

Original Paper

A Comparative Study of the Tragic Forms in the Dramatic Works of Shakespeare and Guan Hanqing

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Abstract

Guan Hanqing and William Shakespeare, as brilliant stars in the history of Chinese and Western drama respectively, both dedicate great tragedies to mankind. By means of textual close reading and cross-cultural research methods, this paper analyzes the tragic forms of the dramatic works of Guan Hanqing and William Shakespeare from multiple dimensions, including tragic characters, tragic conflicts, and tragic endings. A comparative study of the tragic forms in their dramatic works helps us deeply understand the unique charm and inherent differences between Chinese and Western tragedies, providing a new perspective for cross-cultural drama research.

Keywords

Shakespeare, Guan Hanqing, tragic forms, comparative study

1. Introduction

Guan Hanqing and William Shakespeare, as brilliant stars in the history of Chinese and Western drama respectively, although living in different times and spaces, each shone brightly in the field of tragic creation. Guan Hanqing lived in the Yuan Dynasty, an era of sharp ethnic and class contradictions, and his tragic works, like a mirror, reflected the sufferings and struggles of the people at the bottom of society. Shakespeare was active during the English Renaissance, and his tragedies profoundly explored various issues of human nature, fate, and society. A comparative study of the tragic forms in their dramatic works helps us deeply understand the unique charm and inherent differences between Chinese and Western tragedies, providing a new perspective for cross-cultural drama research.

2. Tragic Characters: The Struggle and Helplessness of Commoners vs. The Cognitive Breakdown of Nobles

2.1 Guan Hanqing: The Paradigm of Suffering and Struggle of Bottom Characters

“Tragedy as a genre originated with the ancient Greeks (the name probably derives from ‘goatsong’, and relates to the therapeutic, quasi-ritual functioning of the tragic hero as a scapegoat), and the rules of tragedy were codified by the Greek philosopher Aristotle in his *Poetics*” (Hopkins & Steggle, 2009, p. 71). “In tragedy, concern for form must be given to the characters as well as to the structure of the play, for the tragic hero must be ‘a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous.’” (Bressler, 2007, p. 20). Unlike Aristotle's requirement for the characters to be highly renowned in tragedy, in Guan Hanqing's tragic works, the characters are mostly ordinary people at the bottom of society. Take *The Injustice to Dou E* as an example. Dou E is a widow with a tragic fate, who was sold as a child bride at an early age and lived a hard life. When facing the forced marriage by Old Zhang and his son Donkey Zhang and the unjust judgment by Prefect Tao Wu, she had no power to resist and could only be slaughtered by others. Another example is Zhao Pan'er in *Rescued by a Coquette*, a woman who, although living on the edge of society, tried to get rid of her predicament with her wisdom and courage. Also, Mother Wang in *The Butterfly Dream*, an ordinary mother, who would sacrifice herself to protect her son, showing the struggle and helplessness of the bottom people in difficulties.

Dou E in *The Injustice to Dou E* is the concentrated target of institutional violence. The Yuan Dynasty system, through a combination of economic, judicial, and ethical means, tamed Dou E into a guilty victim. Dou E's tragic trajectory is locked layer by layer by many kinds of institutional violence, such as economic institutional violence—being sold to Granny Cai as a daughter-in-law at the age of seven, reflecting the legal commercialization of women's bodies under the Yuan Dynasty's wife pawn system, and judicial institutional violence—Prefect Tao Wu's trial logic is that “low characters are like that: they'll only confess when put to torture,” which exposes the brutality of the Yuan Dynasty's flogging system.

Zhang Gui in *Lu Zhailang* vividly demonstrates the dissolution of subjectivity under the pressure of power, becoming an object in power relations and losing human subjectivity. When facing Lu Zhailang's seizure of his wife, Zhang Gui experiences a psychological evolution of shock—fear—collapse. Commoners' right to speak has been deprived by the privileged class in the Yuan Dynasty. He finally shaves his head to become a monk, which symbolizes the desperate negation of the existing order through self-destruction.

2.2 Shakespeare: The Narrative of Cognitive Breakdown of the Aristocratic Class

The protagonists of Shakespeare's tragedies are mostly from the aristocratic class. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet is the Prince of Denmark, with noble blood and superior status. However, he falls into the predicament of avenging his father, struggling painfully between ideal and reality, reason and emotion. King Lear in

King Lear is a king who, due to a moment of folly, divides the territory of his kingdom between his fawning eldest and second daughters but is betrayed by them, falling from a high-ranking monarch to a poor old man living in the wilderness. Macbeth in *Macbeth*, originally a noble with remarkable military achievements, is driven step by step into the abyss of sin by ambition, and ultimately ends up with a tragic fate.

Hamlet is a pioneer of Western cognitive breakdown, and the collapsed order of the Danish court where he lives becomes a desert of truth. The prince's tragedy stems from some cognitive dilemmas: The collapse of religious order leads to a vacuum of existential meaning; Hamlet's anxiety about the legitimacy of action, which can be seen from his words "conscience does make cowards of us all", reflects the inhibition of Enlightenment rationality on the instinct of action.

Macbeth falls into the ontological dilemma of ambition, which becomes an ideological illusion driving him to self-destruction. Macbeth's tragedy goes beyond moral judgment to reach the abyss of existentialism: the witches' prophecy activates ambition from potential desire to real action; Macbeth's monologue of "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace from day to day to the last syllable of recorded time" (Shakespeare, 2002, p. 647) exposes the existential fear of meaningless repetition. The emptiness of Macbeth and his wife confirms Lacan's theory of subjective splitting, revealing the existential emptiness after the satisfaction of desire. We can clearly see the emptiness from the following monologue of Lady Macbeth:

LADY MACBETH: Naught's had, all's spent,

Where our desire is got without content.

Tis safer to be that which we destroy

Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

— *Macbeth*, Act III, scene ii

2.3 Differences in Character Personalities

The tragic characters in Guan Hanqing's works are mostly simple, kind, tenacious, and unyielding.

Dou E is kind and filial, caring for her mother-in-law. Even when wronged, she always adheres to her kind nature. Before her execution, she is still worried that her mother-in-law will be sad to see her suffer, and asks the executioner to take a detour. At the same time, she has a strong spirit of resistance. When facing an unjust trial, she dares to rebuke Heaven and Earth, shouting the grieved and indignant cry: "Ah, Earth! you will not distinguish good from bad, / And, Heaven! you let me suffer this injustice!" (Yang & Yang, 1979, p. 27)

Zhao Pan'er is intelligent and resourceful. She is well aware of the difficult situation of prostitutes, and successfully rescues her sister Song Yinzhang, who is bullied by a villain, using her wisdom and means.

The tragic characters in Shakespeare's works have more complex and multi-faceted personalities.

Hamlet is indecisive. After learning that his father was murdered, he should have taken action to revenge quickly, but falls into deep thinking and hesitation. He constantly weighs the pros and cons,

thinking about the justice and consequences of revenge, resulting in missing many opportunities for revenge.

Othello is a brave and upright man but with strong jealousy. His love for his wife Desdemona is sincere and deep, but he is blinded by jealousy due to Iago's provocation, eventually killing his innocent wife with his own hands.

Macbeth's personality has both an ambitious and power-hungry side, and a side of unextinguished conscience and inner struggle. After murdering King Duncan, he falls into deep remorse and fear.

LADYM: How now, my lord? Why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
With them they think on? Things without all remedy
Should be without regard. What's done is done.

MACBETH: We have scotch'd the snake, not kill'd it.
She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.
But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.
Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch him further.

—*Macbeth*, Act III, scene ii

3. Differences in Types of Tragic Conflicts: Social Contradictions vs. Human Nature Tearing

3.1 Guan Hanqing: Theatrical Performance of Social Class Contradictions

The tragic conflicts in Guan Hanqing's works are mainly social conflicts. In the Yuan Dynasty, society was dark, with severe ethnic and class oppression, and Guan Hanqing's works truthfully reflected this social reality. Take *The Injustice to Dou E* as an example: the conflicts between Dou E and Donkey Zhang, Old Zhang and Prefect Tao Wu are essentially contradictions between ordinary people at the bottom and evil forces, as well as corrupt officials. Donkey Zhang and his father Old Zhang attempt to seize Dou E and her mother-in-law's property; Prefect Tao Wu is corrupt and perverts the law, treating human life with contempt. Their behaviors represent the evil forces of the time, and Dou E's tragic fate

is a concentrated embodiment of such social conflicts.

Another example is *Lu Zhailang*: Lu Zhailang, a powerful and influential figure, relies on his power to seize commoners' daughters and oppress the people. The conflicts between the protagonists Li Si, Zhang Gui, and Lu Zhailang profoundly reveal social injustice and the sufferings of ordinary people.

In *The Butterfly Dream*, the intense conflict between ethics and law shows how Yuan Dynasty's judiciary destroyed legal communicative rationality through ethical intervention, leading to a false resolution of the tragic conflict.

In *The Golden Thread Pond*, the conflict between emotion and currency reveals the alienation in the early stage of capitalist germination. The obstruction of Du Ruiniang and Han Fuchen's love by the madam essentially reflects a clash of the following logics. Firstly, emotional logic: "I am determined to marry him, yet hear his servants call me unreasonable," embodying the bottom women's yearning for sincere emotion. Secondly, currency logic: The quantitative transaction of five taels of silver for a token alienates emotion into a calculable commodity. Thirdly, power logic: The music registry system's control over women's bodies makes Du Ruiniang unable to choose her spouse freely.

3.2 Shakespeare: Ontological Conflicts of Cognitive Rifts in Human Alienation

Shakespeare's tragic conflicts are more reflected as conflicts of human nature. His works deeply explore the inner contradictions and struggles of characters, showing the complexity of human nature.

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet's inner cognitive dilemma and anxiety about action are the core of the play. On one hand, he must avenge his father, which is his responsibility and mission; on the other hand, he is confused and afraid of the consequences of revenge. In a general environment of moral decay, individuals are powerless to improve the situation. He constantly ponders the meaning and value of life, with a strong sense of existential emptiness, and undergoes countless painful struggles in the process of revenge.

In *Macbeth*, Macbeth's empty desire and the conflict between his ambition and conscience are the roots of the tragedy. He craves power and kills innocent people to seize the throne, yet his conscience plunges him into deep remorse and fear.

In *King Lear*, the alienation of language and the inverted cognition of power and love lead Lear into tragedy due to his confusion between power narrative and emotional narrative. King Lear equates flattery (such as the eldest daughter Goneril's "I love you more than words can wield the matter") with true emotion, neglecting the virtue. And he passes his power to his eldest daughter Goneril and his second daughter Regan, both of whom gain his kingdom and power through flattery, yet they are heartless and without virtue.

LEAR: Ha! Goneril with a white beard? They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything I said! 'Ay' and 'no' too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words! They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie—I am not ague-proof.

—*King Lear*, Act IV, scene vi

His power is stripped away. Not taking virtue as a criterion for judgment and transferring the power to those who are heartless and without virtue can be said to be the root of his tragedy.

In *Othello*, the murder driven by jealousy is exacerbated by racial othering, making Othello a spiritual victim of colonialism. Iago's handkerchief conspiracy exposes the following cognitive fallacies. Firstly, break between signifier and signified: The handkerchief, as a signifier of love token, is usurped into evidence of adultery, reflecting the fluidity of symbolic meaning. Secondly, tyranny of the imaginary: Othello imagines possible betrayal as existing reality, falling into Lacan's cognitive trap of the mirror stage. Thirdly, superposition of racial symbolic violence: The self-stigmatization of black skin reveals the poisoning of colonial discourse on subjective identity.

3.3 Differences in Forms of Conflict Expression

Guan Hanqing's tragic conflicts are expressed intensely, with externalized and unrestrained clashes. Characters often express their anger and resistance through fierce words and actions. In *The Injustice to Dou E*, Dou E confronts Prefect Tao Wu in court, fearlessly exposing his fatuity and corruption with intense words full of anger and despair. Before her execution, she swears three oaths to prove her innocence, and this strong act of resistance pushes the tragic conflict to a climax:

DOU E: I want to say three things, officer. If you will let me, I shall die content. I want a clean mat and a white silk streamer twelve feet long to hang on the flag-pole. When the sword strikes off my head, not a drop of my warm blood will stain the ground. It will all fly up instead to the white silk streamer. This is the hottest time of summer, sir. If injustice has indeed been done, three feet of snow will cover my dead body. Then this district will suffer from drought for three whole years. (Yang & Yang, 1979, p. 29)

In *The Riverside Pavilion*, Tan Jier engages in a fierce battle of wits with Yang Yanei to protect her husband. She skillfully uses Yang Yanei's lecherous nature to trick him into giving up his sword of authority and gold tally, successfully foiling his plot.

Shakespeare's tragic conflicts, however, are full of delays and internalized twists and turns. He often reveals conflicts through characters' inner monologues and dialogues. Hamlet's soliloquies are an important way to show his inner conflicts. His famous monologue "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 141) profoundly reveals his painful thinking and inner struggle when facing revenge and life dilemmas.

In *Othello*, the dialogues between Othello and Iago, as well as Othello's inner suspicion and jealousy, gradually drive the development of the tragic conflict. Iago, through clever words, constantly sows discord between Othello and Desdemona, intensifying Othello's inner contradictions.

4. Tragic Endings

4.1 Characteristics of Guan Hanqing's Tragic Endings

Guan Hanqing's tragic endings often see justice being served, concluding with a grand reunion where order is restored. In *The Injustice to Dou E*, although Dou E dies wronged, her spirit lingers and finally

appears in a dream to her father Dou Tianzhang. After finding out the truth, Dou Tianzhang redresses Dou E's injustice, punishing the murderer Donkey Zhang and the fatuous official Tao Wu. This ending reflects Guan Hanqing's pursuit of justice and yearning for a better life.

In *The Butterfly Dream*, Mother Wang's son Wang San accidentally kills Ge Biao, a local bully, while avenging his father. When trying the case, Bao Zheng is moved by Mother Wang's righteousness and finally pardons Wang San. This ending not only embodies legal justice but also shows the goodness of human nature.

4.2 Characteristics of Shakespeare's Tragic Endings

Shakespeare's tragic endings usually involve the death of the protagonist, leaving a strong tragic impact. In *Hamlet*, Hamlet and Laertes are both wounded by poisoned swords in their duel. Before dying, Hamlet finally kills his uncle Claudius to avenge his father but pays with his own life.

In *King Lear*, after suffering betrayal from his vicious and hypocritical eldest and second daughters and enduring various hardships, Lear dies in sorrow and anger. His kind and filial youngest daughter Cordelia is also killed, making the entire story full of tragedy. Such endings profoundly reveal the unpredictability of fate and the fragility of human nature.

In *Othello*, Othello, who has lost his mind under the instigation of Iago, does not listen to Desdemona's explanation but strangles her with his own hands. After understanding the truth, he draws his sword and commits suicide, leaving behind an eternal tragedy that makes people sigh.

In *Macbeth*, Macbeth's regicide ultimately leads to his own tragedy. He is killed in the battlefield, and his fiend-like wife takes her own life. Thomas Heywood says in his *An Apology for Actors* (1612), "If we present a tragedy, we include the fatal and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders, which is aggravated and acted with all the art that may be, to terrify men from the like abhorred practices" (Smith, 2008, p. 109).

5. Conclusion

By means of textual close reading and cross-cultural research methods, this paper analyzes the tragic forms of the dramatic works of Guan Hanqing and William Shakespeare from multiple dimensions, including tragic characters, tragic conflicts, and tragic endings. Guan Hanqing's tragic characters are mostly ordinary people at the bottom of society; their conflicts are mainly social contradictions, and they fall into tragedy due to social evil forces. The endings often see justice being served and order restored. His dramatic language is vivid, with powerful character portrayals, reflecting criticism of social injustice. Shakespeare's tragic characters are mostly emperors, generals, or nobles, who move toward tragedy under the control of their own personalities and fate. The tragic conflicts focus on the inner contradictions of the characters, and the endings often involve the death of the protagonists. His dramatic language is solemn, with in-depth character portrayals, containing philosophical reflections on the darkness of human nature and the absurdity of fate.

From the perspective of mutual learning, the differences between Guan Hanqing's and Shakespeare's

tragedies are not opposites but complements. Like two towering peaks, they jointly define the spiritual height of human beings in the face of suffering. One blooms the flower of criticism in the quagmire of reality, and the other opens a window in terms of ideological cognition. The existence of such differences precisely proves the richness and openness of tragedy as the core genre of human spiritual history. Future drama research should, with a broader cultural perspective, seek commonalities in differences and find dialogues in conflicts, making Chinese and Western tragedies, as important drama types, the torch to explore the tunnel of a community with a shared future for mankind.

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