

# Suicide, Shakespeare and Sloth

*Bernadette Waterman Ward*

ABSTRACT: Some scholars have recently proposed that portrayals of suicide in Shakespeare are designed to encourage a broadening of sympathy that will lead to a liberal understanding of the autonomy of the person, even in choosing death. Principally by examining the suicides in *Othello*, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and in *King Lear*, this study argues that the suicides in Shakespeare's plays are not meant to seduce the audience into sympathy for suicide. Instead, they are meant to draw the attention of the audience to certain spiritual failures in the characters, especially spiritual sloth, which can take the forms of a failure to care about the proper good of the soul and of a dissipation of attention that distracts from virtue, such as one finds in cases of restless activity and the pursuit of fame.

OURS IS NOT THE ONLY TIME in which suicide has been presented as a compassionate, dignified, even glorious death. Our greatest playwright puts such justifications of self-slaughter on the lips of lovers and soldiers, nobles and devoted servants who kill themselves. It is fashionable to say that William Shakespeare helped his crudely bigoted age to become enlightened about suicide by creating, in a critic's words "a mingling of pity and admiration for the victim, not reproach."<sup>1</sup> Suicide has considerable political and social cachet at the moment,<sup>2</sup> especially if linked to assertion of the arbitrary will. Thus the Hemlock

---

<sup>1</sup> Larry R. Kirkland, M.D., "To End Itself by Death: Suicide in Shakespeare's Tragedies," *Southern Medical Journal* 92/7 (1999): 660-66 at p. 660.

<sup>2</sup> As to suicide's fashionable appeal, see Fabiola Torre, "Dad: 'When my daughter asked to die, the world showed up. When she wanted to live, she was ignored.'" Lifesitenews.com <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/when-my-14-year-old-daughter-wanted-to-live-the-world-ignored-her.-when-she>. Accessed May 20, 2015, net.

Society mantra that the “basic right of self-determination includes the right to die.”<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the tragedies were not written to feed the idea that we must define our own place in the world uncontrolled by any personal bonds we have not chosen. Such uncaring characterizes Shakespeare’s villains, like the evil children in *King Lear* or the title character himself. It is the miserable, bullying Lear who slothfully seeks to escape responsibility. Neither does Shakespeare support the nascent political movements agitating for self-determination, as historically informed commentators have discovered.<sup>4</sup> Despite the seductive language surrounding suicide, his tragedies do not support a romance with death. Instead, Shakespeare uses suicide to warn audiences against the sin at its root: sloth, a failure to care for the things most rationally good for the human spirit.

Without entirely neglecting other tragedies, such as *Othello* and *Julius Caesar*, this study will focus most on *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear* as paradigmatic statements about suicide in Shakespeare. *Antony and Cleopatra* leads the plays in suicide count, with five. *King Lear* features both a suicide and an attempted suicide. In both plays a suicidal man attempts to draw someone into assisting with the deed.<sup>5</sup> *Renaissance Quarterly* may describe Shakespeare’s suicides as “the emergence of the early modern subject through figures that show how the assertion of the self can be self-negating,”<sup>6</sup> but the problems of how to become autonomous and uncommitted are not, *maugré* Stephen Greenblatt, central to Renaissance plays.<sup>7</sup> Instead I take criticism from

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert L. Risley, quoted in Lawrence Stevens, “Suicide: A Civil Right,” <http://www.antipsychiatry.org/suicide.htm>, accessed May 19, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Among a chorus of commentators pointing out the horror of rebellion that was deep in Shakespeare’s culture and rhetoric, I particularly point out Rene Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (South Bend IN: St. Augustine Press, 2004), ch. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkland, op. cit., 661.

<sup>6</sup> Maggie Kilgour, review of *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* by Eric Langley (*Renaissance Quarterly* 64/1 (2011): 334-35).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, “Shakespeare and the Ethics of Authority” in *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought*, ed. David Armitage et al. (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), *passim*.

the generation after Shakespeare at its word about what a play was meant to achieve:

The first Design of Dramatic Poetry, was to amend the Heart, improve the Understanding, and, at the same Time, Please the Imagination. To Tragedy, one Species of the Drama was allotted, the Description of those Passions, which, when loose and ungoverned, are productive of the most terrible Consequences on the one hand; but if, on the other, they are kept within their proper Limits, and chuse reason for their Guide and Director, they become highly conducive to the Happiness of Mankind.<sup>8</sup>

Even Shakespeare's bleakest works serve a moral aim. Indeed, there he most attacks sloth.

Shakespeare knew of that capital sin from a moral tradition flowing through Aquinas from the Desert Fathers, who defined sloth not directly as laziness but as directionless sadness repelling one from spiritual good. Slothful faintheartedness withers the soul. It is antithetical to virtuous magnanimity and zeal for action. Yet the Fathers warn that even action can manifest sloth's fundamental abandonment of hope. Failure to direct the will rationally produces not merely the expected "idleness and drowsiness" but "uneasiness of the mind, restlessness of the body, instability, loquacity, curiosity" – action that is mere distraction for an empty soul.<sup>9</sup> Such action can produce even an illusion of greatness that seems great because it motivates restless pursuit of other people's attention. Sloth, like websurfing, may swallow one's hours aimlessly. But in restless political aggression it also makes shift to stanch a spiritual hemorrhage. In a modern example, a Muslim radical from a mild, traditional family, now turned atheist, explained her aggressions as a cure for aimlessness: "Spiritual religion gets a bit boring as a kid, so I liked the idea of politics too. It felt like a social movement and I was excited by that."<sup>10</sup> To desire the excitement of physical pain and rush for

---

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Foote, *The Roman and English Comedy Consider'd and Compar'd*, 1747, quoted as frontespiece to Lily Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (New York NY: Barnes and Noble, 1952).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 35, a.4 obj. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Anthony, "Losing their Religion: The Hidden Crisis of Faith among Britain's Young Muslims," *The Guardian* (May 17, 2015) online edition. Recognition of this as a form of accidie was assisted by Dorothy

glory in destructive political violence is, of course, a distraction from the virtue of rational joy in the flourishing of all things. It parodies rulership as absurdly as sadomasochism parodies the difficult work of virtuous love. The cure for sloth is indeed love, an attentive delight in the things one is given to care for; joy, the *affectio justitiae*, is deeply rational.<sup>11</sup>

The idea of sloth as indifference or inaction would seem to exclude Shakespearean characters brimming with passion and boldness. Yet, “uneasiness of the mind, restlessness of the body and loquacity” sort well with such passion as shrinks the soul to mere love of self, and then self-destruction. Othello is unsure of himself. Although he is a valuable general, the closed, caste-conscious culture of Venice’s great families shuts him out, and Iago uncovers his secret uneasiness of mind. Rational joy seeks the good of all it encounters. Iago tempts Othello to doubt his virtuous wife, a Venetian aristocrat, on irrational grounds. He can do this because Othello desires his own honor over the better virtue of his wife. Othello says:

I had been happy if the general camp,  
pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
so I had nothing known. O now, for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind.<sup>12</sup>

He is concerned not with her virtue but with his feeling about it. Aggression and the guarding of one’s public honor – so important to the suicide plays – are false versions of the virtue of Magnanimity. By them Othello descends from murder to suicide, in each case distracting himself from his uneasiness of mind by action, and finally by a desire for physical suffering, like today’s young people obsessed with “cutting” or suicide. Looking on the corpse of the wife he murdered, Othello cries:

---

Sayers, “The Other Six Deadly Sins: An Address Given to the Public Morality Council at Caxton Hall, Westminster, October 23, 1941” – <http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity07/Sayers.html>.

<sup>11</sup> John Duns Scotus, *Ord.* 3 suppl. d. 26, edited and translated by Allan Wolter (with facing Latin) in Allan Wolter, *Duns Scotus on the Will and Morality* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1986), p. 179.

<sup>12</sup> *Othello* III.3.345-49.

Whip me, ye devils,  
 from the possession of this heavenly sight!  
 Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!  
 Wash me in deep-down gulfs of liquid fire!<sup>13</sup>

He kills himself partly because he wants distraction from his guilt. Real repentance, which leaves room for joy, is a desire for the goodness of God, not mere distraction from the consequences of one's sin. The allure of distraction indeed creates the greatest suicide bloodbath in Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*. Antony is a paradigmatic case of the descent from irrational inattention to duty into aimlessness, then further, into violence, and finally, down the complete collapse of the self in self-murder. As Cleopatra manipulates Antony into abandoning his roles as a ruler, a soldier, a Roman, a husband – and even his manhood – she is identified with sloth. Antony is married to Fulvia during his passionate affair with Cleopatra, and he knows that his wife is faithfully taking care of his political business while he takes his pleasure in Egypt. When Fulvia dies, Antony mourns her:

“There's a great spirit gone....  
 I must from this enchanting Queen break off,  
 Ten thousand harms, more then the ills I know  
 My idleness doth hatch.”<sup>14</sup>

But he does not break off, despite many resolutions and even a new marriage, to affirm his Roman political responsibilities. Antony's eyes “o'er the files and musters of the war / have glowed like plated Mars.”<sup>15</sup> He has led victorious armies through extremes of hunger and thirst, fear and hardship. He has ruled a third of the known world. Cleopatra subdues him with distractions meant to “sharpen with cloyless sauce his appetite.”<sup>16</sup> In a heavily symbolic gesture of erotic play, he gives Cleopatra his sword, but by her heedlessness, he loses everything. She goads him to a sea battle that Octavius wins against him because Antony

---

<sup>13</sup> *Othello* V.2.277-80.

<sup>14</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra* I.3.94.

<sup>15</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra* I.1.3-4.

<sup>16</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra* II.1.25.

flees the fight to follow her ship. His immeasurable shame that “I have lost command”<sup>17</sup> – as he has, in every way possible – he assuages with drink and more lovemaking to a woman he knows as “this false soul of Egypt.”<sup>18</sup> His spirit withers; he fights Octavius on land, not to defend proper rulership but to escape his shame through violent action, hoping for death in battle, with a false magnanimity like Othello’s. A follower of his, sensing Antony’s hopelessness, deserts him. Then he kills himself, through shame that he has abandoned his duty to his general Antony, as Antony himself has abandoned his duty to Rome. Antony fails to die in his lost battle and then becomes pettily jealous when the victorious emperor’s messenger kisses Cleopatra’s hand. Miffed, Cleopatra decides to reclaim his affection by starting a rumor that she killed herself at a public monument. Antony is jealous of her glory in suicide and he hastens to copy her. He begs for help killing himself, but his servant slays himself to avoid facing Antony’s death. So Antony gives himself an inefficient wound that eventually does kill him, after three guards separately refuse to finish him off. A triumphant Cleopatra kisses her dying lover, and commends, like suicide advocates today, his self-determination: “So it should be,/That none but Anthony should conquer Anthony.” And indeed it is he who has defeated himself.

It is this degenerated soul, shrunk from confident self-disciplined leadership to aimless violence and petty jealousy, begging for a death none will give him, whose extravagant erotic poetry of submission has inspired critical rhapsody since the mid-twentieth century. One can see a fair sample in Donald Stauffer’s book on Shakespeare, subtitled *The Development of His Moral Ideas*:

*Antony and Cleopatra* is less a tragedy than a victorious vision, a fulfilment of immortal longings.... Its protagonists finally create their own glowing worlds.... The idea that imagination and resolution may reshape or transcend life is whispered, and man is seen as the creator of his fate.... This, then, is one road to freedom..., the free development of men’s best impulses.”<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra* III.11.24 .

<sup>18</sup> *Antony and Cleopatra* IV.12.25.

<sup>19</sup> Donald A. Stauffer, *Shakespeare’s World of Images: The Development of His Moral Ideas* (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966), p. 247.

But freedom resides in self-mastery, not self-delusion. Idling with Cleopatra, Antony has drowned his rational responsibilities in distraction until he could not maintain his status as a model soldier and statesman, or even as a husband and citizen. Stephen Greenblatt thinks that Shakespeare's conflict "between reason and desire, is mistakenly understood as inevitably an ethical conflict."<sup>20</sup> There is no mistake in such a characterization. Antony plainly sees the crisis as moral. To "make his will lord of his reason" he knows is crime, not transcendence. In clear opposition to his Harvard critic, Shakespeare is unsparing in showing us the gorgeously attractive road that leads to the degradation of Antony's self in every respect. Cleopatra grandly buries her latest Roman lover but fails in her negotiations with the chillier victor, Octavius Caesar, who intends to parade her captive in a triumph through Rome. She sends for poisonous snakes. As self-slaughter has among us been renamed "death with dignity," so Cleopatra puts a public-relations spin on her own death wish: "I have immortal longings." Two servants then copy her suicide. Recent critics have resisted the connection between Cleopatra's voracious, manipulative hedonism and the decay into death. As Jacqueline VanHoutte puts it, "The queen of Egypt herself is the subject of conflicting commentary, but her 'end' typically earns critical applause. Even those who denounce Cleopatra's conduct as sinful tend to find her suicide splendid."<sup>21</sup> Shakespeare chose which elements of Plutarch's narrative he would use and emphasize, and Cleopatra's role in the plot demonstrates the power of destruction by distraction. The suicide has indeed a grandiosity about it, but it is the false splendor of Pandemonium. The play's cascade of suicides has its origin in Antony's failure to love what he ought to love – his faithful politically astute wife – and in the sorrow and shame that send him ever back to his distractions.

The three copycat suicides are, of course, realistic according to the "Werther effect" of contagion in suicide. High-profile figures who kill themselves draw with them rudderless souls -- the uneasy, the unstable,

---

<sup>20</sup> Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline Vanhoutte, "Antony's 'Secret House of Death': Suicide and Sovereignty in *Antony and Cleopatra*," *Philological Quarterly* 79/2 (2000). Accessed at Humanities May 19, 2015.

the restless, the curious, or, as in these plays, those who have given over their very selves to celebrities unworthy of the devotion. In *Julius Caesar*, the second most suicidal play, Brutus is swayed by a desire for glory projected mistakenly upon public opinion. Losing his status and fearing dishonor, Brutus kills himself explicitly against his own Socratic philosophical reasoning.<sup>22</sup>

I do find it cowardly and vile,  
for fear of what might fall, so to prevent  
the time of life – arming myself with patience  
to stay the providence of some high powers  
that govern us below.<sup>23</sup>

There are three other suicides in the play among those who hang their lives on his fortunes. But such underlings neglect the true good that they should uphold. We shall see in *King Lear* the proper response of a servant to a morally aberrant master, or a child to a suffering, suicidal parent.

*King Lear* has only one suicide: that of Lear's abusive daughter Goneril, who kills herself after being double-crossed in adultery and then murdering her sister Regan for it. We are not called to compassion for her "courage" in suicide, but we do see compassion, courage, and death in the household of the slaughtered sister. A servant demonstrates the lively desire for another's flourishing that is the antidote to sloth. Regan and her evil husband have been mocking and torturing an old man, Gloucester. Regan's husband is gouging out Gloucester's eye. The servant intervenes:

Hold your hand, my Lord:  
I have serv'd you ever since I was a Childe:  
But better service have I never done you,  
Then now to bid you hold.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Platonic origin of this speech is demonstrated by Mark Sacharoff, "Suicide and Brutus's Philosophy in *Julius Caesar*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33/1 (1972): 115-22.

<sup>23</sup> *Julius Caesar* V.1.100-07.

Regan's husband kills the heroic servant and then gouges out the other eye. But we have seen a martyrdom for the sake of real virtue. The servant is no mere tool of his lord. He has a great soul and the zeal to take action, even to die resisting his master's vice. Kent showed such zeal earlier in the play when King Lear was recklessly giving his kingdom to Regan and Goneril while banishing his virtuous youngest daughter. Kent said:

Be Kent unmannerly  
When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?  
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak  
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound  
When majesty falls to folly. Reverse thy doom;  
And in thy best consideration check  
This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgment,  
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least.

Lear's response is: "Kent, on thy life, no more!" And Kent's reply is noble:

My life I never held but as a pawn  
To wage against thine enemies; nor fear to lose it,  
Thy safety being the motive.

The sub-plot that parallels Lear's folly is Gloucester's rejection of his good son for his bastard son, the younger of the brothers. In fact, the sub-plot opens and closes the play, and it addresses the temptation to suicide broached by the general hopelessness of the heroes – Lear driven from his authority, his home, and his sanity by children he engendered, and Gloucester betrayed, blinded, and beggared. Certainly Gloucester is in enough pain to elicit compassion. Predictably, critics of our century have thought that Shakespeare is calling us into bemoaning the intervention against despair made by Gloucester's good son Edgar, when, in successful disguise, he learns of his father's plan to kill himself. Critic and physician Larry Kirkland discusses Gloucester's attempted suicide as an example of the problems faced by "persons with severe disabilities, who may therefore be physically unable to commit suicide without help." With deadly compassion, he seems dismayed that

Edgar doesn't just let Gloucester jump off a cliff when he wants to. Instead, as Kirkland says, Gloucester is

tricked into thinking that he did jump but survived. Then in but fifteen words, Gloucester beautifully encapsulates the frustration felt by one in such a condition:

Alack, I have no eyes!

is wretchedness deprived that benefit

to end itself by death? (*King Lear* IV.6.72-74)

Shakespeare, of course, did not let him die at that point because he(Gloucester) still had a dramatic role to play.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Kirkland is wrong about that. Except for another moment when his good son Edgar rouses him out of a suicidal melancholy, he has no function at all in the falling action. Gloucester's attempted suicide is also unnecessary to the plot. Shakespeare invented it, as it is in none of his sources.<sup>25</sup> The playwright was in no way obliged to give us this attempted suicide, and it was even risky politically, but evidently he deemed it urgent.<sup>26</sup> Gloucester's role in the play is primarily as a comment on suicide.

Gloucester has been an adulterer. That is how he sired the bastard son who betrays him and gets good Edgar disinherited. Gloucester has very little recognition of the damage that he does by his irresponsibility. In the presence of his bastard son, he prattles merrily to Kent:

I have, sir, a son by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account. Though this knave came something saucily into the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged.

---

<sup>24</sup> Kirkland, op. cit., p. 663.

<sup>25</sup> Russell Fraser, editorial afterword in his Signet edition of William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (New York NY: Penguin, 1982).

<sup>26</sup> Greenblatt even points out that the Gloucester plot of *King Lear* was dangerous to the playwright. The torture scene and the encouragement that is offered to endure through such hardship may have made it seem subversive in its 1610 performance in a Catholic recusant house, as most victims of Elizabethan torture were Catholics. Greenblatt, op. cit., p. 75.

As if two-timing on his wife were not enough, Gloucester gets in further trouble when Lear's evil daughter demands his loyalty against the king. Gloucester is her vassal, but his fundamental commitment should be to the king. The king, however, has been ousted from power, and while there is conspiracy to return him to the throne, its success is uncertain. So Gloucester tries to play his political loyalty both ways, offering Regan hospitality and the king some aid. Gloucester's bastard son betrays him and the torture follows.

Why does Shakespeare make his comment about suicide by giving us a man of such wavering loyalty? And why does he do so in a play where the servants are unusually heroic in resisting their masters for the sake of the good to which their masters ought to be attending?

By these choices, original to Shakespeare, we see how he has undertaken to "amend the heart and improve the understanding." Gloucester's heroic son Edgar educates his father about the folly and devilish evil of his desire, and Gloucester dies a natural death. By making Gloucester both callous and likable, however, Shakespeare calls playgoers to identify with him and thereby exposes them to the littleness of soul that is the root of his death wish. Although like Antony an adulterer, Gloucester is not an Antony bestriding the world. He is a little man, lecherous in a small way, thinking of himself as kindly and loyal but in fact too spiritually lazy to resist the desires of the flesh. He is in fact no more than intermittently affectionate and easily turned in his feelings – prone to "instability and loquacity, he is an everyman whose sins come back at him with appalling force. And they are sins of littleness, of lack of care for the things most deeply good for the human spirit: sloth.

Gloucester wants to die when he learns the truth about his treacherous son and the treacheries of his own life that spawned the horror. Edgar has to encourage him to keep living when he leaves the old man to go do battle against his brother:

What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;  
Ripeness is all.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> *King Lear* V.2.

Shakespeare chooses as Gloucester's time to die not the moment when he has learned the truth about betrayal but when he has learned the truth about loyal love, a recognition that can only come after the suffering. His good son, whom he disinherited and banished on pain of death, tells the story:

Met I my father with his bleeding rings,  
 Their precious stones new lost; became his guide,  
 Led him, begg'd for him, sav'd him from despair;  
 Never (O fault!) reveal'd myself unto him  
 Until some half hour past, when I was arm'd,  
 Not sure, though hoping of this good success,  
 I ask'd his blessing, and from first to last  
 Told him my pilgrimage. But his flaw'd heart  
 (Alack, too weak the conflict to support!)  
 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,  
 Burst smilingly.

The “flawed” heart “burst smilingly.” Shakespeare gives him joy at the end – joy, which is the remedy of sloth. Remember that the rational virtue of joy takes delight in the flourishing of any thing, but it is in fact demanding. It requires work. How can joy be difficult? Down syndrome babies, for instance, frighten their parents with their need for future care, but for those who accept them, they are fountains of joy, teaching to those who accept them Gloucester's truth about loyal love. A culture infected with the rhetoric of self-determination, of will over nature and reason, is also a culture infected with sloth. It can hardly be otherwise, since sloth involves a refusal to love the greater good, a willingness to settle for an easy and undemanding solution to the pains of love and life.

It is through what Aquinas defines as the deadly sin of sloth – distraction, avoidance of the work of human and spiritual engagement – that the love of death has infected our media and our hearts. In *Antony and Cleopatra* he shows us that life without responsibility is finally death – social, moral and even physical. He uses suicide to demonstrate the destructive power of sloth. But in *King Lear* he deals with the temptation to suicide head-on. There again he asserts the connection between suicide and inadequate love, but there he also shows us the solution. It is heroic love, heroic patience even at the risk of his life, by

which Edgar rouses to love and to joy his corrupt, politically weak, unfatherly, suicidal father. The play is a call to something like sanctity. Shakespeare is not among those who call us to deadly pity. He is among the voices calling us to escape the culture of death.