Suicide in Shakespeare's Tragedies: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract—The Renaissance clearly witnessed a revitalization of human’s worldview towards education, the arts, and critical thinking. In the midst of this social, cultural and political transformation, a renewed perspective was held on the subjects of euthanasia and suicide. Philosophy began to struggle free from the fetters of Christianity and to redefine its targets as the production of free and intellectual citizens. Many well-known figures of Renaissance philosophy put forward theses that were reckoned at the time to be harshly iconoclastic, such as the permissibility of suicide. Shakespeare, the chief figure of the English renaissance, in line with anti-religious discourses of his time, employs characters who radically pertain to suicidal ideologies of the ancients. The dominant theme of suicide pervading his works demonstrates how the Renaissance man mirrored the Greek and Roman ideologies and how the process of secularization exposed him with a sort of absurdity as a result of which suicide could be tolerated or even more admired. The present paper, aims, on the one hand, to defy many contemporary arguments which ill-foundedly endeavor to introduce Shakespeare as an anti-suicide figure. On the other hand, the authors show how Shakespeare was heavily influenced by the religious, humanistic, artistic and scientific discourses of his time in his exposure to the theme of suicide. The paper’s main discussion is preceded by an overview so as to introduce the fluctuation of attitudes towards suicide through history until the Renaissance. The study may be reckoned as a great stride towards a new-historicist study of Shakespeare and the idea of suicide.

Index Terms—suicide, Shakespeare, renaissance, new-historicist, ancients

I. INTRODUCTION

Owing to the fact that Christianity materialized in a world in which dignity and chastity were the integral social fabrics, any Christian stance against suicide in favor of these basic precepts was naturally uncalled for. If the truth be known, many figures of authority such as the early bishop of Hippo, Augustine and the later theologian Thomas Aquinas have postulated that Jesus was a suicide as well. Akin to Socrates, he never adduces reasons to acquit himself and even seems to have incensed his judges. In the book of John we find Jesus saying: “No man taketh [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself” (John 10:18). Our earliest records verify that Christians did not take issue with suicide and even extolled the virtues of suicide. To illustrate, around the year 300 the scholar Eusebius, soon to be a bishop, set his pen to paper for a compilation of Christian martyrs. He recounts how a Christian woman and her two virgin daughters took their lives out of deference to faith.

Kalman J. Kaplan, a psychologist and historian of the early Christian period, calls our attention to the period of Christian martyrdom. Not only does he dare to consider the death of Jesus as voluntary but also treats Christian martyrs on a par with suicide survivors who, overwhelmed with guilt, anger and confusion, impersonate their chieftain: “What are the potential responses of the Christian survivor to the death of Jesus?” … “He may choose to die as a martyr-suicide himself. This brings him close to Jesus Christ in two ways: 1) through imitation of the death of his savior and 2) through offering a reunion with Jesus Christ in the next world” (43). Kaplan is engrossed in Donatist heresy as the uttermost expression of this predilection: “Whole companies of Donatists, for example, threw themselves from rocks.” In them he finds “a desire, and indeed, an active pursuit of death” (39). Ignatius of Antioch writes: “I am yearning for death with all the passion of a lover.” Donatists would not accept sacraments from priests who had on the surface dissociated themselves from Christianity during the period of persecution.

While for the populace suicidal martyrdom was the death of Jesus in miniature, many authoritative voices were antithetical to self-murder. Paul writes: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you” (Philippians 1:23–24).

The infatuation with martyrdom was, however, so pervasive that it outlasted the period of persecution. As Christianity was beginning to entrench, suicide seemed less a defensive tool than an unnecessary or even menacing tragedy. Efforts to quench this fire of religious fanaticism culminated in the first general injunctions against suicide. In 305 the Council of Guadix amended its list of martyrs by deleting the names of all those who had died by their own hand. The 348 Council of Carthage went farther than the church had before, actively condemning all those who had chosen suicide under the pretext of piety but in fact for personal reasons.
The most astringent remarks on suicide come from Saint Augustine in his book *City of God* around the year 400. He seems to have signed off on the presupposition that Jesus took his life voluntarily, writing, “His soul did not leave his body constrained, but because he would and where he would and how he would.” Yet he deprecated other suicides and clashes with Eusebius over his judgment on the story of virgin girls killing themselves. For Augustine, the girls would be exonerated of any possible rape. Augustine’s remarks provide us with corroborative evidence that individual intention supplants the outward appearance of an action as a gauge for any moral judgment. With that reversal we leave behind the classically inflected sense that honor—or even virtue, or purity, or the absence of sin—ought to decide the matter of guilt. We have arrived at a morality dependent on individual intention. He dubs suicide as a “detestable crime and a damnable sin” and squarely assails it:

This we affirm, this we maintain … that no man ought to inflict on himself voluntary death … that no man ought to do so on account of another man’s sins, for this were to escape a guilt which could not pollute him, by incurring great guilt of his own; that no man ought to do so on account of his own past sins, for he has all the more need of this life that these sins may be healed by repentance. …Those who die by their own hand have no better life after death (Augustine 29).

Augustine’s agitation against suicide soon galvanized other church authorities to legislate against the phenomenon so that they can quell its popularity among the masses. The Council of Arles in 452, the Council of Angers in 453, the second Council of Orleans in 533, the Council of Braga in 563, the Council of Antioch in 590, the Council of Hereford in 673 and the 16th Council of Toledo in 693, all demanded retribution for the act of suicide. Deprivation of self-murderers from funeral rights and confiscation of their properties were the inevitable corollaries of such conventions. Soon, suicide came to be reckoned as the worst sin possible because it was a theft from God which left no chance for the sinner to perform penance so they would be excommunicated. Suicide was the abandonment of hope in the beneficent Almighty and was firmly bracketed with the devil. Suicide’s soul was an ill omen to the living and had to be suppressed ritualistically. They were treated like social vermin which had to be ostracized. All across Europe, their bodies were dragged to the place of execution. They were hung on gallows and left to putrefy. They were sometimes buried in a remote area with stakes through them to help hold their souls in check in case they wander around and harass the living. In some places they had to be buried at night. In Danzig, now a part of Poland the body of a suicide victim was not permitted to be taken out through the door but had to be passed through a window, even if a hole had to be knocked in the wall when there was no window. We should bear in mind that Aristotle and Ptolemy were the pillars upon whom the ideological superstructure of Christianity rested. The increasing hostility of the medieval period was to some extent due to the decline in Stoicism.

The ferocity of the response to self-destruction could appear unthinkable for the modern reader. As an illustration, when a Parisian man took his life by plunging into the Seine in 1257, his body was dragged through the city and was hanged in public and left there until birds and maggots eviscerated the cadaver. In 1288 when another Parisian man committed suicide his body was hung by the monastery. But, it was later decided that they had overlooked the crucial formality of pulling his body through the city behind a horse so the whole rite was redone, this time meticulously. From the fifteenth century through the seventeenth century the “rites of reversal” was performed as an impediment to resurrection of suicides’ soul. Following these rites, the cadaver of a suicide would be placed in the ground face down, lying north-south, opposite to the normal burial practices. When Amy Stokes committed suicide in 1590, the coroner of London decreed that the top of the stake constricting his cadaver be left visible for the others to take lesson.

The Protestant Reformation which swept through the continent in the early 1500s brought about subversive changes in worship and policy. The proponents, however, did not make any effort to renew the previous harsh policy on suicide. Torturous Punishments were inflicted on the victims as visibly repugnant as possible to provide deterrence for the other would-be suicides. For Martin Luther suicide was the fallout of devil’s temptation. He also pins the blame on Epicureanism, the philosophical legacy of the pagan world. The point is made clear when we see how bitterly he reacts to the news of a woman killing herself:

I have known many cases of this kind, and I have reason to think in most of them, that the parties were killed, directly and immediately killed by the devil, in the same way that a traveler is killed by a brigand. … Yet still the civil magistrate is quite right in punishing this offence without exception, lest the devil should make more and more way in this respect. The world merits such warnings, now that it has taken to epicurising, and setting down the devil as nothing (Luther 72).

The Renaissance clearly witnessed a revitalization of human’s worldview towards education, the arts, and critical thinking. In the midst of this social, cultural and political transformation, a renewed perspective was held on the subjects of euthanasia and suicide. Philosophy began to struggle free from the fetters of Christianity and to redefine its targets as the production of free and intellectual citizens. Many well-known figures of Renaissance philosophy put forward theses that were reckoned at the time to be harshly iconoclastic, such as the permisibility of euthanasia (Gillon 173-92). For instance, in his 1516 book, *Utopia*, Sir Thomas More wrote:

If a disease is not only incurable but also distressing and agonizing without any cessation, then the priest and the public officials exhort the man, since he is now unequal to all of life’s duties, a burden to himself and a trouble to others, and is living beyond the time of his death, to free himself from this bitter life as from prison and the rack, or else
voluntarily to permit others to free him. In this course he will act wisely since by death he will put an end not to enjoyment but to torture (187).

Another somewhat affirmative take on self-murder was authored by John Harington, one of the cherished courtiers of Queen Elizabeth I. Harington conceives a conversation between Samuel, Saul, and Solomon on the question of “Whether it be damnation for a man to kill himself.” Samuel tends a stark religious rejection of all suicide, while Saul presents a contrasting altercation, acclaiming both Cato and Samson for having avoided harassment by their foes. As Saul puts it, “Was it not better for me to kill myself, seeing that I see death present before mine eyes, than suffer mine enemies to abuse me ignominiously, to triumph over me despitefully, and to revile me contumeliously? If a man be condemned to die is it any matter whether he or the hangman shall tie the halter about his neck and cast him off the ladder?” (25-47) Then Saul asks, “Did not the martyrs of Queen Mary’s days willingly offer themselves to the flames?” Harington admires Samson, whom God himself granted the legendary strength requisite to kill himself in the moment. He also names Socrates as a praiseworthy suicide. Solomon, an embodiment of justice, judges without abandoning the concept of religion but much more sympathetically for the idea of suicide. He does not condemn suicide forthwith. Instead, he says that we must “leave all to the secret judgment of God, referring all to his mercy.” Paintings and literary portraits of suicide also began to change at this time. The suicidal person was no longer thought of as being lured by fiends to contravene the rule of God. In God’s most secret mind, the judgment, we are told, is likely to be one of mercy.

Shakespeare, the chief figure of the English renaissance, in line with anti-religious discourses of his time, creates characters who radically pertain to suicidal ideologies of the ancients. The dominant theme of suicide pervading his works demonstrates how the Renaissance man mirrored the Greek and Roman ideologies and how the process of secularization exposed them with a sort of absurdity as a result of which suicide could be tolerated or even more admired (Ornstein, 1960). The present paper, aims, on the one hand, to reject the contemporary arguments which endeavor to introduce Shakespeare as an anti-suicide, and on the other, the author shows how Shakespeare was heavily influenced by the religious, humanistic, artistic and scientific discourses of his time in his exposure to the theme of suicide.

II. DISCUSSION

There is no shadow of a doubt that the state of mind which steers one into committing suicide was such an arresting motive for the Renaissance tragedy which would never escape the careful observation of Shakespeare, the illustrious psychologist of the sixteenth century. Owing to pervasion of the motive and its thorough dissection, which attests to his comprehensive knowledge of the mainsprings of human action, we could place Shakespeare above all his ancient and modern peers.

Unlike some of the greatest minds who viewed self-murder through the dark, dismal shadows of their own horrible experience, Shakespeare apparently reckoned suicide as ensuing not so much from what could be termed an aberrant mental function as from a false moral philosophy affecting minds which worsens to the point of desperation.

He lucidly does not intend to provide us with a philosophy of suicide nor does he intend to sit upon a coroner’s inquest to render a verdict of temporary insanity upon every case of suicide that takes place. It would be equally misleading to think of Shakespeare as a physician who seeks to justify the act in the strict scientific acceptation of the term as a certain diseased mental process. Therefore, it could be contended that all his principal suicides committed the act in their natural, at least, if not their sober senses. Othello, for instance, is one of those eminent figures whose suicide, as it will be observed, could not be explained in terms of insanity by any means.

In the case of insanity, psychologists detect at once the abnormal physical, mental and moral organization which constitutes the inherent predisposition, that is, a germ which has been implanted there originally and merely awaits the effect of adequate provoking impetus to be wrought to the point of self-murder. In Othello, however, this organization is absent and even on the verge of stabbing the dagger into his heart he could by no means be diagnosed with any tinge of inherent tendency to mental disease.

It should be noted that though Othello is naturally endowed with all the requisite qualities to embellish a warrior such as bravery, faithfulness, insatiability for honor and great force of will, it would be completely pretentious to characterize him with the highest order of intellect as he is not intrinsically furnished with the shrewdness, profundity and discernment of character necessary to ward off the machinations of the criminal mastermind and moral bankrupt who haunted and chased him to the degree of desperation. His reason and judgment, though never diseased, is completely shrouded in the whirlwind of passion aroused within him by this sinister genius. His mind, off and on, recoils in horror from the surge of passion and only once is it suggested that it is upset and Lodovico asks “Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brains?” Yet, we could assuredly claim that that is not the case. Though his sense of desperation peaks at regular intervals we could positively certify that his wits are safe, and his seemingly loss of brain occurs only momentarily as he soon recovers his balance and to whatever extremes of desperation he is driven, with a clear head, sweeps on to the accomplishment of his dark purpose.

Othello’s mind was never more determined than in the moment of sheer helplessness and he reasons in total composure upon the mission he is about to accomplish, about the causes and consequences of killing Desdemona.

"It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul:
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!"
It is the cause...
Put out the light, and then put out the light!
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me; — but once put out thine,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean beat
That can thy light relume. When I have plucked thy rose,
I cannot give it vital growth again;
It needs must wither."

After the accomplishment of the bloody deed, he is hemmed in by the attacking army of remorse which is strong enough to lead one to a mental breakdown. He, however, does not buckle under the pressure and his mind even in his utter desperation is composed.

"My wife! my wife! What wife? I have no wife.
Oh, insupportable! Oh, heavy hour!
Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon; and that the affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration."

When the whole mystery of his deception is unraveled before him and in the presence of Iago he is quite calm and exposed to his stupidity and naivety he exclaims: “O’ fool! Fool! Fool!” He embraces suicide not as means of escaping from the backbreaking burden of remorse and sorrow as this burden he expects to bear even in that “undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.” Suicide is the punishment for his tragic flaw, for his folly and weakness. He thus invokes upon himself the most terrible torture the imagination is able to conceive:

"Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemona! Desdemona! dead?
Dead? Oh! Oh! Oh!"

After taking an arduous voyage through all sorts of mental suffering, the complete integrity of Othello’s mind is still manifest in his last words:

"Soft you ; a word or two, before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know it;
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one, that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one, not easily jealous, but being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one, whose hand.
Like the base Judean, threw a pearl away,
Richer than all his tribe; of one, whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
And say, besides,— that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian, and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog.
And smote him — thus.” [Stabs himself].

As mentioned before the Renaissance man experienced a period of ambivalence with regard to suicide. This was mainly due to the fact that rising secular philosophies constantly and fiercely clashed with religious accounts of life and creation in the middle ages which preceded the era. The fact caused that artists and men of letter portrayed a completely reflective account of suicide. Suicides are frequently depicted as reflective characters before perpetrating the act which attests to this sense of ambivalence, hesitation and uncertainty. For instance, when the ancients recounted the story of Lucretia, she always died; they did not interrupt to trap the moment when she reflects on killing herself. Of course, her death had to occur for the real climax to transpire, the anguish of the sacrifice felt by those surrounding her; the vow to wrest power away from their stranger lord, and of course from any king; and then, of course, the battle and the foundation of a new government. But the Renaissance revival of appeal to Lucretia was very different. After Botticelli’s, in none of these outstanding pictures does Lucretia demise. Even when already stabbed, she is still breathing. Quite
absorbingly, there is a sculpture in Vienna by the artist Ignaz Platzer dubbed *Junius Brutus, Swearing Revenge at Lucretia’s Corpse*. Lucretia stands next to Brutus. The conceit is that he is holding her up in one arm while he directs most of his attention to the knife he is about to swear by, but we cannot help take notice of the fact that Lucretia even here appears to be standing on her own. Instead of the ancient insistence merely on what follows, Renaissance sensibilities cannot ignore the live woman reflecting on her suicide.

Fascination with Lucretia in this era was not confined to the visual arts. One of the two long poems Shakespeare wrote was *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), a rich and elegant contemplative work composed in musical language, and full of twisted sentiments. After Lucrece has taken her own life, and her father and husband have fallen on her in relentless lamentation, Brutus, long known as a fool, a buffoon, in this moment matures and broods in case the men will likewise take their lives. “Seeing such emulation in their woe,” he plucks the knife from Lucrece’s side and then declaims against their prospective suicides and also against Lucrece’s:

“Thou wronged lord of Rome,” quoth he, “arise!
Let my unsounded self, suppos’d a fool,
Now set thy long-experience’d wit to school.
“Why, Collatine, is woe the cure for woe?
Do wounds help wounds, or grief help grievous deeds?
Is it revenge to give thyself a blow
For his foul act by whom thy fair wife bleeds?
Such childish humor from weak minds proceeds;
Thy wretched wife mistook the matter so,
To slay herself, that should have slain her foe.” (Shakespeare 82)

By no means is this what the ancient Roman men and women had considered, indeed, when the story was first narrated. The men assembled in the story were not said to be in peril of reacting to her suicide with their own, while in Shakespeare’s epoch it was possible to conceive romance and heartbreak driving a man’s hand against himself. Beyond the menace of the men doing themselves in, Brutus does not side in with Lucrece’s act; indeed, he calls it mistaken. Shakespeare’s characters advise that we must get to grips with our psychological and political problems by projecting out anger, not internalizing it. One element for which Shakespeare is admired is that his works generally amalgamate various strong competing perspectives. Most often, the shrewdest of perspectives is uttered by a court fool, or someone impersonating the fool. This fool—gone-wise, Brutus, says Lucrece mistook the matter. As mentioned, Chaucer also thought that those surrounding Lucretia would have excused her, but her act was exalted as a sign of uttermost chastity and grace.

In Shakespeare’s recount of the story, she is guilty, and he urges to avoid her example. Indeed, Lucretia’s story is not Shakespeare’s most well-known contemplation on self-murder. *Hamlet* was composed only a few years later, about 1601, and delicately expresses the increasing uncertainty about suicide. Early in the play Hamlet wishes that “the Everlasting had not fix’d / his canon ‘gainst self-slaughter,” but his more profound reflection on the subject comes subsequently. It is among the most beautiful, sorrowful, and intellectually idealistic passages in the English language.

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
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? To die—to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: ’tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish’d. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—there’s the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law’s delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurms
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover’d country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of? (309)

He is not just enquiring whether he is too exhausted and hapless to persist, and he neglects the question of whether he has something to live for after all. Life is agonizing, it is like slings and arrows. What he asks is: which is more noble, which is more sensible? Fortune and destiny are furious and bash us and gash our flesh. Heartbreak and a plenty of natural human trauma are wretched. Yet when he declares that death is an ending “devoutly to be wished,” it does appear as though he is still struggling to persuade himself. Even the vibrant line about taking up arms against a sea of troubles manifests a type of harsh ambivalence, for swords will definitely fail to fight the sea. Hamlet does not do himself in. His answer in that profound but terse question is “to be.” But in this decisive moment he does not say that he has to stay here, alive, for any certain reason. He just does not reckon outright death as a decisively inviting alternative. Putting aside those immortal lines, the Lucretia poem is a better place to go for Shakespeare’s wisdom against suicide. What is crystal clear here is that attitudes were undergoing a considerable change, and the church’s argument that God alone has the right to take a life was totally taken for granted.

However, it should be noted that after Hamlet’s erstwhile love interest Ophelia commits suicide, her survivors plead against her being judged a suicide and retributed for it. About Ophelia, one of the undertakers says, “Will you ha’ the truth on’t? If this had not been a gentlewoman, she should have been buried out o’ the Christian burial.”

Arrestingly, in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, Imogen is stopped from stabbing herself because of the belief that suicide is prohibited by God.

Against self-slaughter
There is a prohibition so divine
That cravens my weak hand. (271)

Different characters provide different replies to this intricate question. Here, religion’s claim that God banned suicide manifestly had effect on people.

For another of Shakespeare’s reflections on the subject, we refer to Cleopatra. In Shakespeare’s characterization, the queen gives this speech before she clutches first one and then another poisonous asp to her breast:

Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I have
Immortal longings in me. Now no more
The juice of Egypt’s grape shall moist this lip:
Yare, yare, good Iras! Quick! Methinks I hear
Antony call. I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act. I hear him mock
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come!
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life. (158)

Take into consideration her “immortal longings” and the depiction of her already dead lover Marc Antony—remember that he has mistakenly thought Cleopatra already dead and did himself in—awakening himself from lounging in the afterlife to acclaim her “noble act.” The frivolity of Marc Antony’s death haunts all suicides, with its hint that we are not always aware where we really are in our story. Consider also Cleopatra’s comprehension of the act as one of bravery comparable to a queen. In the last line we sense this voice is more from the Elizabethan Englishman than from the ancient Egyptian, for Shakespeare’s elegant phrase “I am fire and air; my other elements I give to baser life,” belts out a more modern poetry of death.

Suicide sometimes appears tolerable or even gracious in Shakespeare’s works. He lived in a time when people were commencing to challenge religious rejection of suicide. Religion’s ban on suicide definitely saved lives, but retribution not only of those who tried their hand at suicide but of even the survivors of suicides struck many as unjust. As mentioned in the Lucretia paintings, suicide was becoming more exposed and more tolerated in the early modern era, and literature followed suit. It suffices to say that Shakespeare’s works consist of no fewer than fifty-two suicides.

Yet, a plethora of Shakespeare’s suicides are frivolous, erroneous, or immature. King Lear’s Gloucester is another royal character who endeavors to put an end to his life. Gloucester’s universe has collapsed around him in the treason and onslaught that has followed Lear’s insensible division of his territory. Gloucester, blinded, wretched, and disillusioned, asks his vagabond companion (his son Edgar in disguise) to lead him to Dover:

There is a cliff, whose high and bending head
Looks fearfully in the confined deep:
Bring me but to the very brim of it,
And I’ll repair the misery thou dost bear
With something rich about me: from that place
I shall no leading need. (657)
But Edgar deceives him, ushering him on a trek to some fields near Dover, where he visualizes a little bump as though it were a precipice. After dispatching his friend away, Gloucester takes what he reckons will be a mortal leap and falls flat on his face on the ground. At this point Edgar, no longer disguising his voice, pretends that Gloucester’s leap was authentic, and that they are at the bottom of the precipice now; he deigns shock that the man is still alive. Edgar pretentiously believes that something supernatural had saved Gloucester, who swears: “henceforth I’ll bear / Affliction till it do cry out itself / ‘Enough, enough,’ and die.” The ridiculous fall revolutionizes him. It also gives him a voice to express the insight that the pain that would spur suicide will dissipate if we can wait it out.

A bitterly frivolous pair of suicides in Shakespeare is that of Romeo and Juliet, a revision, as we have mentioned, of the ancient story of Thisbe and Pyramus. The elemental cause of the tragedy is the hostility between the young lovers’ families, which puts Romeo and Juliet in an impossible situation in the first place. Still the primary cause of their death is mere impatience. If Romeo could have hesitated just a few minutes more, Juliet would have awakened from her potion-induced trance, and their world would have metamorphosed. Even if one’s beloved is not temporarily in a deathlike sleep, waiting can sometimes hinder the impulse for suicide.

If Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy is the most famous epitome of someone considering suicide, Romeo and Juliet is plainly the most well-known dramatization of the real act. For that reason only, it is not without significance to weigh the extent of the error. Not only was the final moment of each life hinged on a fatal mistake, but there is also a more inclusive error. At the beginning of the play, Romeo crushes on a different girl, as assured that she is his true love as he will later be of Juliet. What if he had done himself in over that lost love? As many of us know from experience, when one love is hampered, another often flourishes in its wake—particularly in cases of young love and young lovers.

Shakespeare appears to be warning us that we can misjudge our circumstances just as his characters did. Even if your life abounds with travesties, full of disguises and mysterious pacts, even if does not lead to the elevated levels of tragedy, your understanding of its twists and turns may itself be somehow unfathomable. In the plays, many characters view their lives through a perverted lens, making it rather impossible to know what course of action is appropriate; Shakespeare, we may speculate, is enquiring whether our own lenses provide any realer a view. It should be noted that our discussion on reflective suicide in the renaissance period is completely in line with my previous discussion on proving the fact that suicides in Shakespeare never lose their reason and sense of judgment before committing the act. They are all contemplative figures who are never mentally diseased that is, insanity could never be accounted as the cause for suicide in Shakespeare.

Professor John Collins, in his essay (162-163) puts forward a premise so as to describe both Sophocles and Shakespeare’s motives towards the theme of suicide as similar. Surprisingly, this conspicuously ill-founded hypothesis has passed unchallenged thus far:

"By neither of them has any glamour of sentiment been cast over it. In no case is it associated with honor, but in all cases with intemperance or ignominy, or with both. ... In the suicide of Ajax, the one instance in which Sophocles has represented suicide as a deliberate act, what impresses us throughout is the utter demoralization of the victim .... Labouring at first in a turbid storm of frenzy, he regains self-mastery only to reduce to the dominion of a perverted will an anarchy of conflicting emotions, rage, shame, remorse, pity, grief-perishing desperately, a laughing stock to his foes, a source of sorrow and reproach to his friends. So perish Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Brutus, Cassius, Titinius, Cleopatra, Antony, Enobarbus, Goneril, Othello, and, it would seem, Lady Macbeth. In none of these cases is self-destruction associated with anything but intemperance or retribution. 'The foul'st best fits my latter part of life,' exclaims Enobarbus; and it is remarkable that the poet should have put into the mouth of Brutus, the noblest of those who fall by their own hands in the tragedies, not merely a condemnation of the act generally, but a condemnation of the one suicide which tradition has universally glorified, and which even Dante appears to have excepted from the catalogue of crimes:

I did blame Cato for the death
Which he did give himself; I know not how,
But I do find it cowardly and vile,
For fear of what might fall, so to prevent
The time of life: arming myself with patience
To stay the providence of some high powers
That govern us below." (Julius Caesar 5.1.101-8)

Hamlet's remark in his famous soliloquy will occur to everyone, but still more striking are the words in which Gloucester expresses his thankfulness that he has been saved from such a crime:

You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again
To die before you please. (King Lear 4.6.221-3)"

If these remarks are true we will come to the conclusion that Shakespeare had adopted a moral approach towards self-destruction and had forcefully expressed his condemnation of the act both through the voices of the characters and by representing the act as basically ignominious and as the fallout of weakness and moral corruption. Through Collins’s lenses Brutus’s suicide must be reckoned as a proof of his character’s weakness and that of Antony as the last illustration of the demoralizing influence of Egypt on his nature. In the same vein, the death of Romeo and Juliet is the bitter result of the characters’ incapability to curb their unchecked passions. However, in this part of my dissertation, I
aim to put forward an antithesis to what Collins had contended as I do not consider his attitude to be representative of Shakespeare’s attitude nor I find that the evidence of the plays in any way bears it out.

Mr. Collins seems to have plucked the words of Euobarbus ruthlessly from their context without taking heed of the fact that they should be read in connection with what precedes. That is why he seems to have completely mistaken the significance of the specific passages which he has quoted in regarding them to be reverberations of the dramatist’s voice:

This blows my heart,
If swift thought break it not, a swifter mean
Shall outstrike thought; but thought will do’t, I feel,
I fight against thee! No! I will go seek
Some ditch wherein to die; the foul’st best fits
My latter, part of life. (Antony and Cleopatra 4.6.34)

The “swifter mean” no doubt signifies suicide which is named so because it is used when natural motives fail to bring about one’s death. “The foul’st” however, by no means denotes suicide. It in fact refers to “some ditch”, a place suitable for the ignominious character of his latter days.

What Hamlet, Gloucester and Imogen say in defiance of suicide unquestionably voice the monopoly of the church which reckoned suicide as the most dreadful of the sins which left its victim with no chance of repentance. For the people in whose life religion was a decisive force, the canon set by the Almighty against self-slaughter could be a powerful deterrent motive to stop them from killing themselves. Yet, beside religion and piety we could refer to many other motives which were equally deterrent. Selfishness or base fear, for instance, could be among those motives. Thus, what cravens Macbeth’s hand is lack of nerve as well as a vehement desire to shed the bold of his enemies:

Why should I play the Roman fool, and die
On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes
Do better upon them. (Macbeth 5.8.1)

Iago too, dissuades Roderigo by a skeptical reference to the most selfish motives:

If thou wilt needs damn thyself, do it a more delicate way than drowning.... Seek thou rather to be hanged in compassing thy joy than to be drown’d and go without her. (Othello 1.3.359)

The audience, at the scene of the burial of Ophelia, detests the fanatic priest who voices the stark attitude of the church towards her. What Laertes remarks voices in fact the readers’ mind:

Lay her i’ the earth,
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,
A minist’ring angel shall my sister be,
When thou liest howling. (Hamlet 5.2.262)

If we take into consideration what Shakespeare’s characters utter concerning suicide heedlessly as representative of the playwright’s own personal attitude we are much prone to consider Shakespeare as an advocate of suicide in many instances despite what Mr. Collins claim as we have more evidence for that. Roderigo for instance says: “It is silliness to live, when to live is a torment; and then have we a prescription to die, when death is our physician”. In the Roman plays, as mentioned earlier, suicide is celebrated and mentioned with enthusiasm.

Then is it sin
To rush into the secret house of death,
Ere death dare come to us?

It is great
To do the thing that ends all other deeds;
Which shackles accidents and bolts up change. (Antony and Cleopatra 5.2.4-6)

But we never claim so because apparently such passages as these by no means represent Shakespeare’s own attitude towards suicide. Neither do the words of Imogen, Hamlet or Gloucester. It is mere naivety to examine the words of the characters without taking into account factors such as his situation and time and to attribute them carelessly to the dramatist.

The fact that the speech quoted by Collins was originally presented in Plutarch (1918) clearly testifies that we can by no means regard it as Shakespeare’s own opinion. Brutus was trying to base his life on lofty but cold and moral foundations. He faces crisis by curbing the dictates of his heart and distances himself from the model his Roman forebear had set and adopts a philosophical approach. He clearly takes a strongly defying stance against the deed which his ignorant countrymen have unanimously lauded. But when the test comes and he is exposed to the abasement of being led in triumph, human instinct frustrates the artificial working of stoic restraint and Brutus chooses to follow after Cato:

No, Cassius, no. Think not, thou noble Roman,
That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome;
He bears too great a mind. (Julius Caesar 5.1.111)
Brutus is undoubtedly vocalizing his strength here. His weakness would lay rather in his refrain from committing an act which his human instinct ordered and the Roman doctrines had lauded. In Julius Caesar characters view suicide through the eyes of their Roman forefather. This perspective would have been set by the narrative of Plutarch even if Shakespeare had not been acquainted with it from other sources.

Marking Shakespeare’s moral attitude toward self-murder is not confined in such detached utterances however. This impression is in fact conveyed through the representations of the act through the whole body of his works. He no doubt meant the murder of Duncan by Macbeth or the unfilial conduct of Goneril and Regan to be felt as morally base. But it should be noted that to most readers any sense of criminality in the suicide of Shakespeare’s characters dissipates in the working of other sentiments. Goneril’s self-slaughter, for instance, injects a sense of satisfaction in the reader as we regard the act as a just punishment for the cruelty and baseness of her nature. It could make no difference if she had been killed. Her suicide however satisfies the reader more as the frustration of her evil plans finally led her into that consciousness to do herself in. In the case of Romeo, Juliet, Brutus, Othello, Antony or Cleopatra they are similarly shut off from our sympathy as their suicide suited as a penalty for their faults. Obviously reprimanding Othello for not choosing a life of stoicism and patience after killing her lady is plausible only for a critic regarding the play from without. But as no moral issue is present in the mind of Shakespeare, the audience too will not make any moral assessment of the scene.

Taking into consideration what was discussed before there remains no room to conclude that Shakespeare endeavored to stress disapprobation of suicide on the part of his audience. Mr. Collins too probably did not intend to demonstrate that Shakespeare deliberately set out to condemn suicide. But there is no shadow of a doubt that he intended to prove that for Shakespeare suicide was always an ignominious and base act. But his commentary appears to be more a pathetic fallacy in Shakespeare’s criticism.

We could in one sense reckon suicide as intemperate or ignominious in Shakespeare’s works as it is the outcome of his characters’ flaws or weakness in nature. Therefore, suicide of Romeo could be associated with intemperance and his inability to restrain his overflowing passion. In the case of Antony we could associate the act with ignominy as his who Egyptian life was ignominious. But to admit this is by no means to admit that any stigma of intemperance or ignominy is attached to the manner of their death. On the contrary, the reverse appears to be the case as in the death of Antony, Cleopatra, Brutus, Cassius and Othello we could tangibly observe an exaltation of their souls. In other words, the final moments are all marked lucidly with an undeniable moral elevation. Suicide acts like a refinement or purge of their follies. Antony is lifted by the false news of Cleopatra’s death and appears for the first time to have regained his self-possession and self-esteem. He thus embraces suicide with open arms not as a temptation but as a course which his spirit has thus far been too sluggish to pursue:

- Since Cleopatra died,
  I have liv’d in such dishonour, that the gods
  Detest my baseness.
  Thrice nobler than myself!
  Thou teachest me, O valiant Eros, what
  I should and thou could’st not. My queen and Eros
  Have by their brave instruction got upon me
  A nobleness in record. (4.14.55-58)
- That is why the reader could trace no signs of compunction or regret in him after he has wounded himself.
  Peace!
  Not Caesar's valour hath o'erthrown Antony,
  But Antony's hath triumphed on itself. (4.15.13-15)
- And on the throes of his death he gives voice to what is probably the first touch of significance in his passions for the queen:
  Ant. One word, sweet queen:
    Of Caesar seek your honour with your safety. O!
  Cleo. They do not go together.
  Ant. Gentle, hear me:
    None about Caesar trust but Proculeius. (4.15.45-49)
- Through murdering himself he ultimately succeeds in reconciling his honor as a Roman with his love for the Egyptian queen.

Cleopatra too secure in the knowledge that Caesar will humiliate her show no signs of ambivalence and the final resolve to die brings her a new sense of composure, nobility and power:

- What poor an instrument
  May do a noble deed! He brings me liberty.
  My resolution's plac'd. and I have nothing
  Of woman in me; now from head to foot
  I am marble-constant; now the fleeting moon
  No planet is of mine. (5.2.236)
She thrusts herself into the embrace of death with words of passionate eloquence:

Cleo. Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me. Now no more
The juice of Egypt’s grape shall moist this lip.
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear
Antony call; I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act; I hear him mock
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come!
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life. So; have you done?
Come then, and take the last warmth of my lips.
Farewell, kind Charmian; Iras, long farewell. (5.2.282)

The same atmosphere applies to Cassius who we tend to forget his meaner side of nature as he nears his tragic fate. The unworthy bickering between him and Brutus ends and the two bid farewell with elevated postures of friendship. Apprehension of Titinius provides Cassius with enough impetus to do himself in. We could sense how confidently and intrepidly he does so:

O, coward that I am, to live so long,
To see my best friend ta’en before my face! (5.3.34-35)

Titinius himself dies with the sentiment of uppermost in his mind:
Brutus, come apace,
And see how I regarded Caius Cassius.
By your leave, gods!—this is a Roman’s part.
Come Cassius’ sword, and find Titinius’ heart. (5.3.87-90)

In Antony and Cleopatra too we could find no better reason to justify why Eros and Charmian followed their master and mistress into the world of shadows than great sentiment of personal devotion. In such cases self-murder is associated with the highest potentials of one’s spirit to attain nobility. Whatever Shakespeare’s personal attitude had been, he lucidly chooses to side with his Greek and Roman ancestors in considering suicide as a noble means of liberation from the fetters of humiliation and disgraceful life. It should not be forgotten that this is what neo-classist atmosphere of the Renaissance period necessitated. No doubt this approach had its origin in the works of Plutarch who served as the main source for Shakespeare to characterize his Roman characters.

Shakespeare’s strong adherence to pagan feelings is lucidly witnessed by the tenor of comments rendered by other characters on the death of Roman heroes. Surprisingly, we could observe that none of them are taken aback in the sight of protagonists’ self-murder, that is, they never adopt a Christian condemnatory outlook towards the fact. On the contrary, they are quick to admire the suicide of their lords. Thus Julius Caesar closes with a chorus-like panegyric on the character of Brutus, as witness particularly by the manner of his death:

Messala. Strato, where is thy master?
Strato. Free from the bondage you are in, Messala;
The conquerors can but make a fire of him,
For Brutus only overcome himself,
And no man else had honour by his death.
Lucilius. So Brutus should be found. I thank thee, Brutus,
That thou hast proved Lucilius’ saying true. (5.5.53-59)

In Antony and Cleopatra, Decretas speaks of the death of Antony as a manifestation of his nobler Roman qualities:
He is dead, Caesar;
Not by a public minister of justice,
Nor by a hired knife; but that self hand
Which writ his honour in the acts it did
Hath, with the courage which the heart did lend it,
Splitted his heart. (5.1.19-24)

And Caesar find the death of Cleopatra not less worthy of herself:
Bravest at the last,
She level’d at our purposes, and, being royal,
Took her own way. (5.2.338-40)

The reader naturally could not expect to hear vocally and ubiquitously expression in celebration of suicide when we turn from Shakespeare’s Roman plays to his more Christian plays. Hamlet and Imogen therefore must naturally be representatives of the horror and shock that Christian orthodoxy tagged on suicide. Despite hearing scattered expressions of abhorrence concerning suicide when we come to the moment when the final tragic incident takes place, Shakespeare interestingly allows the traditional feelings to sink into abeyance and calls upon us to accept something
very much like the Roman point of view. In other words, the final moment of the two Christian plays which end in suicide, just like what we saw in the cases of Brutus, Cassius and Antony, we witness an intentional acceptation of nobler features of the tragic hero so as to attenuate the ignominy and abhorrence that Christian world of the Middle Ages labeled with suicide.

Yet, in Romeo and Juliet it is impossible to deny that repressive approach of Christianity towards suicide is present in the words of characters. Thus, Romeo addresses the poison as “desperate pilot” and the same word is applied by Prior to Juliet:

And she, too desperate, would not go with me,
But, as it seems, did violence on herself. (5.3.263-4)

But what the audience quickly notices is that it is not the absence of adherence to moral principles which causes the lovers’ death. The reason is in fact the protagonists’ failure to resist the backbreaking surges of passion. The note on which the drama closes is not of reproach but of mingled pity and admiration:

Montague. But I can give thee more;
For I will raise her statue in pure gold;
That whiles Verona by that name be known,
There shall no figure at such rate be set
As that of true and faithful Juliet.
Capulet. As rich shall Romeo’s by his lady’s lie,
Poor sacrifices of our enmity! (5.3.298-304)

In Othello too, a still more vocally pagan attitude is adopted by the reader as his desire to revenge Othello for his brutality of nature somehow sinks in the pity for the murderer. After experiencing interminable moments of haziness and hesitation he finally attains tranquility in the clear light of truth and justice after perpetration of the suicide. His dying words associate the suicidal blow to the essential nobility of his nature:

I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
Perplex’d in the extreme; of one whose hand
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once
Where a malignant and a turban’d Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc’d the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him, thus. (5.2.340-356)

Cassio, in the following lines clearly represents the sentiments of those who have witnessed Othello’s self-inflicted murder. What he gives expression to are the very feelings that are so frequently voiced in the Roman plays:

This did I fear, but thought he had no weapon;
For he was great of heart. (5.2.360-61)

III. CONCLUSION

There is no shadow of a doubt that the social, political, philosophical and artistic upheaval in the wake of Renaissance called many religious doctrines of the Middle Ages into question. Among these was suicide which as one of the most controversial issues was under the most acrimonious and inimical onslaughts in the sovereignty of the church. Shakespeare as one of the leading figures of the Renaissance lucidly defied the medieval attribution of suicide to insanity and his characters, though reach the points of sheer desperation, never demonstrate signs of insanity or mental breakdown. They are in complete sobriety and are depicted in a period of profound contemplation before perpetration of the act which attests not only to their logicality but also to the precarious states of moral and ethical ambivalence and hesitation that the Renaissance man had to get to grips with in an era where many unquestionable religious doctrines were dubiously open to dispute. The present paper is quick to reject many ill-founded commentaries trying to introduce Shakespeare as a die-hard anti-suicide moralist. On the contrary, Shakespeare as the key figure of the neo-classist movement clearly adopts an approach towards suicide parallel to his Greek and Roman forebear and celebrates suicide as a means of manifestation of attaining nobility, honor and courage. Also, Characters’ decisiveness in favoring self-slaughter over humiliation and capitulation provides us with ample evidence to testify their mental health.
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