



A Comparative Reading Of Aristotelian *Hamartia* In Sophocles' *Oedipus* And Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Sophokles'in Oidipus'u ve Shakespeare'in Macbeth'inde Aristotelesçi Hamartianın Karşılaştırmalı Bir Okuması

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Öz

Aristoteles, *Poietika* adlı eserinde olay örgüsü (*mythos*), karakter (*ethos*), düşünce (*dianoia*), dil (*lexis*), melodi (*melos*) ve performansın görsel yönü (*opsis*) gibi trajedinin temel unsurlarını belirler. Bunlara ek olarak, trajik bir kusur veya yargı hatası olan “hamartia” (*ἁμαρτία*) kavramını, “peripeteia” (ani bir talih dönüşü), “anagnorisis” (gerçeğin farkına varma veya keşfi) ve “katharsis” (seyircinin acıma ve korku yoluyla duygusal arınması) kavramlarını da ele alır. Bu kavramlardan *hamartia* hem epistemolojik hem de etik açıdan özellikle önemlidir. Ancak Aristoteles, *hamartia*nın spesifik yapısını veya değerlendirmesini netleştirmez; bu da onun gerçek doğası hakkında süregelen felsefi tartışmalara yol açmıştır. Bazıları onu bir “karakter kusuru” olarak yorumlarken, diğerleri ise bilgisizliğe dayandığını düşünür ve genellikle bunu “trajik hata” olarak değerlendirir. Bu bağlamda, makalenin amacı, Oidipus ve Macbeth'i karşılaştırırken, Sofokles'in *Oidipus*'unda cehaletten kaynaklanan ve Shakespeare'in *Macbeth*'inde ise kahramanı derinden etkileyen, şiirsel adalet biçimi olarak karakterle ilişkili Aristotelesçi *hamartia* kavramını incelemektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Hamartia, Trajik Hata, Karakter Kusuru, Bilgisizlik.

Abstract

In *his Poetics*, Aristotle identifies key elements of tragedy, including plot (*mythos*), character (*ethos*), thought (*dianoia*), language (*lexis*), melody (*melos*), and the visual aspect of performance (*opsis*). He discusses “hamartia” (*ἁμαρτία*), a tragic flaw or error in judgment, along with “peripeteia” (a sudden reversal of fortune), “anagnorisis” (the recognition or discovery of the truth), and “catharsis” (the audience's emotional purification through pity and fear). Of these, *hamartia* is especially significant from both epistemological and ethical perspectives. However, Aristotle does not clarify the specific structure or evaluation of *hamartia*, which has led to ongoing philosophical debates about its true nature. Some interpret it as a “character flaw”, while others see it as rooted in ignorance, often translating it as “tragic error.” When comparing Oedipus and Macbeth, our aim is to examine the Aristotelian concept of *hamartia*—rooted in ignorance in Sophocles' *Oedipus*—and, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, how it relates to character as a form of poetic justice that profoundly impacts the protagonist.

Keywords: Hamartia, Tragic Error, Character Flaw, Ignorance.

Introduction

Perhaps one of the most suitable concepts for analyzing both Sophocles' and Shakespeare's plays through Aristotle's views on poetics is *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία). The main reason is that this concept best captures the essence of tragedy or the tragic hero. Used both epistemologically and ethically, *hamartia* has been associated with various ideas for centuries. Aristotle's work, *Poetics*, also discusses this concept in different ways. In this context, his *Poetics* is often seen as the earliest systematically organized work on art, making Aristotle the first art theorist. In this work, he provides a detailed analysis of the structure and nature of Greek tragedy as an art form (Halliwell, 1987, 3). Aristotle emphasizes that "tragedy is an imitation not of men but of action and of life, and life consists in action" (50a16): "The material to be used is not human feelings, ideas, human characters as such, or for their own sake." He sees tragedy as representing a single important action that needs careful focus. The large, dramatic universe that Shakespeare would later explore was not yet considered, and Aristotle would likely disapprove of "the half-serious subplots and comic interludes." For him, tragedy should be cohesive and tightly constructed throughout (Bremmer, 1969, 5). In chapter 14 of *Poetics*, he states that a tragedy is most powerful when it relies solely on the strength of its action rather than on extra elements such as elaborate costumes or gruesome dances. Tragic incidents (*pathe*) are especially impactful when they happen between family members or friends (Bremmer, 1969, 10).

In this context, by analyzing tragedy as a form of drama, Aristotle defines its core elements: plot (*mythos*), character (*ethos*), thought (*dianoia*), language (*lexis*), melody (*melos*), and the visual aspect of performance (*opsis*). Additional related concepts include "hamartia" (ἁμαρτία) (tragic flaw or error of judgment), "peripeteia" (sudden reversal of fortune), "anagnorisis" (recognition or discovery of the truth), and "catharsis" (emotional purification of the audience, mainly through pity and fear) (Aristotle, 1987, 37). Among these, *hamartia* plays a particularly important role, especially considering that tragedy served as part of an ethical discussion in Greek society, as Martha Nussbaum has pointed out. Through theatrical experiences, Greek society gained a better understanding of which actions and decisions by individuals within the community deserved praise or blame. They consider many factors, especially when judging someone, and evaluate whether the action stems from the individual or from external influences. So, to understand the role of *hamartia* in Aristotle, we first have to distinguish between actions. In other words, we need to determine which actions stem from a lack of self-control and are morally blameworthy. To answer these questions, we first need to examine the *Nicomachean Ethics* (henceforth *N.E.*) III. 1, where Aristotle talks about the kinds of actions that depend on voluntariness.

In *N.E.* III. 1, Aristotle begins by distinguishing between actions that are blamed or praised. For him, to make this distinction, our criterion must be "free will":

Since virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, then, and it is the voluntary ones that are praised and blamed, while the involuntary ones elicit sympathetic consideration and are sometimes even pitied, it is perhaps necessary for those who are investigating issues relating to virtue to make some determinations about what is voluntary and what involuntary (Aristotle, 2014, 1109b29-34).

In this context, he condemns some actions as involuntary if they depend on force or ignorance. Forced actions are those whose starting point is external, and the agent is influenced by outside factors. He also notes that forced actions can result from fear. However, if you're afraid for your life or someone you care about, the action driven by fear can be seen as voluntary. Therefore, he believes these kinds of actions can be considered mixed actions:

These sorts of actions are mixed, then, although they more closely resemble voluntary ones, since they are choiceworthy at the time when they are done and the end of the actions is in accord with the opportune moment. Both "voluntary" and "involuntary," then, should be ascribed with reference to the time at which the agent does these actions. And the agent does do them voluntarily, since the starting point of his moving his instrumental parts in actions of this sort is in fact internal to himself, and—since the starting-point is internal to himself—it is also up to him whether to do them or not. Such actions, then, are voluntary. Unconditionally, though, they are presumably involuntary, since no one would choose anything of this sort for what it intrinsically is (Aristotle, 2014, 1110a10-19).

When he discusses actions committed out of ignorance, Aristotle states that we should consider them all involuntary. However, he notes that if the agents can regret their actions, then we can classify them as involuntary. Aristotle explains that ignorance of the intentions behind choices does not render actions involuntary; rather, it leads to moral depravity. To illustrate that someone has acted involuntarily due to ignorance, Aristotle lists seven types of actions:

1. He or she can't be ignorant of the fact that he or she is the one acting.
2. It might be something done accidentally or in a moment of distraction.

- 3.4. He might mistakenly perceive the person in front of him as an enemy, even though that person is actually a relative or friend he simply doesn't realize.
5. Thinking their weapon is non-lethal or harmless, they might still cause harm.
6. While trying to defend themselves, they might inadvertently hurt the person they face.
7. Even a gentle touch from someone, such as a boxer during training, can cause harm, as when a boxer might knock someone out (Aristotle, 2014, 1111a6-15).

Aristotle concludes that involuntary actions are caused by force or ignorance, whereas voluntary actions are those that the agent begins with knowledge of the specific details involved. At this point, the question is which category *hamartia* falls into. In other words, as Bremmer states, will the person who commits the act be held responsible because they acted on a momentary impulse, or will it be an act caused by circumstances of place, time, or the person's anonymity—that is, an act committed out of sheer ignorance? (Bremmer, 1969, 17).

Bremmer argues that revisiting *Poetics* in relation to Aristotle's remarks in *N.E.* can clarify this question. He proposes that *hamartia* in *Poetics* 1453a10 can be understood as an injurious act committed unknowingly due to a lack of awareness of a crucial detail—such as the instrument, object, or outcome of the action (Bremmer, 1969, 20). Therefore, what we need to understand is the root cause of *hamartia*, derived from the Greek verb “*hamartanein*”, meaning “to miss the mark,” as in an archer failing to hit the target, or “tragic flaw,” “error,” or “wrongdoing”. If the reason is ignorance, it is clear that *hamartia* is not a moral defect or a character flaw. For if it were a character flaw, the hero could not experience *peripeteia*, which is the main consequence of *hamartia*.

As we mentioned earlier, when Aristotle identified the fundamental characteristics of a tragedy, he added that the most important of these is the plot, because what the hero does is more significant than his character. In other words, action takes center stage. Additionally, the tragic hero has no choice but to be good; otherwise, the audience would not be affected by his fall due to *hamartia*, and the hero would not evoke pity or fear. However, tragedy, by definition, is designed to produce these emotions: “Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements (used) separately in the (various) parts (of the play); (represented) by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions.” (Aristotle, 1987, 49b25-28). The character's goodness helps evoke sympathy in the face of misfortune because if the hero is bad, one might think he or she deserves what happens to them. If they are too good, then the misfortune that befalls them loses its credibility. In this regard, Aristotle mentions Oedipus twice as an example of a tragic hero who exemplifies these traits; he can be seen as an object of pity and fear. Moreover, Oedipus is also a very suitable example to illustrate *hamartia*, another important concept in tragedies.

In chapter 13 of *Poetics*, Aristotle, who focuses on the character's traits in the context of tragic effect, begins to discuss *hamartia* but does not clearly explain what kind of structure it has:

It follows on from my earlier argument that I should define what ought to be aimed at and avoided in plot-construction, as well as the source of tragedy's effect. Since, then, the structure of the finest tragedy should be complex, not simple, and, moreover, should portray fearful and pitiful events (for this is the distinctive feature of this type of mimesis), it is to begin with clear that:

- (a) good men should not be shown passing from prosperity to affliction, for this is neither fearful nor pitiful but repulsive;
- (b) wicked men should not be shown passing from affliction to prosperity, for this is the most untragic of all possible cases and is entirely defective (it is neither moving nor pitiful nor fearful);
- (c) the extremely evil man should not fall from prosperity to affliction, for such a plot-structure might move us, but would not arouse pity or fear, since pity is felt towards one whose affliction is undeserved, fear towards one who is like ourselves (so what happens in such a case will be neither pitiful nor fearful).

We are left, then, with the figure who falls between these types. Such a man is one who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility (*hamartia*). He will belong to the class of those who enjoy great esteem and prosperity, such as Oedipus, Thyestes, and outstanding men from such families (Aristotle, 1987, 1452b33-1453a10).

As the quotation shows, Aristotle does not specify exactly what structure *hamartia* has or how it should be assessed. This has led to a long-standing debate in the history of philosophy about what *hamartia* truly symbolizes. Some scholars tend to see it as a “character flaw”. This ethical view has gained wide acceptance, especially since Bywater's translation of *hamartia* as “character

flaw" in *Poetics*. However, other scholars argue that this interpretation is flawed, stressing that Aristotle specifically emphasizes ignorance (*agnoia*) when explaining *hamartia*. Therefore, the mistake often results from flawed or incomplete reasoning in the face of uncontrollable circumstances rather than being an inherent flaw in the character. Stinton suggests that, traditionally, moralistic views regarded *hamartia* as a moral defect, whereas contemporary scholars dismiss this limited perspective. Oedipus' error stems from his ignorance of his parents, not from his hot-tempered nature, as Bywater claims. It is not the reason why he killed his father or married a woman much older than himself—his mother (Stinton, 1975, 236). In contrast, Macbeth is seen as an ambitious man eager for power and kingship, and all his actions reflect poetic justice. Therefore, it remains debatable whether this tragic error is subjective in nature or if it arises from an action, whether at the level of the agent or the deed:

... After much heated debate throughout the last century and a half, most modern scholars view ἀμαρτία as an error of judgment for which the tragic hero cannot be blamed. Still others claim that ἀμαρτία refers to a range of failures, so that it is up to the poet to decide how the hero comes to ruin. Another, currently less widespread, interpretation is that ἀμαρτία is linked to a flaw in the hero's moral character and that he is at least partially responsible for his misfortune (Vinje, 2021, 582).

In this context, Nussbaum emphasizes that a character should neither be divine nor defenseless. On the contrary, in tragedies, many things can happen to people of good character, and most of these misfortunes are not caused by character flaws or sinfulness but rather by a good person suffering from a specific mistake, or *hamartia* (missing the mark) (*Poetics* 1453a9-10). *Hamartia* and *hamartema* are not related to character flaws. However, as Nussbaum points out, *hamartia* has a different meaning from *atukhēma*, which refers to misfortune that is entirely external, such as being killed by a falling statue. The disaster caused by *hamartia* is neither purely accidental nor solely due to a flawed character; instead, it is tied to a particular kind of error in a clear, understandable action. Because of this, disasters resulting from *hamartia* include both blameworthy and blameless misses of the mark, such as Oedipus's innocent ignorance... (Nussbaum, 2001, 382-383).

Hamartia, as a morally neutral non-normative term, is 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 (Brody, 2014, 23).

As a result, it can be said that, for Aristotle, the root cause of *hamartia* in tragedies is not just a "tragic flaw," but a fatal error in judgment that occurs when excessive virtue turns into vice, causing a noble character to fall. Thus, *hamartia* isn't merely a moral failing, but a tragic mistake rooted in the hero's thinking and choices. Even if the tragic hero is noble and virtuous, he or she lacks perfect judgment. In other words, the hero isn't inherently a bad person; rather, due to flawed thinking or circumstances beyond their control, he/she commits tragic acts that lead to downfall. However, MacIntyre points out that these tragic events aren't caused solely by character flaws but can also result from incompatible goods. Consequently, tragic outcomes can't always be explained only by character flaws. Tragedy can also stem from conflicts where equally valuable moral claims create irreconcilable tension. From this view, tragedy reveals not only individual flaws but also the limits of ethical reasoning itself (MacIntyre, 1981, 233).

Bremmer, using a slightly different wording from MacIntyre's, highlights that *hamartia* relates not to the hero but to the plot itself. It is not about a character flaw, a mental state, or a psychological process. For making this clear, he has listed all instances of *hamart*-words in three categories to clarify this point: "MISS – ERR – OFFEND; miss: to fail of purpose, or to be bereft of; err: either: to be under a false impression or: to blunder, to make a mistake; offend: to break the law to act wickedly" (Bremmer, 1969, 30). Regarding Sophocles' tragedy, *Oedipus*, he states that the "err- category" is the most commonly used. As we know, Aristotle considers *Oedipus* the perfect tragedy because it contains both *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and *hamartia*. Thus, it can be concluded that this category aligns with Aristotle's view. Aristotle associated the hero's downfall with *hamartia*, not as a character flaw, blameworthy passion, or tendency, but rather as a focus on how the plot develops. The hero's downfall should therefore be caused by a *hamartia*, which does not imply moral wrongdoing.

The true meaning of *hamartia* is a tragic error resulting from wrong reasoning that appears within the plot; this error does not indicate a moral or unjust mistake. The error lies not in the character of the person, but in their thinking, which comes from ignorance—and this flawed thinking is most often caused by a lack of understanding of the person's identity (Else, 1957, 379). As these studies determine, *hamartia* in *Poetics* 1453a10-15 is best defined as a "tragic error," a wrongful act committed in ignorance of its consequences and nature, which initiates a sequence of events culminating in disaster. It is not a "tragic flaw"—a moral weakness or character defect that worsens over time until it leads to crime—nor is it equivalent to "tragic guilt," the inner burden caused by sin from the wrongful act, which is only alleviated through punishment (Bremmer, 1969, 62-63).

In light of all these statements, when we turn to Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, we see that some actions can be analyzed in light of *hamartia*. In *Oedipus*, the play shows Oedipus trapped in his predicament from the start. As it unfolds, we see gradually what leads to his misfortune. In one way, he causes his tragedy, but in another, he does not. He is not responsible because, due to a prophecy, his father handed him over to a shepherd to be killed, but the shepherd couldn't do it and instead gave him to a villager. He is responsible because he killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus, unaware of his true identity, got into an argument with an old man at a crossroads and, in self-defense, killed him justifiably. At this point, killing this person is not a tragic mistake, but the person he killed was his father, and his tragedy begins here. We are faced with a self-fulfilling prophecy. After this incident, Oedipus arrives in Thebes and saves the city from disaster; he marries the queen and has two daughters and two sons. But after a while, a plague breaks out in the city, and the people demand that King Oedipus find a solution. Known for his sound reasoning, Oedipus sent Creon to go to the seer Tiresias,

"Speak up, old man.

Your years, your dignity—you should speak for the others.

Why here and kneeling, what preys upon you so?

Some sudden fear? some strong desire?"

"You can trust me. I am ready to help,

I'll do anything. I would be blind to misery

not to pity my people kneeling at my feet."...

"I wasn't asleep, dreaming. You haven't wakened me—

I have wept through the nights, you must know that,

groping, laboring over many paths of thought.

After a painful search I found one cure:

I acted at once. I sent Creon,

my wife's own brother, to Delphi—

Apollo the Prophet's oracle—to learn

what I might do or say to save our city." (Sophocles, 1985).

But Creon returned with an answer telling Oedipus about a murder:

"I will tell you what I heard from the god.

Apollo commands us—he was quite clear—

"Drive the corruption from the land,

don't harbor it any longer, past all cure,

don't nurse it in your soil—root it out!" (Sophocles, 1985).

In response to Creon's words, Oedipus asks who the oracle indicated should be killed. Creon explains that the former king, Laius, was murdered at a crossroads by someone while traveling to consult the oracle. He mentions that only one person saw the murder, but this witness fled, and the killer's identity remains unknown. However, the witness did say one thing:

CREON:

He said thieves attacked them—a whole band,

not single-handed, cut King Laius down.

OEDIPUS:

A thief, so daring, so wild, he'd kill a king? Impossible,

unless conspirators paid him off in Thebes.

CREON:

We suspected as much. But with Laius dead
no leader appeared to help us in our troubles.

OEDIPUS:

Trouble? Your king was murdered—royal blood!
What stopped you from tracking down the killer
then and there?

CREON:

The singing, riddling Sphinx.

She ... persuaded us to let the mystery go
and concentrate on what lay at our feet (Sophocles, 1985).

Amid all of this, unaware of his own misfortune, he seeks to learn the prophecy and, upon discovering it, suffers a tragic fall: the man he killed was his father, and the woman he married was his mother. Unable to handle this knowledge, Oedipus blinds himself and leaves Thebes, wandering the roads. As shown, he is not the one who initiates his *hamartia*. In a way, he will make his choices whether he wants to or not. But if he had listened to the seer and not gone any further, the prophecy might not have come true. Still, Oedipus, who is a noble character and believes it's his duty to do what's best for his people, brings about his own downfall.

Regarding Shakespeare, since England was experiencing change and transformation, and there was no standardized language or tradition at the time, his contribution to this field was highly significant. Shakespeare combined this emerging standard language with traditional storytelling, creating important works. His narratives stay true to stories inherited from the Ancient Greeks and translated fables (Aykaç, 2026, 573). Overall, these stories resemble traditional tragedies, but the roles of tragedy and *hamartia* have evolved over time. For Shakespeare, the emphasis shifts from the plot to the exposure of the complex psychological states of characters. As a result, *hamartia* takes on a more ethical and psychological character. The certainties outlined by Aristotle become more uncertain within the context of the era in which they are experienced. The heroes are confused, and it's difficult to judge their actions simply through the lens of pure good or evil. *Hamartia* becomes more personal, subjective, internal, and conscious. A. C. Bradley, in his work *Shakespearean Tragedy*, mentions that Shakespeare's four great tragedies are *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, within the framework of "dramatic appreciation." (Bradley, 1904, 2). In this list, he emphasizes not just the events but the actions of the characters and the choices that lead to these events, or sometimes the choices they neglect to make. In *Macbeth*, the influence of a divine prophecy on the psychologies of different individuals is examined. In this regard, Macbeth faces a prophecy similar to Oedipus, but he knows about the prophecy from the start. Unlike Oedipus, the prophecy in *Macbeth* is more a statement of possibility rather than an inevitable fate. Thus, Macbeth retains the freedom to choose. However, the prophecy awakens a hidden desire within his subconscious, one he fears to confront. Additionally, Lady Macbeth's words sometimes reinforce and at other times incite him to fulfill that desire. As a result, Macbeth determines his own *hamartia* and gradually shifts from conscious decision-making to unconsciousness and despair throughout the play:

... excess of passion and imagination in these men and women involves also another limitation: an incapacity for reasoning, that the Greeks denoted by the term "dianoia". This is not to say that Shakespeare's heroes are generally mental weaklings, but it is true that the power of apprehension is out of all proportion to the power of comprehension, so that it often interferes with normal processes of reason: the reasoning is often too highly colored to be sound (Bundy, 1924, 539).

In this context, it can be said that there are two important interpretations of *hamartia* in these plays. Sophocles' *Oedipus*, which aligns more closely with Aristotle's interpretation, and a more contemporary interpretation. The aim of our study is to examine the Aristotelian concept of *hamartia* in Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within the framework of different interpretations.

1. Sophoclean *Hamartia*

The best example of *hamartia* caused by ignorance is Oedipus. Acting in the name of moral justice, Oedipus, a noble character, realizes that the prophecy made about him is the cause of the plague. When he goes to Delphi, instead of getting answers to his questions, he learns that he is guilty of both parricide and incest. Shaken by such a prophecy, Oedipus, as the play progresses,

engages in violent actions driven by a premonition that his life is in danger. However, it is more reasonable to see this choice not as a moral flaw but as an intellectual error.

In this context, Aristotle alludes to Oedipus, although not by name, in N.E. 1135a15-1136a9 to clarify and improve the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions:

What I mean by voluntary, as was also said earlier, is what is up to the agent and done knowingly—that is, not in ignorance of the one affected, the instrument, or the end (for example, whom he is striking, with what, and for the sake of what), and where each of these is neither coincidentally so nor so by force. For example, if someone were to take the hand of another person and use it to strike a third, the second would not be acting voluntarily, since it was not up to him. It is also possible that the one being struck is his father, whereas the agent, while knowing that he is striking a human being or one of the people present, does not know that it is his father. ... What is done in ignorance, then, or not in ignorance but not up to the agent, or what is done by force, is involuntary (Aristotle, 2014, 1135a22-35).

Therefore, Oedipus' act is not voluntary because it is not deliberate, even though it caused his father's death. His act is worth pity, not "assessing a penalty" from a third person. It is not a matter of moral justice, rather of ignorance; "a big mistake (53a16), one pregnant with disaster for the hero." (Else, 1957, 383). Else adds that "... We may debate over which caused the killing of Laius, Oedipus' ignorance or his hot temper, but there can be no argument about what he 'recognizes': it is the identity of the man he killed." (Else, 1957, 385). So, *hamartia* appears not as part of the hero but as part of the complex plot, which is essential to a perfect tragedy.

As Griffith states, we can see that this parricide can be viewed in two ways: "homicide and father abuse." Oedipus wants to know the cause of the plague, and as the oracle says, he is in search of Laius's killer without knowing that this person is also the murderer of his father, himself. So Laius' murder in the face of the law has different aspects:

Classical Athenian jurisprudence recognizes three kinds of killing, and different scholars have classified Laius's murder under all three. The first is the unintentional killing of an innocent victim (what we would call "manslaughter"). ... The second kind is justified homicide ... which is the intentional killing of a criminal caught in the act. ... The third kind is intentional homicide (ordinary murder). Self-defense was a mitigating circumstance in a case of intentional homicide, rather than grounds for lawful homicide. ... One must show that the victim intended to kill the murderer. Yet Oedipus does not argue self-defense, claiming, as he would have to do, that Laius was about to kill him, stating in fact that on this occasion Laius wanted only to drive him from the road" (Griffith, 1958, 47).

The quote highlights the ongoing debate: was Oedipus guilty due to his character flaw—his ill-tempered nature—and his actions of killing the man, despite him being his father? Or was he not guilty because his fate was predetermined, and he had no way to escape it? Given that he is not guilty, it can be said that Oedipus, who seems to be the one causing his own character's corruption, is actually a powerless character in a predetermined plot, and even his choices have been made for him. Griffith, citing Plato, said that, according to Athenian law, self-defense cannot be used as an excuse in cases of parent-murder. This homicide can be considered an intentional but not premeditated murder, but again, we cannot find this type of crime and penalty in Athenian law. Griffith outlines three punishments for murderers in Homer and Hesiod: death at the hands of the victim's family, exile, or monetary compensation. Oedipus stands out as the only hero who does not receive any of these punishments. Although he blinds himself and leaves the city, this act is his own decision, not imposed on him. Consequently, he avoids punishment for killing his father, marrying his mother, and causing the plague, while also preventing revenge from others. Sophocles explains this by suggesting that the Thebans' focus on the Sphinx distracted them from properly investigating the murder. Despite the delay caused by the Sphinx, the punishment for Laius' killer remains appropriate. The oracle decrees exile for the murderer, and Oedipus enforces it himself, effectively punishing himself even by his own choice (Griffith, 1958, 48).

But even so, in Griffith's version, Oedipus has not fully absolved himself of guilt by blaming all on fate and punishing himself with exile. Laius' murder happened at a three-way crossroads, which means that when the two met and Laius pushed Oedipus aside, telling him to move out of the way, Oedipus could have followed and taken another path—but he did not. Furthermore, for Homer, Laius—being a king—is superior to Oedipus, who is a king's son; therefore, Oedipus should have obeyed him. Additionally, Laius is a stranger to Oedipus, so killing him is wrong. As Homer said in *Odyssey*, all strangers are under the protection of Zeus. Also, a large crowd resembling his herald accompanies Laius on the road as he heads to consult the oracle; thus, Oedipus has blocked a sacred quest (Griffith, 1958, 49-50). So, among all these statements, it can be said that Oedipus' *hamartia* lies in his hot-tempered character. However, it is not so simple when considering the power of fate in Ancient Greek tradition and tragedies. It is not something you can avoid through reasoning or by changing paths. Even though Sophocles depicts an Oedipus who is never hesitant, he is still powerless to fight against fate, as he suffers in his quest to find the murderer. Moreover, even if Oedipus acts out of *hubris*, the same can be said for Laius; he provokes Oedipus.

In this regard, while examining *Oedipus* through the concepts of fate, guilt, and reason, Kane focuses particularly on the relationship between divine justice and human suffering in tragedies. According to him, when it comes to epics and tragedies, a distinction should be made between suffering that results either from a rejection of divine justice or from that justice. However, when we analyze *Oedipus* through this distinction, we encounter a more complex perspective (Kane, 1975, 16). Like this reading, Solomon emphasizes fate in *Oedipus*. According to Solomon, fatalism focuses on an inevitable outcome rather than on causes and free will. Consequently, "Oedipus is doomed to kill his father and marry his mother, no matter what he or others do to prevent it, and no matter how circuitous the causal path he follows until he reaches that outcome." (Solomon, 2003, 435).

Therefore, his failure to listen to the seer and to pursue further does not stem from a character flaw but from the limitations of his mind, which prevent him from understanding all the forces that control the universe (Golden, 1984, 146):

If he has been unsuccessful in avoiding the actions the oracle has foretold, it is not because of any moral flaw within him, but only because his human faculties were insufficient to fathom the forces that govern the universe. In a moral sense, he is completely innocent of the crimes that have been committed because he did not will them and strenuously sought to avoid them. In his belief that he could evade the oracle, and in his mistaken judgments of Teiresias and Creon, he did make serious intellectual errors, but they were morally justifiable mistakes which other good men who were not "perfect in virtue and justice" might also have made (Golden, 1984, 146).

Even though the root of his misfortune lies within himself, we can still see him as a victim and as a noble and virtuous character. However, the question of its origin remains open for debate. The primary reason for *Oedipus*' downfall is his relentless determination to discover the true identity of Laius' murderer, which ultimately includes his own. This quest isn't morally wrong. Thinkers who interpret *Oedipus*' *hamartia* from a moral perspective also view his ignorance as a fault, attributing his failure to predict the consequences of killing his father to a specific predisposition or moral weakness. However, Stinton argues that linking *Oedipus*'s mistake to his father's murder is not particularly convincing (Stinton, 1975, 237). *Oedipus* consciously and nobly chose actions that led to his ruin. His role as king urged him to investigate, and his intelligence and energy drove him to seek all answers: "In his naive faith in reason *Oedipus* embodies the claims current in Athens of the more daring of the Sophists. For *Oedipus* man is truly 'the measure of all things'." (Kane, 1975, 19). His actions seem harmless and justified. Yet he unknowingly destroys himself through his choices; this self-destruction is *hamartia* because it's wrong to bring about one's own downfall, not because the desire to uncover the truth is blameworthy (Bremmer, 1969, 160).

So, when it comes to *Oedipus*, it is hardly fair to say he was the one who initiated everything. His tragic *hamartia* should be understood as a result of his actions faced with obstacles, rather than simply his choices. He killed someone to protect himself and unknowingly became a parricide. External obstacles, not internal weaknesses, led to his downfall (Sherman, 1992, 178). As a result, he maintains his innocence throughout the play. His mistakes are not caused by a lack of willpower, nor by a hidden, subconscious ambition. This clearly sets his *hamartia* apart from *Macbeth*'s.

2. Shakespearean *Hamartia*

When we examine *Macbeth*, we see a *hamartia* that he perhaps willingly falls into. Yes, *Macbeth*'s *hamartia* also begins with a prophecy, but the witches who deliver it do not command him to kill Duncan. Instead, they greet him and Banquo as kings:

First Witch: Lesser than *Macbeth*, and greater.

Second Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.

Third Witch: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:

So, all hail, *Macbeth* and Banquo!

First Witch: Banquo and *Macbeth*, all hail!

Macbeth: Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more.

By *Sinel*'s death I know I am Thane of Glamis;

But how of Cawdor? the Thane of Cawdor lives,

A prosperous gentleman; and to be King

Stands not within the prospect of belief,

No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence

You owe this strange intelligence? (Shakespeare, 2008, 23-24).

From this point on, we see Macbeth's mind growing increasingly confused as his hidden desire to be king slowly surfaces, leading him to make tragic mistakes. Macbeth, both distracted and overwhelmed with fear by the words he hears, begins his downfall. In this way, Shakespeare shows the poisoning of his conscience and character throughout the play through emotions and desires. It is clear that Macbeth is the cause of his own *hamartia*. The prophecy of the witches has, in a sense, acted as a catalyst for hidden desires. Unlike Oedipus, Macbeth makes his own choices that lead to his downfall, losing himself. He gradually loses sleep, drifting toward an unconscious, expectation-free future, which is exactly what the soliloquy "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow..." emphasizes.

Macbeth is compelled to make a series of morally questionable decisions, and throughout the play, his actions begin to escalate more rapidly. Each choice seems to be made to justify the next. In this way, we can say that we are dealing with a very Aristotelian plot. However, it is the internal, psychological states of the characters rather than their actions that ensure the plot's continuity. It seems nearly impossible to reach a definitive judgment about any of the characters. To elaborate through Auden, what Macbeth and Oedipus have in common is the presence of a prophecy that comes true in both cases. But, in the case of Oedipus, this is a prophecy that was foretold to Oedipus in his ignorance and which he eventually comes to know. In Macbeth's case, he is the one who speeds up the fulfillment of the prophecy. After hearing the witches, he could have relaxed and waited for the prophecy to fulfill itself over time, but instead, he took the witches' words as a promise and acted (Auden, 1968, 218-219). This is a historical path to Oedipus's *hamartia* because there is no direct connection between his existence and the actions driven by the prophecy. Therefore, it's not really possible to say he made the wrong choices. However, regarding Macbeth, we can say the opposite. Macbeth's actions and choices, fueled by *hubris*, are his own. They may not make him a bad person, but they lead to a *hamartia* caused by his pride. Shakespeare's use of psychological terms often reflects Elizabethan-era ideas, emphasizing characters' flaws and moral dilemmas. His characters and scenes reveal Elizabethan psychology by exposing internal moral and mental conflicts (Bundy, 1924, 526).

Although he appears in the play as a criminal, Macbeth remains a tragic character. His lack of practical thinking and character weakness led him to make errors. In this sense, he may seem closer to us modern people than Oedipus. His moral flaws and the mistakes he makes seem more relatable than those Oedipus endures. The human will to power, as Nietzsche also pointed out, exists deep within all of us. We can all be tempted by the promise of power, honor, and glory. He interprets the prophecy as a symbol of what should happen over time. The desire in his subconscious comes to light. However, unlike a murderer, throughout the play, his remorse and suffering over his actions are also shown. This helps portray him as a tragic character (Arif, 2002, 247). As Arif quoted from Crane, we can say that we see Macbeth both from inside and outside:

... what most sharply distinguishes our view of Macbeth from that of the victims and enemies is that, whereas they see him from the outside only, we see him also, throughout the main action of the play- the major action of the play- from the inside, as he sees himself, and what we see thus is a moral spectacle the emotional quality of which, for the impartial observer, is not too far removed from the tragic dynamis defined in the *Poetics* (Crane, 1976, 188).

Therefore, in *Macbeth*, it is possible to discuss a tripartite *hamartia* that can be classified through consciousness. Primarily, the role of the witches appears as the emergence of the unconscious into consciousness and maintains continuity throughout the entire play. The first tragic act, the murder of Duncan, is the first outcome of this prophecy. The second tragic act, the murder of Banquo and the second encounter with the witches, presents us with a Macbeth who is completely blinded by greed and utterly immersed in *hamartia*. With the third tragic act, the murder of Macduff's family and the approach of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane, Macbeth begins to realize that the uncertainty in the witches' prophecy and what makes it possible is himself, and his true downfall occurs (Arif, 2002, 253).

In this sense, Bradley emphasizes that Shakespeare introduced natural, psychological factors common to all human beings to justify Macbeth's acts of murder. In keeping with the typical structure of Shakespeare's plays, Macbeth begins with a series of revelations. This is followed by conflict, and its gradual development is traced; finally, it culminates in a complete and utter catastrophe (Bradley, 1965, 280). Shakespeare's tragic characters exhibit intricate psychological states, highlighting how an imbalance between passion, reason, and imagination leads to their downfall:

In the first place, these heroes, with practically no exception, lack an equilibrium; there is from the outset a war of the soul. Just as we may say that the protagonist of a Greek drama possesses a tragic *hamartia* in the sense that he has failed to realize the ethical ideal of the golden mean, so these heroes have a tragic shortcoming in the sense that they have not found the proper balance of head and heart (Bundy, 1924, 535).

Conclusion

In conclusion, when it comes to *hamartia*, there are both similarities and differences between Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The reasons for these differences depend on the era in which they were written, the social conditions, and the audience's expectations. In line with his era's demands, Sophocles depicts the downfall of a noble character that the audience can relate to through the plot. However, this downfall is clearly not due to a character flaw. Instead, our character, based on his noble qualities, adapts and inadvertently heads toward disaster. External forces beyond his control trigger his *hamartia*. Therefore, it is not entirely accurate to say he made a choice in the full sense of the word. He chose to kill a man, but not that the man would be his father. He chose to marry a woman and become king, but not that the woman would be his mother. In this way, he is at the start of his downfall but did not lay the stones himself. His ignorance of the prophecy is at the heart of his *hamartia*.

When we examine *Macbeth*, we again encounter a similar plot that begins with a prophecy, but in most cases, this is the only common element. This is because the witches' prophecy does not confirm certainty but instead suggests a possibility. However, it is so powerful that it acts as a trigger, a promise that sets Macbeth in motion. Due to the weakness of will and practical reasoning evident in most of us, Macbeth responds by acting. He makes choices, and each choice becomes the necessary cause of the next. Nevertheless, Macbeth cannot be fully considered a murderer. Instead, he is a tragic hero. He confronts the hidden desires within all of us that often remain unseen. Therefore, he is closer to us than Oedipus, but less compelling. With Oedipus, we see the *hamartia* of a noble character brought down by forces beyond his control, whereas with Macbeth, we often see a hero with a weak character.

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