

Gendered Perspective and Tragicomic Anticipation in Shakespeare's King Lear

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Abstract. This essay examines unexpected tragicomic elements in Shakespeare's "King Lear". Traditionally viewed as a tragedy, "King Lear" features moments of redemption that blur genre boundaries. Drawing on Northrop Frye's insights and analyzing plays like "The Winter's Tale" and "Measure for Measure", the study highlights the pivotal roles of female characters in influencing the trajectory of their male counterparts. Such intersections suggest "King Lear" not only embodies tragedy but also incorporates reconciliatory aspects of tragicomedy, enriching its narrative depth and complexity.

Keywords: Gendered Perspectives, Tragicomedy, Shakespeare, King Lear, Characterization, Themes, and Narration.

1. Introduction

This essay delves into Shakespeare's King Lear, a tragedy that relies in unexpected, unexplored ways on strategies evident in tragicomedy genre. Despite being classified as a tragedy, the play exhibits moments of redemption and self-awareness among its male characters that challenge the traditional boundaries of the genre. This essay aims to explore the gendered perspectives conveyed through characterization, themes, and narration in the play [BG1]. In the wake of Northrop Frye's commentary on comedy, and exploring a range of Shakespearean plays either regarded as tragicomic (such as The Winter's Tale, Pericles, and Cymbeline), or those the author will argue should be so regarded (e.g. Measure for Measure, Merchant of Venice), the paper seeks to highlight how female characters influence the growth and redemption of their male counterparts, allowing a play like King Lear, typically considered a colossal tragedy, to achieve a sense of promise and reconciliation more commonly associated with comedy, especially tragicomedy. Ultimately, the paper aims to reveal how King Lear gains still greater depth and complexity by anticipating and relying on core elements of the tragicomic genre [BG3].

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Exploring the Definition of Tragicomedy

First coined by Roman dramatist Plautus in 2 century BC, 'tragicomedy' denotes a play with reversed roles of gods and men, masters, and slaves. In the Renaissance, tragicomedy's definition evolved into what Samuel Johnson described as a "drama compounded of merry and serious events". The Italian poet Battista Guarini defined tragicomedy as having most of the tragedy's (and some of comedy's) elements but carrying no action to a tragic conclusion. This definition is borne out in John Fletcher's play The Faithful Shepherdess (1608), adapted from Guarini's Il pastor fido (1590). In short, tragicomedy is a hybrid genre in which "tragic and comic both exist and are formally and emotionally dependent on one another." Though King Lear is among Shakespeare's most renowned tragedies, it is not without its comic side.

Conventionally, the ancient Greek plays classified comedy and tragedy by content and literary form. Tragedy is serious, whereas comedy is frivolous and vulgar. Greek comedy was written to satirize and poke fun at current events in Greek culture, involving amplified vulgarity and domesticity — it tells entertaining stories in the everyday lives of common men. On the other hand, Greek tragedy

was written to purify the spirits of men by portraying main characters, often coming from royal bloodlines or Gods, who fight against their own inevitable fates. Though the plays end with their tragic deaths?, these characters' inner conflicts and battles against powerful subjects are admirable, and more: it reflects the spirit of humanity and initiates emotional catharsis for audiences. Evidently, in Ancient Greek, the content and purpose of the two genres tell stories vastly different.

However, the definition of comedy evolved. The rise of Christianity marked a change in comedy. As Erich Auerbach argues in *Mimesis*, the prosperity of Christianity has a horrendous influence on the literary form of comedy by breaking out the traditional principle of Greek comedy of seriousness in language and rigorous format. Instead, new comedy, under the effect of Christianity, promotes Christian values of reconciliation, forgiveness, and redemption. The *Divine Comedy* written by Dante Alighieri is such an embodiment of this new Christianized comedy. The *Divine Comedy* recounts a soul's journey to God from its recognition of sin in the inferno, which was named for two reasons: first, the narrative poem was written in Italian, not in Latin, so it is vulgar in format, not serious enough to be a tragedy; second and more importantly, that the poem shows a process of moral salvation, as the protagonist travels from hell to heaven and is resurrected by God at the end. This process of transcending from bad to good and moral correction of one's sin embodies the theme of redemption that aligns with traditional Christian merit. As Northrop Frye argues in *The Argument of Comedy*, the form and definition of comedy have evolved over time from old comedy to new comedy. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is thus an example of the highest form of comedy.

From the Christian tradition, suffering is the necessary gateway to being redeemed and reaching heaven. Because the main character in *King Lear* is redeemed from suffering, its theme is inseparable from the Christian conception of redemption and thus can be considered a tragicomedy.

King Lear presents a compelling blend of tragic and comic elements [BG10], making it challenging to categorize within a single genre. On one hand, it incorporates traditional tragicomedy conventions by exploring profound themes such as power, betrayal, madness, and deception [BG11] while interspersing moments of comic relief [BG12] and touching affection. The dual plotlines, with the subplot closely intertwined with the main plot, further exemplify [BG13] the play's connection to tragicomedy.

The thread of redemption in *King Lear* is artfully demonstrated in three ways – characterization, themes, and narration. First, by exploring themes of reconciliation and forgiveness through meetings between Lear and Cordelia and between Gloucester and Edgar. Second, the characterization of the play offers a unique perspective into the complexities of human nature [BG14]. Third, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare casts female characters as saviors in the male characters' journeys to redemption.

This paper discusses the possibility of defining *King Lear* as tragicomedy by analyzing the comic basis of its structure and the redemptive theme of its content.

2.2. The Structure and Comic Basing of Lear

In addition to the play conforming to Christian traditions of redemption, its structure has much in common with the comedy of the time. Nahum Tate, in hopes of giving Cordelia the happy ending she deserves, produced an adaptation of *King Lear* in 1681, in which Cordelia survives and marries Edgar, declaring "truth and virtue shall at last succeed." Tate's work reveals the comic possibilities of *King Lear*, while it simultaneously offers the ending as an enigma – what would unfold afterward, is there a possibility of Cordelia's resurrection? [BG27] Tate's answer is yes, and he is not the only one. The ending can blur the boundary between a tragedy and a comedy. [BG28] Northrop Frye argues that all tragedies are unfinished comedies. True comedies unfold in a circle: from revealing the imperfections to rebelling against them and finally, to embracing those imperfections and reconciling with society.

This rule is at work in Shakespearean comedies. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows how when revealing flaws in the complicated love triangles and tensions between the mortal and fairy realms. The young lovers' escape into the forest and Puck's meddling with the characters' destinies represents a rebellion against civilization [BG29]. As the characters come to be joined in love and the magical

and mortal worlds are restored to harmony, the drama welcomes flaws and reconciliation in the end. Another contentious comedy by William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, explores the flaws in gender roles and society expectations. Through Petruchio's attempts to "tame" Katherine and her outspoken opposition to conventional gender norms, the rebellion against society [BG30] is depicted. The play concludes with the embracing of imperfections and reconciliation, as Katherine and Petruchio come to understand and accept each other, and they present a newly harmonious relationship. Similar to the structure of these comedies, this circle pattern is applicable to *King Lear* as well. In fact, the play is so replete with this pattern that it can be illustrated through the two plotlines separately.

King Lear divides his realm among his three daughters according to the strength of their declarations of love for him at the start of the play. This behavior displays Lear's vanity and his incapacity to understand true love, two character flaws. Similar to how the Duke of Gloucester fails to perceive the truth and is led astray by his young son Edmund to wrong the senior priest Edgar. These flaws in the two characters are what they are. As the story develops, their choices and actions cause chaos and suffering: Gloucester's eyes are gouged out for his credulity while he is not crippled, and Lear is made homeless and barred from the palace, the very symbol of power, for his dictatorship when he is in power.

The play begins with King Lear dividing his kingdom among three daughters based on the potency of their expressions of love for him. This action reveals the flawed nature of Lear's character – his vanity, and his inability to recognize genuine love. Similarly, the Duke of Gloucester is misled by his little son Edmund to wrong the elder hier Edgar, failing at seeing the truth. These are the peering at the imperfections.

As the plot progresses, their actions and decisions lead to chaos and suffering. Lear becomes insane after being expelled by his two eldest daughters. Gloucester experiences a state of debilitation after being betrayed by his youngest son. The two disheartened men, entangled in vile agony, are, however, more self-aware than ever. Both of them experience anger at their encounter, regret over wronging the incredibly kind, and realization that their predicament is entirely their own doing. Lear is homeless and locked out from the palace – the very embodiment of power – for his dictatorship when he is in power; and Gloucester's eyes are gouged out for his gullibility. Gloucester's suicide attempt and Lear's insanity are the characters' measures of retaliation against the tragic outcome brought on by their shortcomings. These constitute the characters' rebellion against fate.

Both afflicted men are ultimately saved by their children. In the midst of lunacy, Lear reunites with Cordelia, who graciously forgives him and helps him reclaim his throne from the sisters. Gloucester, who is blind, stumbles into the disguised Edgar and is saved from his fevered suicide attempt. Even though the play has a tragic conclusion in which the main characters die, these moments of reconciliation cannot be disregarded when analyzing Lear's structural foundation in comedy.

2.3. Comparative Analysis between Lear and Other Shakespearean Tragicomedies

In terms of characterization, it is not a surprising discovery to see Shakespeare made his female characters facilitate and aid in the transformation of male characters, especially by taking the role of savior in redeeming flaws. Similar to *King Lear*, female characters in *The Winter's Tale* and *Merchant of Venice* (two renowned Shakespearean tragicomedies) play a significant role in redeeming male characters and setting their course straight.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes is the king of Sicilia, who irrationally suspects his pregnant wife of adultery with the king of Bohemia, making her suffer unwarranted accusations and "die." Because of Leontes' false accusation of his wife, his son Mamilius dies; his daughter Perdita is deserted. In mourning, Leontes spends sixteen years repenting his mistake until reuniting with his wife and daughter. Leontes is an insanely jealous and suspicious character who wrecks his family; in the end, he rectifies these shortcomings, repents, and is redeemed. This process of redemption, however, cannot be completed without the aid of three women: Hermione, Perdita, and Paulina.

Hermione is essential to Leontes' redemption because she marks the beginning and end of his transformation. Her "death," directly resulting from Leontes' jealousy and suspicion, or in other words, his flaws, marks the start of Leontes' redemption: he vows to repent for the rest of his life for wrongfully accusing Hermione. When he practices a "saint-like" sorrow for sixteen years, reunites with Perdita he once deserted, and mends his ways, Hermione reappears, resurrected from death, which marks the completion of Leontes' redemption. Hermione's disappearance and reappearance coincide with the beginning and end of Leontes' transformation, which may not be an accident but a design. In *King Lear*, Cordelia disappears from the stage after the very first scene and reappears when Lear has experienced a great deal of psychological discovery and change, coming towards the completion of his transformation. Therefore, the two female characters have something in common. Both are also beautiful and chaste, possess a sort of divinity and sacredness, and most importantly, function as landmarks for the start and the end of redemption.

Perdita is the child abandoned by Leontes. Left in Bohemia to die, she is rescued and raised by a shepherd. She and Florizell, the prince of Bohemia, fall in love, but the king, Polixenes, opposes their marriage. Hence, the young couple flees to Sicilia. Florizell takes Perdita to Leontes' place, who agrees to speak to Polixenes on the young couple's behalf. As a tradition, daughters are married in their father's presence. The fact that Leontes is the intended witness for Perdita and Florizell's marriage is touching. Although Leontes and Perdita do not recognize each other, the scene presents the reconciliation of father and daughter after sixteen years apart. It also foreshadows that Leontes' redemption is near completion, as the oracle states: "The king [Leontes] shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found." With the lost child found, Leontes will have an heir and a good end.

Paulina, a noblewoman of Sicily, also plays an important role in Leontes' journey of redemption. Paulina is unrelenting in her condemnation of Leontes after Hermione perishes. In Act Five Scene One, Paulina urges Leontes to "remember" Hermione and to swear to never remarry. Her speech is poignant and her attitude fierce. Paulina is like a judge: she makes sure Leontes suffers and gets punished for his past mistake, and would hold him in check if he is being easy himself.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the female character Portia becomes the men's savior as well. When Antonio is life-threatening in court to give Shylock a pound of flesh, Portia, disguised as lawyer Balthazar, enters. She artfully resolves the crisis, arguing that Shylock may get a pound of flesh but must acquire it without one drop of blood. Portia uses her wit to defeat Shylock and save Antonio from danger.

It can be said that in tragicomedy plots, Shakespeare often let his female characters promote and help the male characters realize important changes, and even help the male characters repair their defects by playing the role of savior. The fact that *King Lear* conforms to this characteristic adds more credibility to its potential tragicomic basing. The theme of redemption in *King Lear* is driven by three different emotions, and both positive and toxic examples are presented: familial love, men-women love, and the love between the King and his subjects.

Through the Lear family and the Gloucester family, the play offers a glimpse into the dynamics of the family unit. Both families are wealthy, but they live in unfavorable situations where the interaction between the parents and children is strained. Lear forces Cordelia out and is oppressed by Goneril and Regan himself; Gloucester drives Edmund out and is deceived by Edmund. For both families, the harshness of the parent seems to pass onto their offspring, creating a toxic, damaging, and mutually combative relationship. The fathers are then made right by the loving children they wronged and mistreated. Shakespeare seems to imply that familial love is a mutually compliant relationship through this procedure. Accepting one another's flaws and being forgiving of one another are essential to a healthy relationship.

The complicated bond between Edmund, Goneril, and Regan serves as a metaphor for the love between men and women – love is of dual nature, being both redemptive and destructive. As explained in the above paragraph, Goneril, Regan, and Edmund are villains who are covetous to power. For the sisters, their love for Edmund is a destructive force that tears their relationship apart, causing a deadly rivalry; yet, to Edmund, being loved by the two sisters exerts a redemptive force on

him that awakens his conscience. As he is ready to pass away, Edmund discovers that Goneril and Regan have passed away in his place and decides to "do some good." He revokes the warrant for Lear and Cordelia's execution. The play's lover relationship seems to support the idea that women are supposed to be the ones to save the day and save the men. Shakespeare seems to give women in King Lear a type of purifying power by demonstrating that even a hopeless conspirator like Edmund may be transformed. Women become saviors who support the male characters' change and redemption.

There is no finer illustration of the king-subject relationship than Kent's unwavering devotion to Lear. Despite being exiled from England by Lear himself, Kent chooses to pretend to be someone else to continue serving Lear in secret. All of these incidents relate to the play's central theme of love. These episodes are all related to Lear's theme of "redemption." Through three different types of emotional presentation, the theme of "redemption" is constantly emphasized and sublimated in the play, and the compatibility between King Lear and Dante's comedy is further enhanced. Shakespeare's portrayal of human complexity and character duality in King Lear endows the play with a satiric vibe of social mockery that corresponds to the tragicomic nature in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*.

Shakespeare is a master at creating villains made of circumstances and protagonists not devoid of the dark side, letting all characters stay in a middle, gray area. One way he appeals to audiences' resonance with villains is by making them rebellious. Shylock, the Jewish moneylender in *The Merchant of Venice* is such an archetype. In the play, Shylock lends Antonio money, asking for a pound of flesh if Antonio does not return the money on time. In the court, Shylock demands that the terms of his bonds be fulfilled, despite Bassanio rendering him a triple amount of repayment. Shylock holds on to his quest for Antonio's flesh. While it seems cruel to want Antonio's life, Shylock has a sufficient motive to account for his hostility. In court, he gives such powerful expression to his alienation due to the hatred around his identity as a Jew, an outsider in Venice. Antonio has "spet upon his Jewish gaberdine," calling him a "misbeliever" and a "cut-throat dog." These heavily derogative names reveal Antonio's antisemitism. If reading from the lens of Shylock, he is a minority taking legal weapons to defend his identity and avenge Antonio, the discriminator. His action, thus, is not reprehensible, but heroic.

The narration of rebellion is a consistent undertone throughout King Lear. Like Shylock, the three villains in King Lear are rebellious in their strive to break through or challenge existing social norms. The sisters are portrayed as power-hungry antagonists, but they show signs of challenging gender stereotypes and the patriarchy. After obtaining their share of King Lear's kingdom, Goneril and Regan quickly establish their control over their lands and houses. Their assertion of authority challenges traditional gender roles that women are passive and subservient. They also challenge the patriarchal notion that women should be dependent on male direction and decisions by refusing to mindlessly obey their father's wishes and contesting his power.

Edmund in King Lear seeks to topple the hierarchical system that disadvantaged those of inferior births. It is firstly explicitly shown by Edmund's soliloquy, in which he questions the social hierarchy and god's favoritism of the legitimate and expresses an eagerness to topple this system of favoritism. Although the world sees the bastard as "base" and "inferior," he never abides by social placement and conformity but seeks self-improvement, as expressed in his monologue: "Edmund the base shall top the legitimate." His character is morally reprehensible but uplifting if we put ourselves in Edmund's shoes. These three characters's rebellion against the society they lived in is admirable.

On the contrary, Shakespeare also make good men into villain by intentionally adding character flaws. In *The Merchant of Venice*, one thing that makes male protagonists controversial is their controlling and possessive attitudes towards their wives. The leading character Bassanio does not love Portia enough, at least, not as much as his brotherly love for Antonio. When Shylock is about to take a pound of flesh from Antonio's chest, Bassanio bawls that "Antonio, I am married to a wife which is as dear to me as life itself, but life itself, my wife, and all the world are not with me esteemed above thy life. I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all here to this devil, to deliver you." From the statement we can see that by making Portia his wife, Bassanio thinks that he has a right and a claim

over Portia's life, as if she is an object belonging to him. Antonio's statement can be regarded as an exaggerated confession of love for his doomed brother. Yet, as if this is not enough disquieting, Shakespeare writes through the mouth of Antonio that "I have a wife who I protest I love, I would she were in heaven, so she could entreat some power to change this currish Jew." While it can be argued that these statements are nothing but testaments to an endearing brotherhood, the fact that both men allege to sacrifice their wives in exchange for their brother's life is particularly jarring and offputting. Many female readers report that this part is very offensive to them and showcases Shakespeare's sexism. However, setting the controversy aside, this scene produces a brilliant characterization. In such a way, Shakespeare sheds a dark color on the two supposedly good characters and puts their nature in question. Before Bassanio and Gratiano say such things, their character images are upright, trustworthy, and loyal good men, and every audience would stand on their side against the evident villain Shylock in court; however, after their speeches wreck these established images, there seem to be no good men in court, and now audiences are about to vacillate between two sides. In the meanwhile, Shakespeare creates a sardonic situation that involves a transaction of evil: in the foreground, Shylock is the villainous, cut-throat slayer about to take Antonio's life, whereas, in the background, the two supposedly good men frame their wives' deaths (despite not carried out) and become slayers as well.

Lear, as the positive character in the play is not devoid of negative qualities: an outright dictator he is, who carries extreme ego into places beyond politics. In his nuclear family, with three daughters Lear holds none of the supposed familial intimacy but is full of control. This image is quickly established in the first scene where Lear disowns Cordelia by virtue of her ineloquent flattery and is soon enforced in the follow-up scenes. At oldest daughter Goneril's palace, Lear's knights, "disordered" and "debauched," behave poorly with "epicurism and lust." When Goneril asks Lear to dismiss half of them for her palace is made into "a tavern or a brothel," Lear throws a fit on her. "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, more hideous when thou showest thee in a child than the sea monster," Lear hissed vehemently. He even curses that Goneril will be infertile: "dry up in her the organs of increase, and from her derogate body never spring a babe to honor her." Up until driven out of the palace, Lear continuously degrades Goneril in the later scenes as a "devil," "degenerate bastard," or "serpent." So much unagreeable speech, isn't Lear himself the most ingratitude? It remains a question whether the sisters' cruelty stems from the very experience of being mistreated by their father.

Therefore, it can be concluded that in the plot setting of King Lear, antagonists are endowed with qualities that intrigue audiences' sympathy, while the protagonists, equally, possess shortcomings that added complexity to their characterization, a featuring narration consistent with other tragicomedies.

2.4. Discussing the Tragicomic Core of Lear through an Examination of Lear's Strategies and Forms of Redemption

Redemption is achieved through suffering, which is an overarching theme in King Lear. In terms of interpretation of such theme, the play has two plotlines; Lear and Gloucester, each a central character in his plotline, are redeemed by mending their personal shortcomings after suffering the consequences. In each case, their redemption is made possible because of female characters who take the roles of God-like saviors or devilish perpetrators.

It is worth noting that this process also contains a considerable gender element: female characters play as the savior or perpetrator, promoting male characters in their redemption journey. This gender element is common in European comedies such as *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, *Tartuffe* by Moliere, etc. In comedy, female characters play a role in the growth and transformation of male characters through their wit, intelligence, humor, or other means, leading to a positive outcome and ultimate harmony. In tragedy, however, women are often innocent victims who perish due to men's faults, such as the drowned Ophelia in *Hamlet* and the murdered Desdemona in *Othello*.

Therefore, because the female characters in *King Lear* contribute to the male characters' transformation and redemption, instead of vainly sacrificing on behalf of men's mistakes, the play has a comic base in its character setting and structure, thus being a tragicomedy. The relationship between Lear and his three daughters both continues and perverts conventional gender roles. Lear and Cordelia have a traditional father-daughter relationship – the father is dominant and the daughter submits. Lear is a particularly tyrannical parent who ignores Cordelia's free will but demands her unconditional compliance.

In act one scene one, Lear requests his daughters to publicly profess their love for him. Cordelia refuses to betray her candid heart into flatter and says nothing, [BG19] which makes Lear furious, disowning Cordelia and her of dowry. Lear is offended by such a small incident because Cordelia deviates from his expectation: the idea that her father's happiness should be the daughter's filial duty persuades Lear to expect Cordelia would do as he asks. However, Cordelia's reticence implies her refusal to comply; to Lear, this is unacceptable – it is a deviation from his expectation as well as a form of disobedience, a potential challenge to the father's authority. Interestingly, this conventional relationship is reversed between Lear and the elder two sisters, Goneril and Regan.

With Cordelia, Lear is the dominant father, almost tyrannically, demanding her submission, but with the sisters, Lear becomes the submissive one, who is forced into complying with the sisters' demands. For instance, the two sisters bargain with Lear to cut down his retinue: from one hundred knights to fifty, to five and twenty, and finally, to none. They threaten to stop hosting Lear lest he agrees to cut his men; Lear angrily leaves the castle into the storm. When did the two sisters abandon? Lear, the conventional father-daughter relationship is perverted – the dominant father succumbs to the supposedly submissive daughters. Such a flip in the gender roles is quintessential to Lear's redemption because it enables him to peer into his flaws and imperfections: as a tyrant himself, Lear now suffers at the hands of his daughters' tyranny, inspiring him to realize the injustice he has done to Cordelia and launch the first step of his redemption journey.

In addition to father-daughter relationships, other male-female relationships in the play deviate from conventional power dynamics and the pattern wherein men rescue women. Despite men's physicality and social status generally being higher than those of women, the play shows that women are the most powerful agents in male-female relationships. In *King Lear*, men are often the victims of being oppressed by women, while women take the more powerful roles as oppressors or saviors. For instance, in a nuclear family unit, Goneril, instead of Albany, her husband, is in control – she makes decisions, leads the military power, and Albany must obey her despite his attitude. Lear, the lineman in his family, supposedly enjoys the greatest power, but the play shows how he is oppressed by his two daughters. A king, instead of being defeated by a male rival or nearby king, suffers at the hands of two women. When he is in distress, it is another woman, Cordelia, who saves him, instead of men like Gloucester or Kent. In the final fight between the British and the French forces, the leaders of the military forces are women. Therefore, *King Lear* reversed the gender-stereotyped pattern of men saving women.

However, such a step away from gender expectations is incomplete, as the characterization of female characters still exists according to an angel-and-witch dichotomy. In the play, Cordelia is the angel who meets the expectation of a forgiving, loving, and nurturing female; on the other hand, Goneril and Regan are the unforgiving, cruel, and vindictive witches who violate traditional gender expectations of female characters. Such an easily dichotomic portrayal of female characters - as good or evil, desirable or undesirable - lacks complexity, but fits perfectly into the female archetype under the male gaze[BG23]. The two sisters have no filial piety, tolerance, or benevolence expected in a female character; instead, they are cruel and aggressive, possessing qualities that break through the gender stereotyping characterization of female characters. They share their own spotlight in the play by boldly challenging Lear's authority and the social patriarchy.

It is a pity that Shakespeare concludes their rebellion with sheer evil. The monologue has the power to make a morally reprehensible action comprehensible, just as Edmund becomes an attractive villain and a victim of circumstance by taking audiences through his mental process. Shakespeare does not

write a monologue for the sisters, letting them be typical antagonists and born-bad witches. Thereby, King Lear has some progress from the conventional gender roles by depicting reversed power dynamics in male-female relationships, but this change does not prevent the characterization of female characters from returning to the convention.

King Lear inherits the common feature of traditional European comedies by having women promote men to obtain salvation. Although the play has an ending of tragedy, the structural basis of Lear further consolidates its tragicomic core.

3. Summary

While King Lear is a well-recognized tragedy, its comic characteristic in many aspects cannot be ignored. First, the play conforms to the comedy cycle paradigm proposed by Frye: seeing defects, resisting defects, and finally embracing defects and reconciling with society; Secondly, the play is consistent with Shakespeare's famous tragicomedy *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Winter's Tale* in terms of characterization, theme interpretation and plot narration. Third, the play's interpretation of the theme of "redemption" is in line with Frye's definition of the highest form of comedy, Dante's *Divine comedy*, for its discussion of redemption. On top of that, the male characters (Lear, Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund) are given some chance at redemption through the acts of their female counterparts consistent with European comedy. Overall, though main characters suffer and die in the play, there is also substantial experience by those characters of self-awareness, apology and forgiveness, and redemption. Therefore, King Lear has elements of both Shakespeare's tragedy and Dante's comedy, and can be regarded as a tragicomedy.

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