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**History and Language in Tennyson's Tragedy *Harold* (1876)**

A Research by

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+9647501544367 +9647504453971**Abstract**

Alfred Tennyson (1809- 1892) wrote a compact, action- packed, historical, patriotic, and a pioneering tragedy inspired by the Norman Conquest of England entitled *Harold* in 1876. It is based on the facts regarding the events leading to the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Tennyson has been, so far, the only man- of- letters to have dramatized this chapter of British history in a tragedy, even though he has never been the only writer to have paid attention to this turning-point in the destiny of his homeland. This tragedy focuses on the personal conflict between Harold Godwinson (1022- 1066) and William Duke of Normandy (1028- 1087), also known as William the Conqueror, or King William I. This drama, thus, is a journey to the past to explore the forces at work, and the men who made history, the struggle to achieve an improvement after the long- lasting social and cultural stagnation of England in Anglo- Saxon days which had lasted from 449- 1066. Tennyson chose the historical moment which all the earlier playwrights had avoided. Alongside this, he chose the accurate kind of discourse that would be more suitable for both the historical theme and the historical period.

The paper considers and clarifies the notable presence of language and its use as an indication of the historical course of the work. This is carried out through the analysis of a number of selections from the text. The focus will be on the historical style of the dramatic discourse. Tennyson is faithful as much as possible not only to the events but to the historical kind of speech used by characters to make a convincing and trustworthy play linguistically and historically. The paper considers and clarifies the notable presence of language in its use in historical context of this tragedy.

Key Words; historical drama, language and history, style, historical diction.

### **History and Literature**

The link between literature as an aesthetic creative entity and history as a scholarly and scientific discipline is old and time-honored, going back to the ancient Greeks- History is facts. Literature is based on imagination and fiction. In their *History of Civilization*, Brinton, Christopher and Lee Wolff define history as follows:

The word HISTORY has two broad general meanings. It can mean everything that has happened, past history, even just the PAST, as contrasted with the PRESENT and the FUTURE, and it can mean the study of that past, the RECORD of what has happened. (P. 3)

These authors carry on to say:

History, to be concrete, will not tell you whether to use steel or aluminum for a given gadget. It will not choose for you between Browning's:

*God's in his heaven-*

*All's right with the world*

And James Russell Lowell's:

*Truth forever on the scaffold,*

*Wrong forever on the throne.*

What history can do, however, is supply a series of case histories or clinical reports, extensions of human experience, from which certain notions of how to go about handling cases in the present may be obtained. (P. 4)

"For history can .... Show ... the range ... of human behavior" (P. 5)

In his *Story of Mankind* (1951), the Dutch- American historian Hendrik Willem Van Loon (1882- 1944) writes:

The Danes had been driven away [from England] and now (it was early in the eleventh century) another Saxon King, Edward the Confessor, was on the throne. But Edward was not expected to live long and he had no children. The circumstances favored ambitious dukes of Normandy. In 1066 Edward died. Immediately William of Normandy crossed the channel, defeated and killed Harold of Wessex (who had taken the crown) at the Battle of Hastings, and proclaimed himself King of England. In another chapter I have told you how in the year 800 a German Chieftain had become a Roman Emperor. Now

in the year 1066 the grandson of a Norse pirate was recognized as king of England:

*Why should we ever*

*Read fairy stories, when the truth of history*

*Is so much more*

*Interesting and entertaining!*

(Van Loon: P. 154)

The link between history and drama is also old and can be traced back to the Renaissance. The playwrights apart from Alfred Tennyson, the poet Laureate who wrote verse plays towards the end of his life, avoided dramatizing the events and historical characters leading to the Battle of Hastings and William of Normandy's coronation as king of England. According to the historical facts (see *A History of England* by Andre Maurois, for instance, pp. 62- 69) Edward the Confessor died on January 5<sup>th</sup> 1066. Next day, Harold was crowned King in Westminster Abbey- Harold died in battle on October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1066.

### ***Harold as a Historical Play***

History plays usually are constructed upon a sharp antitheses between hard times and promising times. R. G. Collingwood (1889-1943) defines the Christian apocalyptic history as "a history ... divided into two periods, a period of darkness and a period of light". (Collingwood, p. 50).

Thus, *Harold* is a play that shows Tennyson to have regarded the history before the battle of Hastings as dark, and the period after 1066 as the beginning of light. This seems to be Tennyson's governing principle or his principal pattern in constructing his history play. So, by genre, *Harold* is a historical play with apocalyptic undertones. It bids farewell to England of the Dark Ages and welcomes the Medieval England that would later on grow up to become the merry England of later decades, as the poets love to suggest to the public.

*Harold* is, by genre, a historical play. The time frame of the play is the year 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest. It extends from King Edward the Confessor's last days to King William's victory in the battle of Hastings. Actually, the time frame of this play represents the border line of two distinct eras in English history. That is why the setting is in organic harmony with the other dramatic elements in the play combined with the poetic use of language.

*Harold's* main outline follows the details of historical events. King Edward the Confessor's days are ending but he refrains from naming his successor clearly. He had given Duke William of Normandy a vague that he would succeed him as the English monarch. Nevertheless, this promise had only lukewarm, half-hearted encouragement by King Edward, maybe because the Duke was the brother in law of the King. This uncertainty of the situation led the Duke to ask help from Harold to the ascend English throne. Harold unwillingly agreed. In reality, when King Edward died, Harold claimed the throne. Thus the battle began between the two (William and Harold). Harold's army was already exhausted from fighting with the Norwegian invaders and internal rebellion. As a consequence, Harold was killed during the battle and William's army won the battle. The victorious William praised his dead rival's enormous dexterity, and then gave promises to make England a truly great nation.

The tragedy rests on the two historical pillars: Harold and William. Thus, from the beginning till the end of the play all actions and events are related to these two characters. Tennyson avoids the episodic structure which many a historical play may succumb into. The plot is tight rather than loose, due to the presence of these two polars. Whatever affects one of them affects the other. Harold being the representative of the Anglo-Saxon England and pre-conquest English spirit affects everything in the play i.e. whatever happens to Harold affects England. The story of Harold is the story of England at the end of the Anglo-Saxon days. The climax is reached at in the battle of Hasting and Harold's death. The play ends quietly when the completion of the chain-of-action causes the logical disentanglement of the plot.

### **The Analysis: History, Language, and Style in *Harold***

In a very true sense, William and Harold are heroes, or national figures that made history. Their words and their deeds filled pages of the annals and the chronicles. In this context, it is pertinent to quote Herbert Linenberges words:

History and heroism work in a kind of reciprocal relation to one another, our knowledge that the hero lives within a particular historical context gives meaning to his acts, while his acts, in turn,

endow history with its central meanings,. History magnifies and is magnified in return. (Linenberges, p. 60)

Tennyson seems to have paid particular attention to make each of the key- figures speak their own language which can be felt as the true representation of the inner and outer personality, because in a play of this kind every word counts due to the fact that in history, every minute detail counts. That is why many utterances in this play deserve consideration.

The word “lie” and its derivations are worthy of consideration in this play because the whole drama reflects an event triggered by falsehood and dishonesty. Harold himself boldly says:

*Better die than lie* (Act II, Scene ii, p. 619)

This may show that he is honest, till the events reveal that he means exactly the revers, i.e. better lie than die. This means that he says what he does not mean and means what he does not say. This shows that he lacks the ability to use the art of diplomatic discourse which always sounds responsive and reassuring while it avoids involvement in complicated legal consequences. This implies that language in this play, whether the utterances were spoken by Harold or other characters, reflects the conflict between truth and untruth. Harold’s language shows the dichotomy between truth and falsehood. For him (like many other Medieval princes), telling lies is a sinful matter which can be cleaned and forgiven by a confession to the priest. Thus, shortly after his false oath, he says:

*I mean to be a liar- I am not bound-  
Stigand [the priest] shall give me absolution for it-  
(Act II, Scene ii, p.624)*

Harold wants to avoid the truth that he is a liar, a usurper, and a false- lover, even though he is a royal and noble character. He sounds quite unequivocal when he answers the earl of Kent asking him about being “Stupid- honest?”:

*Better to be a liar’s dog, and hold  
My master honest, than believe that lying  
And ruling men are **fatal twins** that cannot  
Move one without the other* (Act III, Scene I, p. 626)

As it can be seen in the quotation above, Harold is sending an implicit message to the effect that though he may be a liar, his followers should be his faithful dogs that must refrain from troubling themselves over the link between lying and ruling. Harold is not yet to be a king because Edward is alive still. Nevertheless, Harold uses the form “my master” where he intends to say “your master, who is going to be me”. He also uses the plural form “ruling men” to denote the singular form “ruling man” which he evidently intends to refer to his own person. These words used by Harold indicate that he must not be counted a liar though he is one. “Fatal twins” is also uttered by Harold to show that there is an unintentional epithet which reveals more than what he wants to admit. This epithet turns into an ironic predication which summarizes much of the play because both men (Harold and William) are born on the same day October 14<sup>th</sup>, William in 1028 and Harold in 1022). So, in a sense they are each other’s double, i. e. twins. Naturally, only some of the twins are identical. Many are un-identical. Thus, Harold and William share a number of Points. But, they have a lot which sets them apart. In this case one of them is a liar (Harold) and the other is a ruler (William). The later wins because he is aided with his integrity. Tennyson does not permit Harold to score many points at William’s expense because this would be against the events and spirit of history.

Nevertheless, Tennyson manages to show indirectly that Harold’s exaggerated ego, via the latter’s use of the pronoun “thou” as a term of address, when he says:

*[Addressing William in the latter’s royal Court in Normandy]:*

*Count of Normans, thou hast ransom’d us,*

*Maintain’d and entertain’d us royally!* (Act II, Scene ii, p, 618)

Harold uses the pronoun “thou” addressing William. In the history of the English language this pronoun is used in Old and Medieval English to address someone who is either very intimate to, or lower than, the speaker. Harold uses this pronoun but he thinks that he is superior to William. It may indicate that they are intimate with each other but temporarily because Harold with his inflated ego uses the derivation form of the “royal we”, i. e. “us” when he talks about himself.



As for William, when he uses pronouns and terms of address he seldom sounds either contrived or artificial, as they are compatible with his wholesome and impressive personality. He uses the pronoun “I” when talking about himself. His attitude is reflected in his use of language. Even when he wins the battle, he does not use the “royal we”:

*I am thy fastest friend in Normandy* (Act II, Scene ii, p. 622)

Despite the splendor of William’s Norman Court, he prefers to avoid pompous language. Even after his tremendous and historic victory at Hastings, he avoids the “royal we” when referring to himself:

*I am king of England,...*

*And I will rule according to their laws.* (Act VI, Scene ii, p. 645)

According to Lindenberges, these verbal echoes give the play an important role as a tragedy. He refers to Shakespeare but the context also serves in this very instance of Edward’s utterance:

Beyond their obvious ceremonial functions, the various curses and prophecies that run through Shakespeare’s histories act as signals to show as where, precisely, an event fits into the framework, and remind us in what direction the play is going. (Lindenberges, p. 138)

Beside Harold’s boastful, circumlocutive, but untruthful language and William’s direct, un-boastful, unornamented, but truthful language, there is another language represented by the dying King Edward the Confessor (1003- 1066). He speaks a language which is compatible with his pious name and reputation. As a dying man, he sees visions. In his visions an angel shouts “The Doom of England”. The vision seems to foretell William’s victory and his later statistic measures of registering all the cities, towns, villages, and people of England by compiling the so- called “Domesday Book”. Edward also foretells in his dying vision the site of the battle, as well as the manner of Harold’s death:

*Senlac! Sanguelac,*

*The Lake of Blood* (Act III, Scene I, p. 628)

Edward goes on to say, after some interruptions:

*A sea of blood- we are drown’d in*

*Blood- for God*

*Has filled the quiver, and Death has drawn*

*The bow-*

*Sanguelac! Sanguelac! The arrow! The arrow!*

*[Edward dies]* (Act III, Scene i, p. 628)

The language of King Edward is intended by Tennyson to stand for the voice of Providence. The word “blood” suggests death, defeat, and war. The “arrow” refers to the manner of Harold’s death, because he was killed by a stray arrow between his eyes. Edward’s words are more than just his dying speech, they also indicate the end of Harold, which is a literary technique known as foreshadowing.

King Edward (1003- 1066) was religious, pious and his words were true. His vision reveals details of the Old English poem *The Vercelli Book*, viz. “The Dream of the Rood” (c. 750, probably by Cynewulf). Particularly inviting is the image of “green tree”, in Edward’s vision which contrasts with verbal associations of “human blood”. While the subject matter of the Old English poem is religious and has rather indirect relation to the historical subject of the play.

The dying king’s words are a true prediction of Harold’s downfall, of blood, but also of England’s ultimate triumph: in his vision the tree symbolizing England will:

*Grow ever higher and higher* because of being

*Baptized in blood* (Act III, Scene i. p 626)

Thus, the dying king’s words seal Harold’s death. Again, truth triumphs over untruth.

### **Conclusions**

Historical evidence tells us that Harold as a man was a self-centered person, motivated by arrogance, anger, jealousy, making him trespass the acceptable limits of human relations, causing him to be narrow-minded and inflexible. He took the authority to rule England but over acted in the malpractice of his powers. This is significant even today, as reflected in today’s conflict embodied in the abuse of power for personal gains. So the results can be summarized in the following points:

1. *Harold* is a rare historical play where Tennyson chooses Anglo-Saxon history which is a seldom- dramatized historical era to awaken the nation to its history. He does that as a truly patriotic



intellectual poet and thinker to share the truth with his less knowledgeable audience.

2. Tennyson encourages his audience to acquire a better perception of William's victory over Harold. The play reveals the truth of Harold. It is indirectly but determinedly didactic, because the understanding of the Anglo- Saxon and Norman era is essential for the full understanding of English history from the perspective of challenge and response.
3. *Harold* as a historical play makes sure that none of the major characters is either introspective or static in action. It is bothactable and stagable. The role of history is evident in a meaningful interplay of the leading character and the course of events; or the personal freedom of the said leader and the destiny of the nation which he leads.
4. Tennyson is to be credited because he gives us the facts of history. Out of the chaos made by Harold, there emerge England and the English nation afresh. So, history may be merciless, but it is just. This may be Tennyson's genuine message.
5. *Harold* is a noteworthy piece of work whether as history or drama. It can be considered as a pedagogically useful text for the comprehension and appreciation of late Anglo- Saxon and early Norman England. A true material for generations to study and evaluate the English history as it is.
6. Tennyson delivers his message through the creative use of language. The message indicates that the glory of history is made by straight and truthful men. These are the heroes. Their hero- like conduct consists of truthful utterances.
7. The play may be more than about the victory of William over Harold. In fact, it can be about the victory of the straight language of truth over untruth. Thus, each of these men's attitudes to the word he speaks is also the measure of personal magnitude and their consciousness of their historical responsibility.

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