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The Fortune-Seeker's Failure to Find Happiness

Humanity must rid themselves of the misconception that fortune contains happiness. Only through dispelling this illusion can the human condition improve. Boethius's work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, reveals humanity's predisposition to falsely associate happiness with the subjects of fortune. Fortune's subjects encompass all aspects of life which are under the control of chance, such as political power, financial stability, and so on. In Shakespeare's tragic play *King Lear*, the characters seek political power for happiness's sake in addition to other motivations. Boethius and Shakespeare's works contain significant differences in their focuses, structure of their works, and intent. However, both works are similar in showing that the pursuit of fortune's subjects results in dehumanized individuals. Boethius, through a dialogue between himself and the personified Fortune and Lady Philosophy, focuses on the individual who seeks these desires. He sees this dehumanized state as the result of individuals failing to pursue unity with Divinity. Shakespeare, in his tragic play, focuses on the power-seeking individual's active repression of the human dignity in others. In order to negate the delusional belief that fortune leads to happiness and, thereby, improve the human condition, the authors of both works emphasize how seeking fortune's subjects diminishes people to a subhuman state.

All individuals desire happiness, and society fosters the belief that fortune contains this happiness. Boethius defines this desired state by writing, "mortal men travel by different paths,

though all are striving to reach one and the same goal, namely, happiness, beatitude, which is a good which once obtained leaves nothing more to be desired.” (48). This desired state is complete in its independence of all other desires. Individuals desire fortune when fortune is associated with happiness. Without any inherent ability to bring happiness, individuals pursue fortune as “things which are not good by nature are sought after if they nevertheless seem as if they were truly good.” (Boethius 72). Fortune seems good when linked to happiness. This link forms from societal influence. Society ties happiness to fortune by promoting the “general pattern of human happiness” to include fortune’s subjects “wealth, position, power, fame, pleasure” (Boethius 49). An individual then learns to associate happiness, the ultimate desire, with fortune.

The acquisition of fortune can lead to the acquisition of political power, and in extension, the perception of happiness. Fortune, personified by Boethius, explains that she has authority over different forms of power, including financial power and political power (Boethius 25). Power-seeking individuals seek happiness from fortune in the form of control and influence. Boethius echoes this sentiment when he says, those who seek power believe happiness “lies in the highest power, and either want to be rulers themselves, or try and attach themselves to those in power” (Boethius 49). The actions of the characters in Shakespeare’s drama *King Lear* exemplify this seeking of political power. While Shakespeare never explicitly states the reason for this power-seeking, the characters who pursue power seem to believe that it will fill an emptiness, an unfulfilled need. This need for power shows itself after King Lear’s youngest daughter Cordelia refuses, unlike her sisters, to profess her love for the King to inherit her dowry. This refusal enrages the King who tells the husbands of his two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, “With my two daughters’ dowers digest the third” (1.1.144-145). The image of the

two lords and their wives fighting to consume Cordelia's promised power invokes a feeling of hunger. This hunger which is experienced by the characters appears animalistic in its fervor. Boethius's definition of happiness can provide a clearer understanding of the reasons behind these characters' hunger for it. Boethius explains that once happiness is acquired, it vanquishes all other desires; consequently, the characters of King Lear chase happiness because they think it will solve all of their wants.

In *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan's desires for control of the kingdom exemplify the overwhelming pursuit of political power within this society. Unsatisfied with their halves of the kingdom, they work together to strip King Lear of his last vestiges of power (1.3.15-17). Despite only having one hundred men left, Goneril and Regan refuse to care for the King until abating him of the last of his men (2.4.293-303). This shows that the pursuit of power comes even before compassion. Removing the last of King Lear's men is not enough, both daughters also prepare for war with each other. This "division / between the dukes" (3.3.8-9) will end only when "wars toward 'twixt / the dukes of Cornwall and Albany" (2.1.10-11) result in one victor. War will occur because, despite having equal halves of the kingdom, Goneril and Regan are unsatiated. Both daughters desire control of the entire kingdom and are willing to fight both father and sister until they have it. However, with the belief that power will bring happiness, the death of others and the destruction of their familial relationships are less important than power.

Another prominent power-seeking character is Edmund. In a time when age and legitimacy were the keys to gaining power through an inheritance, Edmund found himself restrained by his status as a son who was neither first-born nor legitimate. Edmund lacked not only financial stability, but also social status. Society's establishment of power as a desirable commodity granted those who possessed it - such as an eldest son - praise and acceptance.

Edmund protests his illegitimacy and age's ability to prevent his inheritance. He says, "Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom, and permit / The curiosity of nations to deprive me" (1.2.2-4). The word 'deprived' is essential as it shows Edmund's deep dissatisfaction in not being able to obtain that which society has deemed a good worth pursuing: power. In reference to Edmund's existence, his father says, "I have so often blushed to acknowledge / him that now I am brazed to 't" (1.1.9-11). This treatment of Edmund by both his father and society leads Edmund to desire the societal acceptance and the superior position of his older and legitimate brother Edgar (1.2.21-23). Society has established that power is highly desirable, and that the powerful deserve the most respect. To find fulfillment within society - and subsequently happiness - Edmund seeks to acquire power.

Unfortunately for Edmund, Goneril, and Regan, happiness cannot reside in fortune. Fortune's subjects, such as political power, can never belong to the individual. Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that, "happiness can't consist in things governed by chance" (31). Fortune is fickle and undependable by her nature (23); she is the definition of chance. Happiness is a complete state and independent of desires, those who obtain fortune should no longer have any needs or desires. However, the characters in Shakespeare demonstrate that this is clearly not the case. Boethius reinforces this saying, "if happiness is the highest good of rational nature and anything that can be taken away is not the highest good – since it is surpassed by what can't be taken away – Fortune by her very mutability can't hope to lead to happiness." (31). Since fortune is independent of the individual (25), and an individual easily receives and loses fortune's subjects, these subjects cannot hope to lead to a state of happiness. The unstable and temporary nature of fortune is incongruent with the stable and complete nature of happiness.

The events within *King Lear* reflect Lady Philosophy's explanation of the fickleness of fortune. The characters within this play understand the instability of fortune. After Edmund's betrayal of Edgar, Edgar finds himself to be "The lowest and most dejected thing of Fortune" (4.1.3). He clearly acknowledges that his unhappiness is due to his loss of fortune. However, having been brought so low he "lives not in fear. / The lamentable change is from the best" (4.1.4-5). Believing himself to be at the bottom of fortune's wheel, the only direction left to go is back up towards an improved state. Fortune's instability appears again with Edmund's downfall. At the end of the play, Edmund is in a position of power. However, after engaging in a duel with Edgar, Edmund's power, control, and life vanish. As Edmund is dying, he says, "The wheel is come full circle; I am here" (5.3.209). Edgar has regained his power, and Edmund is once again powerless. This inversely proportional relationship in power between Edgar and Edmund exemplifies fortune's fickle nature; as she gave to one, she took from the other. The deep sorrow which came from the loss of fortune demonstrates fortune's inability to contain true happiness.

Happiness cannot reside in fortune; however, it does exist. Boethius explains that happiness exists only in the Divine. Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that "God is to the highest degree filled with supreme good is unqualified and final" (69). Happiness is complete in its existence outside of a state of desire. Therefore, happiness and God are synonymous given that they are both complete, require nothing, and are supremely good (71). Drawing nearer to God results in drawing nearer to happiness. Therefore, only that which brings humanity closer to this supreme goodness can lead to happiness, "as men become just through the possession of justice, or wise through the possession of wisdom, so those who possess divinity necessarily become divine. Each happy individual is therefore divine" (71). To be happy one must engage in a relationship with Divinity, as sharing in divinity is sharing in happiness. All objects and desires

that lead one away from this supreme good are, by their nature, unable to provide their pursuer with happiness.

Sharing in divinity requires orienting oneself towards God. For this to happen, a person must first recognize the superior value of the rational individual, endowed with the ability to know God, over fortune's subjects (Boethius 35). An understanding that power, wealth, honor, and all other fortune-dependent aspects carry no inherent goodness and cannot lead to happiness is essential. Misdirected individuals focus on obtaining fortune's subjects, and, in doing so, lose sight of the true source of happiness. Boethius explains this misdirection writing, "when a being endowed with a godlike quality in virtue of his rational nature thinks that his only splendour lies in the possession of inanimate goods" he is unable to find happiness (35). Believing the splendor of favorable fortune can lead to happiness places the value of these worldly pursuits above an individual's worth. This superior value given to fortune occurs as the result of an individual pursuing only that which he or she assumes to be greater than himself or herself (35). An individual who holds this belief hinders his or her relationship with Divinity as it subordinates the rational individual's ability to cultivate a relationship with God below the pursuit of fortune. Happiness then proves even more elusive as retracting from Divinity is synonymous with drawing away from a state of complete happiness.

Dehumanization is the suppression of one's ability to maintain that which belongs to each person by merit of his or her humanity. Boethius sees individuals who seek fortune as dehumanizing themselves. This dehumanization occurs as the result of suppressing one's natural connection to Divinity, through the rational soul, in favor of pursuing wealth, power, and other pieces of fortune. For Boethius, these individuals are dismissing the inherent blessings given to humanity, rationality and an ability to cultivate a relationship with Divinity, in exchange for

temporary fortune. Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that “the condition of human nature is just this; man towers above the rest of creation so long as he recognizes his own nature, and when he forgets it, he sinks lower than the beasts” (36). Therefore, when an individual believes that fortune contains happiness, he or she confines happiness to worldly pursuits. In placing these pursuits above the individual, humanity stifles their rational nature which connects them to God. The result is a dehumanized individual who no longer recognizes his or her own nature.

Shakespeare, unlike Boethius, does not explicitly state where happiness resides. However, the familial destruction for the sake of power and vendettas throughout the play reveals the baseness of humanity. This destruction is a contrast to natural familial relationships. The comparison of Cordelia to her sisters demonstrates this contrast. Cordelia speaks truthfully saying, “I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less” (1.1.101-102). She loves the King as her father and is unwilling to hyperbolize their relationship, even for the sake of her inheritance. Her two sisters do not demonstrate a similar filial duty. Goneril and Regan both speak of their eternal love and devotion to King Lear (1.1.60-84). However, once they acquire his power, they quickly prove the falseness of their words. Goneril’s insistence on the removal of King Lear’s remaining men drives him from her castle to Regan’s (1.4.263-264). Regan sides with Goneril and casts Lear out into a terrific storm (2.4.352-353). The natural duty and relationship between parent and child is disregarded in favor of power, and personal vendettas. These resulting distorted relationships stand in contrast to natural and happier familial relationships.

King Lear also shows the dehumanization that results from pursuing fortune. Edmund’s pursuit of power and wealth leads him to suppress the dignity of his brother. He sets up Edgar to look as though he conspired to kill their father and seize his power. This forces Edgar to escape

persecution by playing a madman. “I will preserve myself, and am bethought / To take the basest and most poorest shape” (2.3.6-7) with this shape being “in contempt of man / Brought near to beast” (2.3.8-9). Edmund forces Edgar to live in a subhuman and animalistic state by stripping him of the dignity an individual’s rational nature demands. This subhuman form is the result of Edmund’s power-hungry actions. Therefore, a power-seeker can force other individuals into a dehumanized state by denying them their inherent human dignity in exchange for a piece of fortune.

Goneril and Regan’s power-seeking actions dehumanize King Lear. They suppress the King’s dignity by denying his rational nature and belittling him. While attempting to remove King Lear’s men, Regan says “You should be ruled and led / By some discretion that discerns your state / Better than you yourself” (2.4.166-168). She is belittling him and deeming him unfit to make decisions. Lear tells Regan “I gave you all –“ (2.4.286) to which she replies “And in good time you gave it” (2.4.287). She holds no gratitude towards the King, only a will to use the power she now possesses to acquire more power from the King. She denies his rationality and, in doing so, suppresses his dignity. She does this so that she may strip him of his men. Goneril also suppresses the King’s dignity. She says, in response to the King’s refusal to dismiss the rest of his train, “’Tis his own blame hath put himself from rest, / And must needs taste his folly” (2.4.331-332) before thrusting the King out of the castle and leaving him to the elements. King Lear says of his daughter’s actions, which suppress his dignity, that “Nothing could have subdued nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters” (3.4.76-77). This subduing of nature comes from his daughters treating him as an irrational foolish old man and ignoring his due dignity. In this pursuit of power, Goneril and Regan push the King into a subhuman state.

The dehumanization in both works occurs in slightly different forms. In Boethius's work, dehumanization occurs when an individual seeks happiness in fortune, thereby placing fortune above himself or herself. This results in a failure to participate in Divinity, the source of true and complete happiness. In Shakespeare's play dehumanization occurs when the power-seeking individual suppresses the human dignity in others. This suppression is caused by denying the rational nature of the individual and it forces the individual to revert to an animalistic state. In both works dehumanization is caused by power-seekers and results in an individual failing to maintain that which is granted to an individual by merit of being human.

While both Shakespeare and Boethius share similarities in their intent to dissuade individuals from pursuing fortune for happiness, their works also differ in their structure, intent, and thematic portrayal. Boethius wrote a philosophical and theological work centered around a dialogue between himself, cast as a character, and Lady Philosophy. He creates an organized and sequential argument for the inability of fortune to contain happiness. In the character's dialogue each thought builds upon the previous one, with the logic of the previous statement supporting the claim of the next. Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* centuries later. His intended audience is less scholarly, and, perhaps, can relate more to the messiness of life than an argument's theological underpinnings. Shakespeare's play reflects this messiness in the viciousness of human actions. He shows the destructiveness of pursuing political power for happiness. However, he does not suggest that this is the only reason Edmund, Goneril, and Regan seek power. Throughout the play, alternative motivations such as jealousy, shame, and revenge influence these characters' actions. In this way, Shakespeare gives a better representation of life. Often many reasons and emotions influence actions, not simply a belief that one's actions will draw one closer to a state of happiness.

Despite differences between the two works, there exists important commonalities. Both works show fortune's fickleness, the pursuance of fortune's subjects for satiating one's desires, and the resulting dehumanization of such pursuits. Fortune's instability is apparent in both Shakespeare's frequent reference to fortune's wheel and Boethius's exploration of the ever-changing nature of fortune. Society promotes the dangerous belief within an individual that happiness exists in fortune's subjects. The actions of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan as they pursued political power exemplifies the danger of this belief. Both authors also show that seeking power and wealth dehumanizes an individual or individuals. This dehumanization is the active suppression of an individual's inherent merits as being a part of humanity, whether this is developing a relationship with the Divine or maintaining one's human dignity and rationality.

Societies throughout history have ingrained within individuals the belief that happiness can come from fortune's subjects, such as political power. Boethius and Shakespeare's works, written approximately 2,000 years apart, reflect the persistence in this societal tendency. Dispelling the illusion that fortune contains happiness would remove the desire to acquire fortune's subjects. Removing this desire would end the dehumanization, both personal and individual, that results from such a pursuance. Humanity might then gain an appreciation of the superiority of the rational soul. Individuals could then pursue happiness through appropriate pathways by drawing near Divinity, investing in authentic familial relationships, or other virtuous actions. To improve the human condition, humanity must dispel the illusion that fortune contains happiness.

Work Cited

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