

The paradox of tragedy is when the worst comes inevitably even to those who proceed with the best meaning. *Titus Adronicus*, *King Lear*, and *Timon of Athens* are a collection of some Shakespearean tragedies that have survived through the ages because of their content. The society that perceived and attended the theatre at the time each play was written had some influence on how the plays were written or performed in the future. Critics have reviewed and studied all of these plays and many different outcomes have occurred as a result. It has been said that Shakespeare must have had nothing short of some shattering personal experience to explain the sudden change in the mode of his expression when he began writing his tragedies.

The most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glove-maker, Richard Shakespeare, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his education went no further than that. In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part owner of the Globe Theater. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, literary intellectuals such as Ben Jonson hailed his works as timeless.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was very well established. The dearth of biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history concealed in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact and from Shakespeare's reasonable education that Shakespeare's plays were actually written by someone else, Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates. But support for this claim is overwhelmingly uncertain, and many scholars do not take the theory seriously.

Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* around 1605, between *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and it is usually ranked with *Hamlet* as one of Shakespeare's greatest plays. The setting of *King Lear* is as far removed from Shakespeare's time as the setting of any of his other plays, dramatizing events from the eighth century. But the parallel stories of Lear's and Gloucester's sufferings at the hands of their own children reflect anxieties that would hit close to home for Shakespeare's audience. One possible event that may have influenced this play is a lawsuit that occurred not long before *King Lear* was written, in which the eldest of three sisters tried to have her elderly father, Sir Brian Annesley, declared insane so that she could take control of his property. Annesley's youngest daughter, Cordell, successfully defended her father against her sister. *King Lear* demonstrates how vulnerable parents and noblemen are to the theft of immoral children and thus how fragile the fabric of Elizabethan society actually was (Leggatt, 72).

When performed, *King Lear* needs the stage for its full effect. Its most characteristic language is concrete and physical. The tortured body is a recurring image. What was only talked about was then seen on stage. Even a reader can feel the physical horror of the scene in the language: "bind fast his cocky arms"; "Out, vile jelly!" in language and action this is an intensely physical play (III.vii.27, 81). Geographically speaking, Shakespeare imaginatively fits the court and the house, the field, and the plain, in the order but on separate occasions, on stage. This gives the audience a strong sense of the place from which Lear has come and to which he is going. Throughout the play, characters coming from or going toward the town of Dover would pass through an upstage opening to stage right. Critics believe that Shakespeare's separation of places into three broad areas deepens the audience's understanding, for example, Lear's madness, which overwhelms him (Hills, 11).

Lear, the aging king of Britain, decides to step down from the throne and divide his kingdom evenly among his three daughters. First, however, he puts his daughters through a test, asking each to tell him how much she loves him. Lear's older daughters give their father flattering answers. But Cordelia, Lear's youngest and favorite daughter, remains silent, saying that she has no words to describe how much she loves her father. Lear flies into a rage and disowns Cordelia. Unable to believe that his beloved daughters are betraying him, Lear slowly goes insane.

Meanwhile, an elderly nobleman named Gloucester also experiences family problems. His illegitimate son, Edmund, tricks him into believing that his legitimate son, Edgar, is trying to kill him.

Lear's basic flaw at the beginning of the play is that he values appearances above reality. He wants to be

treated as a king and to enjoy the title, but he doesn't want to fulfill a king's obligations of governing for the good of his subjects. Similarly, his test of his daughters demonstrates that he values a flattering public display of love over real love. He doesn't ask them, "which of you doth love us most," but rather, "which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (I.i.49). It seems that Lear is simply blind to the truth, but Cordelia is already his favorite daughter at the beginning of the play, so presumably he knows that she loves him the most (Leggatt, 19).

King Lear is a brutal play, filled with human cruelty and awful, seemingly meaningless disasters. The play's sequence of terrible events raises an obvious question for the characters, whether there is any possibility of justice in the world. Edgar insists that "the gods are just," believing that individuals get what they deserve (V.iii.169). But, in the end, we are left with only a terrifying uncertainty-although the wicked die, the good die along with them, bringing up once again the paradox of a tragedy. There is goodness in the world of the play, but there is also madness and death, and it is difficult to tell which overcomes in the end.<Tab/><Tab/>In a more indirect way, the play's closeness to comedy triggers expectations of a predicted ending, with the defeat of the wicked and the restoration of the good. Every one of Shakespeare's tragedies makes some use of laughter, though the laughter can be grim. This is the most savage and unredeemed of Shakespeare's tragedies, and at the very end "all's cheerless, dark and deadly" (5.3.292). Perhaps the cruelest scene in Shakespeare is the blinding of Gloucester, which inevitably defines the nature of a tragedy (Charney, 264).

The cruelty is so unimaginable, but it is done in such a practical and specific way.

Titus Andronicus, a Roman general, returns from ten years of war with only four out of twenty-five sons left. He has captured Tamora, Queen of the Goths. Tamora urges her sons Chiron and Demetrius to rape Titus's daughter Lavinia, after which they cut off her hands and tongue so she cannot give their crime away. Finally, even Titus's last surviving son Lucius is banished from Rome; he subsequently seeks alliance with the enemy Goths in order to attack Rome. Eventually, Titus begins to act oddly and everyone assumes that he is crazy. Titus, having feigned his madness all along, tricks her, captures her sons, kills them, and makes pie out of them. He feeds this pie to their mother in the final scene, after which he kills both Tamora and Lavinia, his own daughter. A rash of killings ensues; the only people left alive are Marcus, Lucius, Young Lucius, and Aaron. Lucius has the unrepentant Aaron buried alive, and Tamora's corpse thrown to the beasts. He becomes the new emperor of Rome.

William Shakespeare caged his bloodiest tragedy, Titus Andronicus, with the highest body count and cruelest twists. While his characters do the most heinous deeds, they speak those lovely words that make Shakespeare the best at language. Indeed the traditions of Elizabethan theatre are more central to the staging of Titus Andronicus than perhaps any other Shakespeare play apart from Romeo and Juliet. The three separate levels of the Elizabethan playhouse are all required, with frequent use of the upper gallery and the 'cellarage' area below the stage. One of the challenges facing any modern production of the play is to find a way of representing these traditions in a manner that makes sense to a contemporary audience. Titus is dressed in a Roman toga and other characters are in a mixture of Roman and Elizabethan military costumes (Charney, 217).

The society that attended this play had past knowledge of the history of Rome. The cruelty and violence of the play are connected with the historical period in which the play is imagined to take place. The late Roman Empire around the fourth or fifth centuries when Rome was seriously threatened by the barbarian hords.

Timon of Athens was probably written between 1605 and 1608. Apparently the play was never produced, probably because, as many scholars argue, it was never finished.

In this play, Timon is a wealthy man who takes great pleasure in giving gifts to his friends. But his downfall comes through his inability to support his spending. Eventually he is forced to mortgage all his holdings and becomes bankrupt, and his friends abandon him. In the early part of the seventeenth century, criticism grew for the traditional aristocratic behavior of extravagant generosity and careless expense when nobles' holdings were increasingly unable to support their spending. With England on the rise as an international power, nobles found themselves competing to impress each other with their great extravagance, but did not have the cash to back up their behavior. Society was basically going through the same aspects mentioned in Timon of Athens (Butler, 119).

Timon of Athens concerns itself with the connection between ties of affection and bonds. Timon must discover how much friendship has to do with self-interest, how material goods compare to intangible feelings, and how many people are esteemed for their personal characteristics versus their possessions.

The play has also been compared to King Lear because of the similarity of the hero's fall from power. Timon and Lear resemble each other in expressing the theme of monstrous human in recognition through an extended variety of beast images. The difference is that Lear does not himself become a beast, Timon does.

Exchanges of merchandise are the only transactions in this play. In fact money is the only thing that seems to have any power of reproduction. Financial exchanges between men overwhelm this play, where no women have any significant role.

Timon's reaction to his fall is a curious one. Like many of Shakespeare's heroes, Timon is a self-absorbed character, who must learn a lesson in order to grow as a person and carry on. Yet he fails in this task, going simply from one extreme behavior to another. In the beginning, he isolates himself from the other Athenian lords by setting himself up as a god of generosity. Later when he loses his money, he isolates himself in the wilderness and curses mankind with enthusiasm equal to he praised it as previously. He dies alone, even managing to bury himself and carve his own epitaph. The hero, Timon, makes bad decisions when he has great wealth and he makes bad decisions when he loses his money. He hardly has time within his extreme behavior to learn anything, and he dies before he can begin to find a mean between his various strong reactions. Does Timon's dilemma teach us to distrust generosity, as we have seen its recipients are ungrateful flatterers? Is the play against friendship, showing Timon's acquaintances to be largely driven by greed?

Both questions can be answered positively. For example, Flavius, a lower class man, genuinely appreciates Timon's generosity and offers his friendship. But does that support the point that only a few bad people in Athens turned against Timon, while really most people are kinder than that? The numbers don't prove anything; three of Timon's friends deny him loans, and three men visit him in the wilderness to try to connect with him in various ways. Timon was unable to take a middle path, but interpretation of this play must. The conclusion, like Timon's behavior, seems largely ambiguous.

According to author Maurice Charney, it is possible that Timon of Athens is Shakespeare's most Absurdist tragedy, and the very things that draw it so close to grotesque comedy make it potentially more congenial and therefore more bitter for modern audiences (Charney, 312). As one of Shakespeare's last tragedies, Timon of Athens is disappointing because it is so overwhelmingly ironical and incomplete in its interpretation of its tragic protagonist.

Timon is so neatly divided between excessive love and excessive hatred of mankind that he does not seem tragic at all. He often seems to have trouble understanding his own extreme position. It almost appears that Shakespeare wanted to experiment in different and less deceiving kinds of tragedy.

Timon of Athens has been performed many times but it has not been a success on the stage in its original form. There is no evidence that Timon of Athens was ever performed at the time it was written or shortly after. The first registered performance was in London with the Duke's Company in 1678. The setup of the Elizabethan theatre was used in these performances. The balcony was used for many of the scenes along with the "hiding space" for characters to spy on others (Butler, 77).

These tragedies are a collection based on the fact that they are all very violent and obscene, something not common in theatre at the time they were performed. Audiences were introduced to a new form of theatre thanks to Shakespeare. It is important for a tragedy to define the limits of its world, and especially in Shakespearean tragedy, an incomprehensible evil is touched upon. In each one of these plays, it comes as a surprise to the protagonist to discover the depths of villainy he has been plunged into. The protagonists in each one of King Lear, Timon of Athens, and Titus Andronicus, must pick their way out through a maze of conflicting appearances that have been consciously produced by the immoral image of truth.

<Tab/>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Butler, Francelia, *The Strange Critical Fortunes of Shakespeare's Timon of Athens*.
<Tab/>Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1966.

Charney, Maurice. *All of Shakespeare*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Hills, Mathilda M., *Time, Space, and Structure in King Lear*. Salzburg: Institute for
<Tab/>English and Literature at the University of Salzburg, 1976.

Leggatt, Alexander. *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare*. Boston:
<Tab/>Twayne's Publishers, 1988.