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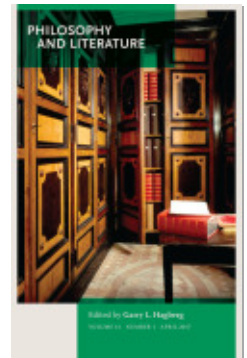
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*King Lear*

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USES OF HAMARTIA, FLAW, AND IRONY IN *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS* AND *KING LEAR*

**Abstract.** I agree with those who say that hamartia is best understood in its literal sense of “missing the mark” rather than as “tragic flaw.” The two are different. Hamartia suggests an action—committing an error or misperceiving a situation—while “tragic flaw” suggests a condition, a state of being such as rashness or excessive egoism. Citing examples from *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *King Lear*, I show that in each case the protagonist’s misperceptions exacerbate his flaw, serving to propel the action. Irony is shown to be frequently conjoined with hamartia. I argue that hamartia in *Oedipus Tyrannus* helps to effect catharsis.

**J**ULES BRODY ARGUES THAT Aristotle’s usage of hamartia in *The Poetics* is best understood in terms of its literal meaning, “missing the mark,” rather than in the broader, familiar sense of “tragic flaw.”

*Hamartia* is a morally neutral non-normative term, derived from the verb *hamartano*, meaning “to miss the mark,” “to fall short of an objective.” And by extension: to reach one destination rather than the intended one; to make a mistake, not in the sense of a moral failure, but in the nonjudgmental sense of taking one thing for another, taking something for its opposite. *Hamartia* may betoken an error of discernment due to ignorance, to the lack of an essential piece of information.<sup>1</sup>

Or, as S. H. Butcher would have it: “as applied to a single act, it [hamartia] denotes an error due to inadequate knowledge of particular circumstances.”<sup>2</sup>

In this short essay I shall attempt to identify several “single acts” of hamartia as they are fleshed out in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *King Lear*, and note how each playwright makes special use of the device. But first I shall comment briefly on why hamartia and the tragic flaw, while related, are not the same.

Hamartia and the tragic flaw are different in that the first is an action, a doing—missing the mark, falling short of a goal, being examples. A tragic flaw, on the other hand, implies a condition, a state of being—excessive pride, rashness, are examples. Lear’s perception of Cordelia as unloving and ungrateful, his missing the mark, is not the same as his flaw: obsessive egoism. But the two are related in that the hamartia, the perception of an unloving daughter, exacerbates the flaw, the egoism, causing it to flair and thus advance the action.

Turning for the moment to *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Sophocles’s treatment of hamartia depends, in part, upon the audience’s familiarity with the story, and hamartia is often expressed in the form of dramatic irony. Consider the following. Here is Oedipus, early on, seeking to reassure Creon, the Priest, and the Suppliants of his loyalty.

And justly you will see in me an ally,  
 a champion of my country and the God.  
 For when I drive pollution from the land  
 I shall not serve a distant friend’s advantage,  
 But act in my own interest. Whoever  
 he was that killed the king may readily  
 wish to dispatch me with his murderous hand;  
 so helping the dead king I help myself.<sup>3</sup>

Oedipus has clearly missed the mark. He is unaware that he himself is the polluting agent he seeks to punish. He has “inadequate knowledge,” in Butcher’s words. But *we* know the truth. We know that Oedipus will soon turn his murderous, patricidal hand against himself, putting out his eyes. So hamartia and dramatic irony are conjoined.

Hamartia also serves to effect catharsis. Previously in these pages I suggested that catharsis takes place when we come to realize that what we previously regarded as unmerited misfortune is, in fact, merited; that Oedipus, by offering to torture the old herdsman, and in threatening to take the lives of Creon and Tiresias, and through his paranoid-like ravings, engages in tyrannical behavior and shows himself unfit to rule—even if he were not already precluded as the source of the city’s

pollution.<sup>4</sup> These instances, coupled with the protagonist's hubris and the exigencies of irony, disabuse us of the notion that banishment and blindness are unjust punishments. The result is the collapse of pity—defined as being a response to unmerited misfortune<sup>5</sup> and hence of fear, which is dependent on pity; hence, catharsis.

Two examples follow. In the first, Oedipus, in full, paranoid-like, attack mode, confronts Creon.

You, sir, how is it you came here? Have you so much  
brazen face daring that you venture in  
my house although you are proved manifestly  
the murderer of that man, though you tried  
openly highway robbery of my crown?  
For God's sake tell me what you saw in me,  
what cowardice or what stupidity,  
that made you lay a plot like this against me?  
Did you imagine I should not observe  
the crafty scheme that stole up on me or  
seeing it, take no means to counter it?  
Was it not stupid of you to make the attempt,  
to try to hunt down royal power without  
the people at your back with friends? For only  
with the people at your back or money can  
the hunt end in the capture of a crown. (S, lines 532–43)

A good deal is happening in this passage. We have, first of all, Oedipus's ubiquitous missing of the mark: Creon did not murder Laius; Oedipus himself did. And we have dramatic irony as well: it was Oedipus, acting alone, who hunted down royal power, robbing the old king of his life, gaining access to his kingdom, effecting "the capture of a crown." Want him running your city-state? Didn't think so. Creon makes the point a bit later on in the exchange.

*Oedipus*

When he that plots against me secretly  
moves quickly, I must quickly counterplot.  
If I wait, taking no decisive measure,  
his business will be done, and mine will be spoiled.

*Creon*

What do you want to do then? banish me?

*Oedipus*

No, certainly; kill you, not banish you.

*Creon*

I do not think you've your wits about you.

...

*Oedipus*

You are a rogue.

*Creon*

Suppose you do not understand?

*Oedipus*

But yet  
I must be ruler.

*Creon*

Not if you rule badly. (S, lines 618–28)

The point is made; Oedipus is clearly unfit to serve and needs to go.

Coming around full circle I agree with Professor Brody that hamartia, in and of itself, is morally neutral. But it often exists in close association with “moral failure.” In the exchanges with Creon cited above, Oedipus mistakes his brother-in-law’s rectitude for its opposite; he misses the mark; and, acting out, threatens not to banish but to kill Creon. Here we have hamartia, itself neutral, generating morally reprehensible, tyrannical behavior when brought in contact with a predisposed temperament, a tragic flaw, if you will.

I now examine how tragic flaws and hamartias operate in *King Lear*. Lear has several of each. Among his flaws are excessive egoism, rashness, rigidity, authoritarianism, excessive pride, and a penchant for tyranny. Foremost among his hamartias is the stubborn belief that he can maintain his honors and trappings, the symbols of power, without possessing the power itself. Other instances of hamartia are Lear’s mistaking Cordelia’s honesty for pride; and in the case of her sisters, assigning honesty to flattery; and with Kent, mistaking his honesty for disloyalty.

With Cordelia, Lear mistakes honesty for pride—ironic in that the king himself is obsessively proud. This missing of the mark, his misperception, inflames his egoism. He cannot tolerate the appearance of disrespect, and so, rashly, banishes Cordelia and, a bit later, Kent.

Several similarities between *King Lear* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* are worth noting. Safe to say, both protagonists have issues with pride, are rash, tyrannical, and suffer difficulties perceiving conventional reality. In addition, the two plays are alike in that their playwrights make similar uses of hamartia and irony. Both make use of blindness. Both explore tyranny. Shakespeare may or may not have been familiar with hamartia as a term in the *Poetics*, but he certainly made good use of it. Consider that Lear misses the mark variously with Cordelia, Kent, Goneril, Regan, and the Fool (whom he offers to whip), as well as in the overriding notion that he can abandon power and still retain its trappings.

As for Gloucester, he misses the mark by allowing Edmund to prey on his credulity, and loses his eyes as a result. Both Shakespeare and Sophocles use irony in conjunction with blindness. Both Lear and Oedipus come to “see,” to *hit* the mark, as it were, when they are blind.

Otherwise, Shakespeare’s use of irony is not as extensive as Sophocles’s, but it’s there. Consider the following moment of irony, and hamartia. To set the context Lear has just disowned Cordelia, and Kent has called upon his king to reconsider. Playing the tyrant, Lear orders Kent to desist.

Peace, Kent!  
Come not between the dragon and his wrath. . . .  
Call France; who stirs?  
Call Burgundy. Cornwall and Albany,  
With my two daughters’ dowers digest this third:  
Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.<sup>6</sup>

Ironies present themselves. The dragon, high and mighty, shouting orders, is in the very process of abandoning his power. We see him teetering, living an illusion—a trust that he can keep the trappings and honors of majesty while handing over its engines. And, as we have noted, we see the irony of Lear accusing his daughter of excessive pride when he himself suffers from it, even in the moment.

In summary, hamartia and the tragic flaw are not the same: the one being an action and the other an existential condition, a state of being. In both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *King Lear*, hamartia and the tragic flaw are shown to be related. Both protagonists, Oedipus and Lear, have flaws exacerbated by misperception, serving to inflame wrath and propel action. Irony is associated with hamartia in both tragedies. In *Oedipus Tyrannus* hamartia is associated with catharsis. Playwrights seeking to try their hand at tragedy might do well to consider the uses of hamartia, flaw, and irony.

1. Jules Brody, "Fate, Philology, Freud," *Philosophy and Literature* 38 (2014): 23.
2. S. H. Butcher, "Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and the Fine Arts," in *Aristotle: Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1951), pp. 317–18.
3. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), lines 135–41; hereafter abbreviated S.
4. Roy Glassberg, "Oedipus the Tyrant: A View of Catharsis in Eight Sentences," *Philosophy and Literature* 40 (2016): 579.
5. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 45.
6. Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, Folger Shakespeare Library (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), act 1, scene 1, lines 135–45.