as 'one of the great English versions of Renaissance humanism'⁵ Lear is far from being 'noble in reason' (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 308). He is on the constant stream to madness. Man is not 'the paragon of animals' (311) at all in the Lear-world. In facing Cordelia's death, Lear cries; 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, and thou no breath at all?' (V, iii, 305–306). In the world of *King Lear*, Renaissance humanism is completely broken down. The balance of man and nature which was one of the neo-platonists' ideas is lost and the 'little world of man' must contend with the storm of nature. So Lear on the Heath no longer asks for gods' charity. Rather, he curses them like Othello. Once, Edmund Spenser

said man was made from the 'perfect mould' of 'this worlds great workmaker'.⁶ Now Lear says:

Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
That makes ingrateful man! (III, ii, 8-9)

In such world, he tries to revenge himself on the 'terrors of the earth'. This is the same attitude as Othello, and is the qualification of a tragic hero. And then, he rolls in the wheel of fortune. Fool suggests the way out of his tragedy as Iago did with Othello:

Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill,
Lest it break they neck with following. (II, iv, 69-71)

But Lear is the tragic hero. In spite of Fool's suggestion, he is forced to be bound upon a 'wheel of fire' (IV, vii, 47). He becomes the 'natural fool of Fortune'. In the stream of tragedy, nature flows to ruin, the great world to 'naught'. In that process, Lear strange to say, refers to the 'blind Cupid':

No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love. (IV, vi, 136)

Of course, he means his ungrateful daughters, but his words allude to more symbolic meaning, that is, they seem to suggest a relationship to blind Cupid — the blind Fortune, because immediately after these words, he indicates the ambiguity from which man must suffer when he is rolled in the wheel of fortune:

A man may see how this world goes with no eyes...
Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? (IV, vi, 148-152)

This ambiguity is nothing but man's consequence brought on by accidental fortune. Lear finally recognizes that he is the 'natural fool of Fortune'. And when he reaches that recognition he is defeated by fortune. The wheel has come full circle.

In *Macbeth*, the tragic fortune takes the very conventional and clear form of the three witches. They first create the ambiguity in the dramatic world. The ambiguity appears in the tragic world as we have just seen in *King Lear*, as in fortuity. The witches are the 'equivocators'. There is always 'double sense' in their words. This ambiguity or the fortuity of fortune ironically gives man the freedom of his choice. Yet, he is in

constant fear just because his freedom is guaranteed by the fortuity of fortune. Indeed, Macbeth's words are 'amazingly similar to the language of the existentialists' as Jan Kott says⁷. He must always choose himself, but after one choice, a new fear steals into him, and it urges him to make another choice. This attitude is in harmony with Hamlet's even though one is a usurper and another is a revenger. Macbeth's words represent well his wavering between fear and resolution. We can easily find in them the discrepancy between words and deeds which is the characteristic of Hamlet's suffering. Macbeth who has heard the prophecy of the witches says:

If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me,
Without my stir. (I,iii, 143-144)

And I,vii, begins with his soliloquy which frankly speaks to his wavering mind. In that soliloquy, he confesses that he has 'no spur to prick the sides of his intent' (I,vii,25-26). Thus, he knows the danger in defying his fortune at that time. Donalbain as a foil knows the danger too and dares not run the risk:

What should be spoken
Here, where our fate, hid in an auger-hole,
May rush, and seize us? (II,iii, 119-121)

On the contrary, Macbeth must defy his fortune. Lady Macbeth gives him the spur. She is the assistant director of the swelling act of this imperial theme. She takes the typical attitude of a person who tries to be supported by fortune. Having read the letter from Macbeth, she first worries about Macbeth in saying, 'nature too full o'th'milk of human kindness', while 'fate and metaphysical aid doth seem to have thee crown'd withal' (I,v,29-30). For her, the raven croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan (I,v,39), and the owl is 'the fatal bellman, which gives the stern'st good-night' (II,ii,4-5). Inspired by his wife, Macbeth tries to bridge the gap between deeds and words—the gap between 'th' effect and it' (I,v,46). Now, he steps in the tragedy and challenges fortune:

... come, fate, into the list,
And champion me to th'utterance! (III,i,70-71)

But his fear is never eased. He goes to see the witches again 'to take a bond of fate'(IV,i,84). Yet, their prophecy remains ambiguous. The first three apparitions which Macbeth sees give him peace of mind. If he had stopped there, he would have been a victim who is fooled by fortune, or from a moralists' view, a villain who is punished by Justice. But he is the tragic hero. His tragedy becomes decisive when he knows the further consequence. The witches advise him:

Seek to know no more. (IV,i,103)

Yet, he must face the necessity of his fortune. He has known the line of Banquo's issue will 'stretch out to th'crack of doom'(IV,i,117). Then, he must fight with his fortune. Henceforth, he is no longer a contemplative man. The perception between deeds and words disappears:

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook,
Unless the deed go with it. (IV,i,145-146)

Ironically at this moment, he is entrapped by fortune. He rushes toward the tragic end and finds the substance of fortune at last, yet, it is too late. On recognizing it, he must die:

And be these juggling friends no more believ'd,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope. (V,viii,19-22)

We are still discussing whether *Macbeth* is a tragedy or a morality play.⁸ To regard *Macbeth* as a morality play is to see the play through the eyes of Banquo or Malcolm. We cannot explain our undeniable sympathy for Macbeth from this view. More significantly, the classical pattern of tragedy, where the hero faced by fortune's necessity and then ultimate defeat, is well preserved. Even if he were a villain, the energy of his villainy is big enough to assume he is a tragic hero, as Northrop Frye says:

A tragic hero is a tragic hero whether he is a good or a bad man; a tragic action is a tragic action whether it seems to us admirable or villainous, inevitable or arbitrary.⁹

What is important is that he suffers above human experience. *Macbeth* is nothing but a tragedy, for Macbeth's last recognition at his death can be reached only by those who have had a tragic experience:

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing. (V,v,24–28)

It is needless to say that this is the same recognition as Lear's, 'When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools' (IV,vi,180–181).

We have examined the four great tragedies. The tragic heroes are given the freedom or hope to be the agents of their own fortune because of the ambiguity of fortune. Yet, their freedom or hope is sustained by the fortuity of fortune as we have found its typical instance in Desdemona's handkerchief. The instances of traditional imagery of fortuity—'Blind Fortune' are few, but it does not weaken the role of fortuity in Shakespearean tragedy. Instead of that imagery, Shakespeare often compares fortune to an inconstant woman. Sometimes she is a 'good hussif' as Celia says in *As You Like It* (I,ii,30). But in tragedy, she is mainly a 'false huswife' as Cleopatra says (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, xv,44).

M.R. Ridley notes that the word 'huswife' has a bad sense: jilt, wanton, etc.¹⁰ The Queen in *Cymbeline* calls fortune 'giglot' (III,i,31), or Juliet says, 'O fortune, fortune! All men call thee fickle' (III,v,60). The most appropriate word for fickleness or inconstancy of woman is 'whore' or 'strumpet'. A player in *Hamlet*, telling the tale of 'Priam's slaughter', says:

Out, out, strumpet Fortune! (II,ii,497)

And he continues to say one 'who this had seen, with tongue in venom steeped; / 'Gainst Fourtune's state would treason have pronounced' (514–515). His words summarize the relation between man and fortune in the tragic world. In that world, man is betrayed by the strumpet-Fortune and pronounces treason against her, and finally is defeated.

Shakespeare uses this imagery in his plays repeatedly. Fool of *King*

Lear, says before the heath-scene:

Fortune, that arrant whore,
Ne'er turns the key to the poor. (II,iv,50–51)

Obviously, 'the poor' is *Lear* who is robbed of all his social clothes. Next, the bleeding captain in *Macbeth*, reporting the situation of a battle, says:

And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling
Show'd like a rebel's whore. (I,ii,14–15)

But *Macbeth* must fight 'disdaining fortune' (I,ii,17).

It is notable that these images are used by 'foils' or other characters relatively unrelated to the tragedies. The heroes refer to fortune, as we have quoted enough, when they challenge it and when they are defeated. That is, the fortuity of fortune is understood only by spectators of tragedy. A tragic hero, ignorant of the double sense of fortune, falls in love with fortune, and is finally betrayed by her. This ignorance makes a tragic hero.

Othello is the play in which fortuity of fortune is most remarkably expressed. Before the murder of Desdemona, the words 'strumpet' and 'whore' are repeatedly used. First, Iago calls Bianca 'strumpet' (IV,i,96). Then Othello calls Emilia 'a subtle whore' (IV,ii,21). Thus the images of 'strumpet' and 'whore' are scrupulously prepared, and lead to the final question:

Othello. Was this fair paper, this most goodly book
Made to write 'whore' upon? ... Are you not a strumpet?
(IV,ii,73–84)

This question involves something more than mere doubt of Desdemona's infidelity. What matters to Othello is whether she is a 'whore' or not. But why 'whore'? The answer is simple when we are reminded of the special sense of 'whore' in Shakespearean tragedy. There, 'whore' connects with a hero's fortune. To be a whore is to be the direct cause of Othello's tragedy, that is, to be a fate who controls the tragic world. So Desdemona refuses to be called a whore, because she is a 'Christian'. The being of Desdemona has a Renaissance idea in some sense, as expressed in the words

'goodly book'. So Othello's mistake is that he tries to identify her with his own fortune, while even to speak the word 'whore' is abhorrent to her (IV,ii,163–164). Othello is betrayed by fortune the whore, not by Desdemona. The whore has Desdemona drop her handkerchief. Here the fortuity of fortune coincides with the necessity:

– Handkerchief? – O devil! (IV,i,43)

In the tragic world, some men try to be supported by their fortune, and some men try to be agents of fortune. These attitudes are possible by the fortuity of fortune. But, one who becomes a tragic hero does not notice that chance is an attribute of fortune. This ignorance gives him the absolute freedom to be a director of the stage, which was the world itself in the Elizabethan age. He is faced with the necessity of his fortune because of this ignorance, and fights with it because of a false sense of freedom, then he is finally defeated. Now, we have a metaphorical story of Shakespearean tragedy. That is, a tragic hero falls in love with Fortune, but he is betrayed by her at last because she is a whore. Noticing her betrayal, a tragic hero challenges her. This story certainly corresponds with the classical pattern of Greek tragedy.

Notes

All the quotations of Shakespeare's works are from *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare* (Methuen, 1959–) except those from *Hamlet* (*The New Shakespeare*, Cambridge, 1921–).

1. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London and Basingstoke, 1974), p. 9.
2. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1972), p. 112.
3. According to Panofsky, 'blind Fortune' occurs in *Merchant of Venice*, II, 1 and *Coriolanus*, IV, 6. *ibid.*, fn.
4. Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1967), p. 5.
5. E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (a Pelican Book, 1972), p. 11.
6. Edmund Spenser, *An Hymne in Honour of Beavtie*, stanza 5.
7. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London, 1967), p. 75.
8. Cf. introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth*, p. 1xv.
9. Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
10. *The Arden Shakespeare: Antony and Cleopatra*, p. 185. fn.