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Ogunian Heroes and Grand-Masters: The Role of Moral Systems and Language in Shaping Tragedy in “The Man Who Would Be King” and *Death and the King’s Horseman*

Harini Angara

In his essay “The Fourth Stage,” concerning the origins of Yoruba tragedy, Wole Soyinka states that all tragedy cannot be understood through a broad aesthetic model. Rather, tragedy must be examined through “our own sources,” that is, a culture’s worldview and mythology:

The persistent search for the meaning of tragedy, for a re-definition in terms of cultural or private experience is, at the least, man’s recognition of certain areas of depth-experience which are not satisfactorily explained by general aesthetic theories; and, of all the subjective unease that is aroused by man’s creative insights, that wrench within the human psyche which we vaguely define as ‘tragedy’ is the most insistent voice that bids us return to our own sources. There, illusively, hovers the key to the human paradox, to man’s experience of being and non-being, his dubiousness as essence and matter, intimations of transience and eternity, and the harrowing drives between uniqueness and Oneness. (“The Fourth Stage” 21)

In the essay, Soyinka refers to Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* as a starting point for explaining Yoruba tragedy to audiences unfamiliar with its conventions. However, Soyinka breaks away from Nietzsche significantly in asserting that the archetypal figures by which Yoruba tragedy is understood are not only of aesthetic importance in the realm of tragic drama but are connected to Yoruba metaphysics. To extrapolate from Soyinka’s argument, tragedy in drama and literature

is defined in terms of these belief systems, but they are manifest in the literary work through the social institutions of the setting, particularly its articulated system(s) of morality.

The tragic elements in both Rudyard Kipling's short story "The Man Who Would Be King" and Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* can be explored through their respective moral systems and the characters' roles within them. In "The Man Who Would Be King," the characters break from a state-imposed moral (and legal) code to create their own code of conduct, and Masonic ethics pervade both this code and the story as a whole. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the moral system serves as a bridge between the social and the metaphysical for the characters; their understanding and fulfillment of social obligations is linked to their roles in the greater metaphysical aspect of the play. In both works, the manipulation of language allows the characters to maintain but also to tweak and tamper with these moral codes. The ensuing breaches of morality shape the tragic action.

Masonic symbolism and Kafir morality in "The Man Who Would Be King"

The two protagonists of "The Man Who Would Be King," Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, have long been operating under, and in defiance of, British colonial law. They impersonate journal correspondents, blackmail native princes, and vow to "get [their knives] into" (Kipling 47) local British officials if they were caught breaking the law. Thus, the official British legal system never figures as a moral authority with any real sway over their actions, and their decision to break with this legal system entirely by simply "going away to be Kings" (Kipling 54) emphasizes their blithe view of colonial authority and, indeed, the lack thereof in the story.

In contrast, Freemasonry, whose power comes not from a state legal system but from an individual's willing commitment to ideals of brotherhood, forms one of the moral underpinnings of the story. The Masonic influence colors the unofficial and matter-of-fact pact that Dravot and Carnehan create themselves before leaving for Kafiristan. As Paul Fussell observes, the "Contract" shares similarities with the "charges" read to Masonic candidates since the

eighteenth century (Fussell 219). Specifically, the “Contrack” elucidates the all-important brotherhood between Dravot and Carnehan and, like Freemasonry, provides an outlet for the men to shed their low social status, if only nominally, by describing their plan to become kings.¹ The “Contrack” is an odd hodge-podge of amusingly fudged legalese (“witnesseth in the name of God—Amen and so forth” (Kipling 56)) and lower-class British English (“so as to get mixed up with one or the other harmful”, “signed by you and me”, “Contrack” (Kipling 56)). Jeffrey Meyers accuses the “Contrack” of being “a magnificent example of elaborate form and insubstantial content . . . ridiculous . . . grandiloquent and ungrammatical” (Meyers 718). While the contract is certainly ungrammatical in terms of standard Queen’s English and the idea of making a written agreement to “[go] away and become kings” appears absurd, it is this very seeming absurdity, exemplified in the written “Contrack,” that makes the seriousness of Dravot and Carnehan’s endeavor all the more affecting. Carnehan himself wryly comments, “Now you know the sort of men that loafers are—we *are* loafers, Dan, until we get out of India—and *do* you think that we would sign a Contrack like that unless we was in earnest?” (Kipling 56). Carnehan’s perceptiveness about the “loafer” label that British society has assigned him shows that there is ironic humor here, but it is aimed at those who would like to dismiss Dravot and Carnehan as caricatures of lower-class dolts. Carnehan here is fully aware that his and Dravot’s social status, dialect, and far-fetched scheme elicit mockery. Dravot has also already admitted that they are not very educated (Kipling 55). Thus, Meyers’s implication that the two men are ignorant of their bad grammar and redundancy dismisses their actual self-awareness.

The “Contrack,” in fact, does contain substantial content, but it is written in a language that may make it *appear* inconsequential. What Carnehan points out with pride is that, by the very act of mapping out a plan of action, the two men have challenged their undesirable social label. As Carnehan notes, they are loafers *until* they leave India—their social label and identity is geographically defined; if they succeed in their mission, they will trade the label of loafers for

1 Kipling rhapsodizes on Freemasonry’s ability to momentarily erase social boundaries in the poem “The Mother Lodge.”

the title of kings. The two have taken to heart the temporary redefinition of social labels afforded by Masonic membership and aspire for a more permanent change.

The first article of the “Contract” then, as self-evident as it seems, articulates that very desire to transform their social labels. The second article agrees that “while this matter is being settled” (Kipling 56), neither man will become distracted by liquor or women. Thus, in order to enter into this social contract, the men must renounce “the two things that make life worth having” (Kipling 56). The agreement recognizes their arrangement as a male bond and sets up moral constraints and sacrifices for its maintenance. The third article, which Carnehan deems unnecessary—perhaps because he feels that a brotherhood already implies this value, furthers the Masonic ideal of mutual aid. As a whole, the “Contract” and its Masonic valences construct the moral barometer of the story.

Thus, the men’s trouble begins when they usurp and abuse Masonic symbols to assert their kingship. When Dravot first discovers that the priests know Masonic symbols and plans to pass himself off as a Grand-Master, Carnehan warns him of the danger of using Freemasonry for one’s own ends. He cautions Dravot, “It’s against all the law . . . holding a Lodge without warrant from any one; and you know we never held office in any Lodge” (Kipling 66). In warning Dravot against lying about his Masonic qualifications, Carnehan acknowledges that although Freemasonry serves as a common language between themselves and the Kafiris, it is a language that he and Dravot do not fully understand. It is unwise, he feels, to pretend to know more than they do. Dravot disregards the warning, seeing only the opportunity to legitimate himself as ruler of Kafirstan. He extends the power of the Grand-Master title, claiming that it includes political authority. Dravot sees only the superficial benefits of his Masonic manipulations. As Edward Marx observes, however, the Kafiris’ familiarity with Freemasonry is a mixed blessing for Dravot and Carnehan:

In the ambiguously symbolic turn of events, the priests overturn a stone revealing the “sign of the Master” identical to the one Dravot has made for himself, thus securing his transcendent status, but forfeiting his control over the sign that gives

him mastery, for at the same time that the sign marks his divine status, it removes him from the social and sexual order to which he later wishes to gain entry through marriage. (Marx 63)

Though Dravot realizes that the pre-existence of Masonic knowledge in Kafiristan has granted him a smooth segue from military conqueror to divine king, he is oblivious to the full import of placing himself within this role in the Kafiri Masonic language. He believes that his divine kingship signifies his invincibility in Kafiri society, that his every need and want will be obliged. For the Kafiris, Dravot's divine kingship signifies his power, but also his moral and metaphysical separation from his subjects. To them, he is not a man imbued with divine privilege, but a divinity whose power stems only from transcending human society and whose conduct and responsibilities must be fulfilled in accordance with his divinity.

Dravot's inability to see this signifier-signified connection² from the Kafiris' point of view is characteristic of the two wayfarers' prejudicial assumptions throughout the story. They do not recognize, until it is too late, that the Kafiris have a moral system of their own, which the two men have unwittingly agreed to abide by in becoming kings. Ironically, both men, but especially Dravot, receive praise for their multilingual abilities; after witnessing their impersonation of a mad priest and his servant at the Serai, the narrator comments that they are "complete to the native mind" (Kipling 59). Their facility with communication across linguistic and cultural divides, however, is limited to practical uses rather than indicative of an understanding of varying cultural viewpoints. When the two men establish themselves in Kafiristan, they promptly set about "improving" the people—drilling troops, building bridges,

2 Ferdinand de Saussure (linguist, 1857–1913) introduced the idea that the relationship between the signifier (the sign or symbol) and the signified (the object or idea that the signifier indicates) is arbitrary. The link exists because an interpretative community has agreed upon it. Thus, a signifier may not signify the same thing in every community. Dravot's assumption that his title of "king" indicates divine right and royal privilege is rooted in a Western understanding of kingship. For the Kafiris, a "king" is a divinity himself, and must not enter into certain social arrangements, such as marriage, with his subjects.

and plowing fields—as though the Kafiris had no civilization prior to their arrival. Even before setting out on their journey, Dravot nonchalantly remarks that there is no need to learn the names of the Kafiri tribes (Kipling 55). As an extension of that assumption, they take the liberty of renaming the Kafiris with the names of men they knew in India (Kipling 67). This act of naming others not only exemplifies their dismissal of the Kafiri cultural lexicon, but is incredibly ironic considering that the two men left India in order to escape labels and names that had been imposed upon them.

This cultural ignorance is illustrated most definitively in Dravot's decision to take a wife. His decision not only breaks the "Contract" but reveals, once and for all, the disjuncture between his assumptions about kingship and the Kafiri view of kingship. Thus, Dravot has transgressed under two moral systems—that of the "Contract" and that of the Kafiris, both influenced by Freemasonry. Again, Dravot attempts to have his way by manipulating language. When Carnehan advises him to remember the injunction against becoming involved with women in the "Contract," the men engage in a semantic argument about whether the phrasing of the contract forbids women throughout the period of kingship or only until kingship is obtained. Dravot then draws a distinction between *women* and a *wife* (Kipling 71). The two words are emphasized in italics in the story and indicate Dravot's ability to twist language to fulfill his personal desires. To become involved with mere *women* may be a violation of the "Contract," but a *wife* is a "Queen to breed a King's son for the King" (Kipling 71) is, in terms of kingship, a necessary duty of dynastic self-preservation, even "a matter of State" (Kipling 72). This distinction of convenience, of course, falls flat. The Kafiris are skeptical of their godly king's desire to marry a mortal woman and the moment Dravot's bride-to-be bites him, his mortality is confirmed and the entire charade crumbles.

The moment of this revelation constitutes the tragic downfall of the story, and Dravot soon realizes and regrets his mistake. In this sense, the events of the story and this final downfall can be understood through the Aristotelian model of tragedy (Aristotle 6.2–6.5). Through this lens, the scene in which the girl bites Dravot and the people turn against him and Carnehan is the ironic reversal and

the recognition scenes. The fortune-seeking protagonists ironically meet with misfortune, and the people's discovery of Dravot's and Carnehan's true identities causes the Kafiris to disown the protagonists. A second recognition scene occurs when Dravot himself is "brought . . . to his senses" (Kipling 76) and regrets his action. In the Aristotelian model of tragedy, the recognition scene must result in suffering for the protagonists, and Kipling depicts the ensuing suffering rather vividly. Arguably, the fear and the pity are dispelled (catharsis occurs) when the story shifts back to the frame narrative, in the narrator's safe news office where only the grisly artifacts of the men's story remain.

Of course, "The Man Who Would Be King" certainly cannot fit neatly into the Aristotelian tragedy mold. The protagonists are nominal kings who won their titles by their own machinations, not through inheritance. They are the antitheses of the refined noble heroes of Greek tragedy. Interestingly, however, just as Kipling champions the use of the common man's English dialect in his works, he places two ne'er-do-wells in the role of protagonists in the tragic plot—a place reserved, as a rule, for characters of noble blood only. The story seems to parody the Aristotelian tragedy by creating a strange splicing of the genres of tragedy and imperial adventure. However, this is clearly no Rider Haggard adventure—the culmination of events is real, violent, and indeed tragic.

The falling action of the story would suggest that Dravot is the tragic hero. He after all is the man of hubris, whose tragic flaw of ignoring the limitations of a divine king causes his and Carnehan's downfall. Throughout the story, Dravot's superior command over language and communication makes him a natural leader and Carnehan his devoted follower. Dravot assumes the speaking role of the mad priest because "Carnehan can't talk their [Hindi-speakers'] patter" (Kipling 58); Dravot is the first to recognize, because of the Grip, that the Kafiris are familiar with Freemasonry (Kipling 66); Dravot takes the lead as King of Kafiristan because he could "[learn] their lingo in a way [Carnehan] never could" and therefore "did a lot that [Carnehan] couldn't see the hang of" (Kipling 66).

However, Carnehan is fluent in another interpretative mode, which also constitutes another, less dominant, moral system in the

story—that of Christianity. Carnehan continually evokes Christian idioms in his interactions with Dravot and with the Kafiris. When obligated to leave a village he has just conquered, he gives a chief a rag from his coat with the command “‘Occupy till I come’; which was scriptural” (Kipling 65). He refers to Biblical law when expressing his anxiety and disapproval of Dravot’s wish to marry (Kipling 72). Carnehan assumes a Christ-like role both when he grants his forgiveness to Dravot for causing their downfall and, more directly, when he is crucified by the enraged yet Kafiris and miraculously survives. Alternately, he takes on the role of an Apostle in returning to the narrator’s office to retell his king’s story as “true as Gospel” (Kipling 60) and in guarding Dravot’s withered head and crown as if they are holy relics. His final quotation of Reginald Heber’s hymn seems to be in honor of Dravot, “the Son of Man,” who dared to assume the role of a God. The Christian system of morality in the story, then, offers an alternative possibility for a tragic plot—that of the mortal who defiantly aspires to the divine and is punished for his sin.

Ogunian tragedy and Yoruba morality in *Death and the King’s Horseman*

Just as the major moral system of “The Man Who Would Be King” is based on Freemasonry, the tragic elements and morality of *Death and the King’s Horseman* draw heavily on Yoruba metaphysics. The characters and events of the play can be understood through the Ogun-Obatala chthonic forms explicated in Soyinka’s essay “The Fourth Stage.” In this essay, Soyinka explains that Yoruba tragedy is defined by Ogun, the archetypal tragic hero. In Yoruba mythology, Ogun formed a bridge between the cosmos and earth, challenging the guardians of the transitional abyss and bringing knowledge with him. Soyinka draws a parallel to the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, who suffers punishment for bringing fire to humans (“The Fourth Stage” 22). The Promethean aspect is included because an Ogun “[serves] the community in the paradoxical act of ‘saving’ [himself]” (Ready 712); his sacrifice results in the gift of understanding for the community. The Ogunian figure exercises his will to make his transition, knowing that not only will he emerge wiser, but that his sacrifice will also bring his community closer to

metaphysical understanding. In *Death and the King's Horsemen*, the tragedy is that Elesin's son, Olunde, makes the sacrifice that should be his father's responsibility. The Ogunian form provides a framework through which to understand this tragedy.

Yoruba metaphysics shape the tragic structure of the play, but within the world of the play they also form the moral system by which the characters operate. The avenue by which the moral system and Yoruba metaphysics are linked is through the adept crafting of language. David Richards explains the importance of the proverb, specifically, in maintaining this linkage:

The proverb utilizes areas of other worldly paradox, metaphor, and mystical confusion as a logical tool which has a practical application in the construction of rules for society . . . the "direction," as it were, of Soyinka's play is always, therefore, toward the social. . . Soyinka maintains, at the local syntactical level as at the grand and metaphysical, a dialectical dialogue between the numinous ideal and the social. (Richards 94).

The proverb is often used to explain metaphysical concepts in social terms as with Elesin's folk song about the "Not-I" bird—that is, the fear of death—who visits farmers, hunters, courtesans, teachers, animals, and even the gods. The song paints the image of a complex social order but also of the mortality that brings all its players from this world to the next. Elesin boasts that he is able to ward off the "Not-I" bird because he "unrolled/ My welcome mat for him to see" (*Death* I. 976). Elesin Oba as the king's horseman is expected to follow his king in making the transition from life to death. The welfare of his community depends upon his commitment to making this Ogunian sacrifice. Elesin confidently asserts that he is prepared for death, an assertion that crumbles as the play progresses. Because of the metaphysical stakes riding on Elesin's fulfillment of this duty, he enjoys a place of material and social honor in his village, a life that he cowardly balks at giving up. Here, the song about the "Not-I" bird foreshadows the irony of Elesin's renegeing on his commitment.

As Richard Ready notes, Elesin's actions make him a "failed Ogun" (Ready 714) because he "confuses, first, Ogun with Obatala [the deity who represents Oneness, or transcendental serenity], and second, after his misstep, Ogun with Sango [the god of electricity,

who dies by violent implosion]” (Ready 715). Ogun is the creative force and Obatala, the form that results *after* the transition, is the creation itself. In “The Fourth Stage,” Soyinka is careful to distinguish between the Apollonian plastic beauty, which Nietzsche defines as simply illusion, and the “inner essence” that is Obatala (“Stage” 22). In order to reach the Oneness with the universe represented by Obatala, the Ogunian figure must first detach himself from the social bonds of the physical world, that is, “experience disintegration” (“Stage” 28). So the Ogunian figure must move from his “generic self” (Ready 716), which is immersed in social relations, to a focused, individual self, in order to take on the challenge of transition, and finally to an Obatalan Oneness, in which he has reached a metaphysical calm and has reconnected with his community as an ancestor-guardian. Elesin refuses to “experience disintegration”; he stubbornly hangs on to the pleasures of mortal life.

When Elesin first glimpses the beautiful young girl, he uses the language of heavenly transcendence, which should be reserved for his impending transition, to describe his infatuation:

ELESIN: *And let me tell you, women-
I like this farewell that the world designed,
Unless my eyes deceive me, unless
We are already parted, the world and I,
And all that breeds desire is lodged
Among our tireless ancestors. Tell me friends,
Am I still earthed in that beloved market
Of my youth? Or could it be my will
Has outleapt the conscious act and I have come
Among the great departed? (Death I. 979)*

In seeing the girl, Elesin feels as though he has already reached Obatalan serenity; he has mislabeled sexual arousal for the surge of knowledge that would be gained by conquering the transition. As Ready observes, “Elesin mistakes creation for creativity, supplants accomplishing the fact with the accomplished fact.... That Elesin would claim for himself the Obatalan achievement of pure essence when in fact he has not even entered the Ogunian torture is the greatest of all illusions” (Ready 715). Indeed, the market women and even the praise singer express confused surprise at Elesin’s poetic

transcendence. The praise singer tells Elesin that he is still grounded in the same place and that the praise singer's voice is not that of a divinity but of the human praise singer Oluhun-iyó (*Death* 982). This identification is significant because the praise singer channels the voice and words of the departed king when Elesin begins his death-trance; that he specifically emphasizes that his voice is now his own indicates that Elesin is speaking oddly, in a way that would only befit that transition ceremony.

However, like Dravot in "The Man Who Would Be King," Elesin's linguistic abilities surpass those of the other characters in the play. He uses his ability to deftly construct proverbs that convince those around him that his demands, however risky, must be heeded. In an eloquent proverb-poem, he assuages the market women's suspicion that he is marrying the girl out of pure lust and that the marriage may affect his ability to enact ritual suicide when the time comes:

*Who speaks of pleasure? O women, listen!
Pleasure palls. Our acts should have meaning.
The sap of the plantain never dries.
You have seen the young shoot swelling
Even as the parent stalk begins to wither.
Women, let my going be likened to
The twilight hour of the plantain (Death I. 981)*

By linking his union with the girl to the natural world using the plantain metaphor, he makes it seem as though there is nothing irregular about his request. The phrase "the sap of the plantain never dries" and the subsequent contrast between the "swelling" young shoot and withering old stalk suggests a metaphysical import to the union; he will be passing his life-force on to the girl, making it more of a boon to her and the community than a strain. His statement that "pleasure palls" is interesting, however, because "pall" can mean "to lose appeal or attraction" (*OED*), implying that he is no longer concerned with pleasure. But a "pall" is also a kind of funeral shroud (*OED*), which links pleasure to his impending death and seems to reveal Elesin's true selfish motives for marrying the girl—that, rather than preparing for his trial, he wants to experience pleasure before he leaves the mortal world. Moreover, he acts as though he has already performed his duty and is reaping the rewards for its execution when

instead he is further enmeshing himself in mortal relationships and creating a barrier to his transition. Interestingly, like Dravot, Elesin's downfall occurs because of his sexual appetite and its interference with the tenuous relationship between the mortal world and the world beyond.

When Iyaloja, the leader of the market women, weighs the moral consequences of allowing Elesin on his deathbed to claim an already-betrothed girl, he wins her over with an eloquent reminder that he should be able to unburden himself of his seed "in the earth of my choice, in this earth/ I leave behind" (*Death* I. 982). By reiterating his crucial community role as ritual sacrifice, Elesin reminds Iyaloja of her own duty to honor him, and she capitulates, noting that "the claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood" (*Death* I. 982). Iyaloja admits that while it is an infringement of the community's moral code to seek union with a woman who is betrothed or married, the infringement is acceptable if it will ensure the health of the greater community. Elesin thus uses both his social status and linguistic abilities to maintain control over those around him, especially the women in the play.

When he fails in his duty, however, all of his power dissipates, including his linguistic prowess. Iyaloja berates him for the misfortune he has brought to the community, and he can only respond in weary, clipped prose:

IYALOJA: *We fed you sweetmeats such as we hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said No, I must eat the world's left-overs. We said you were the hunter who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital portions of the game. No, you said, I am the hunter's dog and I shall eat the entrails of the game and the faeces of the hunter [she continues her verbal assault]*

ELESIN: *Enough, Iyaloja, enough. (Death V. 1012)*

Iyaloja's angry rebuke and Elesin's defeated reply reverse the jubilant call-and-response between Elesin, the market women, and the praise singer in the beginning of the play, in which Elesin's mental strength and ability to carry out his moral and metaphysical duty is celebrated by those around him. Moreover, Elesin has fully lost his access to the rich proverbs over which he had previously had such a skillful command. When Iyaloja refers to his plantain metaphor in

order to emphasize the natural order of the parent-child relationship, he “[does not] see her meaning” (*Death* V. 1013). Thus, even Elesin’s comprehension of the relationship between the proverbs and reality is clouded. Just as Dravot misuses Masonic symbols to put excessive stock in his own infallibility, Elesin manipulates proverbs to laud his own moral and metaphysical power even as he is forsaking his responsibilities. Iyaloja’s anger confirms that Elesin has committed a grievous violation of the moral code and that he has irrevocably failed in his Ogunian act. Furthermore, his failure, born from the desire for a union that Iyaloja now sees as being for personal, not community, benefit, has endangered the future of the community.

When Elesin finally does commit suicide at the end of the play, it is too late. Rather than begin an Ogunian challenge to the constraints of human matter and the bondage of environmental forces, the suicide is an act of desperation and avoidance. Elesin can no longer bear the emotional pain of his failure and his subversion of the natural order, so he chooses to escape it—once again, an act for personal, not community, reasons. In the moments leading to his suicide, he has already accepted a defeatist attitude, blaming the British intervention as the fateful reason behind his failure. This defeatism is a far cry from the “master of my Fate” (*Death* I. 976) of Act One, and certainly antithetical to the resolute perseverance of Ogun. As Richard Ready points out, Elesin’s suicide is characteristic of Sango in its uncontrolled passion (Ready 718). It is a reaction to the circumstances rather than a willful action separate from them. In “The Fourth Stage,” Soyinka contrasts the measured force of Ogun with the violent implosion of Sango, the god of electricity. Sango does not exercise his will in the sacrificial act, as Ogun does, but instead commits “self-destruction [that is] the violent, central explosion from ego-inflation” (“Stage” 28). Though this self-destruction produces “fear and pity” of the Aristotelian type, it does not constitute Yoruba tragedy because there is no controlled mental detachment and no link with the community. Thus, a Sango figure like Elesin cannot be a tragic hero in the Yoruba idiom. Ironically, Elesin’s premature self-aggrandizement finally results in his utter defeat and self-destruction; he jumps from one extreme to another and succumbs to environmental forces.

His son, Olunde, in contrast, is the true Ogunian tragic hero of the play. He practices a cool restraint throughout the play. He is keen to the inconsistencies in British culture and colonialism, but realizes that his time abroad was valuable because it brought him to appreciate the Yoruba worldview (*Death* IV. 1003). Perhaps because he has already experienced transition of a sort by leaving his home to study in England, he is better prepared to control his passions than his father is. Though he has been Western-educated, he understands, unlike the Pilkingses, the importance of his father's sacrifice for the moral and metaphysical health of the community. He commits an error in dying before his father, but he knows that his ritual suicide is the only compensation for his father's failure:

. . . Olunde is to form the necessary link in transition. Hence his act is appropriately restorative . . . In losing himself he paradoxically saves his people. Seen from the communal, ritualistic point of view, his individual act is tragic in a positive sense, for "offences even against nature may be part of the exaction by deeper nature from humanity of acts which alone can open up the deeper springs of man and bring about a constant rejuvenation of the human spirit." (Ready 720)

Thus, Olunde's "offence against nature" is part of his Ogunian sacrifice; in fact, because at its core, the Ogunian sacrifice is a challenge to the powers of nature for the benefit of the human community, it only adds to his status as a tragic hero.

The Ogunian sacrifice is the central moral system in the play, and as Soyinka explains, the British colonial role in the play is incidental (*Death* 972). In making this assertion Soyinka seems to be reversing Chinua Achebe's criticism of *Heart of Darkness*, in which he accuses Joseph Conrad of using Africa merely as the setting for the disintegration of Kurtz's mind (Achebe). Here, Soyinka centers his play on the metaphysical struggles of Elesin Oba and his Yoruba community, and the British colonialists are merely interlopers with only an indirect bearing on the Ogunian tragedy of the play.

At the same time, Soyinka does spend time delineating the moral system of Pilkings's world. Just as Dravot and Carnehan are ignorant of the cultural and religious import of Masonic symbols for the Kafiris, Pilkings exhibits a smug obliviousness to Yoruba beliefs.

In addition to his insistence on arresting Elesin for what colonial law defines as the criminal act of attempted suicide, he and Jane disrespect the religious value of the Yoruba death masks by frivolously wearing them to a costume ball (*Death II*. 984). However, it is not only Yoruba belief that Pilkings disrespects—in his commands to the Christian servant Joseph, he calls Christianity “holy water nonsense” (*Death II*. 987). Like Elesin, Pilkings must direct his actions towards serving his prince, but his duty is not based on any metaphysical system of morality; his sense of entitlement seems to stem from a kind of British colonial chauvinism and a desire to maintain appearances. The superficiality of his moral authority poses the question of whether the root of British colonial authority itself is tottering on unstable moral ground.

Richard Ready comments that “‘The Fourth Stage’ provides readers and viewers of *Death and the King’s Horseman* the means to see how Soyinka is reshaping the Western tragicomic tradition” (Ready 712). Indeed, in bringing Yoruba tragicomic elements to the forefront of discussions about his plays, Soyinka is emphasizing that global and postcolonial literature involves not only an examination of themes and literary language across cultures, but also literary genres themselves. By broadening our understanding of what constitutes “traditional” tragedy across cultures, we have the opportunity to attain a deeper understanding of plays like *Death and the King’s Horseman*. At the same time, though specific cultural knowledge can deepen our understanding, compartmentalizing works according to cultural idiom would be detrimental for determining the aspects that these idioms share. “The Man Who Would Be King” and *Death and the King’s Horseman* both emphasize the importance of reading these kinds of signs and linkages. The oral and written languages in “The Man Who Would Be King” and *Death and the King’s Horseman*, such as Yoruba proverbs and lower-class English dialect, as well as systems of communication like Masonic symbolism and the language of Yoruba sacrifice, have greater symbolic and cultural valences, specifically in understanding the moral systems of the works and determining the ways in which those systems affect the tragic arc of the plots. The ways in which characters manipulate language to either work within or to disturb the moral systems of their worlds affects the

ultimate tragedy in the stories. By examining the parallels between the use of language in such seemingly disparate works as “The Man Who Would Be King” and *Death and the King’s Horseman*, we can illuminate aspects of each that we might not have otherwise seen.

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