

King Lear Revisited

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Shakespeare is an artist for all ages, all people and all countries. Unlike his contemporary, Ben Jonson, he presents a particular society set against a particular background. In this context we may remember the oft-quoted statement of Ben Jonson, : "Shakespeare is not of an age, but of all ages." (*King Lear* 10) Each of Shakespeare's plays presents a distinct world, and none of his plays is more close to the world around us today than *King Lear*. The world of *King Lear* presents a reversal of human values. It is a wasteland devoid of spirituality. Eliot's 'Wasteland' has traces of hope in the form of lilacs, so the world in *King Lear*, too has Kent, Cordelia, Edgar, the Fool, the gentleman and servants. But the prominent projection is that of evil forces and vile passions. The King's vision is clouded. Kent's curt advice, "See better, Lear". (I.i.153) is flouted. Kent rightly describes Cordelia as "the true blank thine (King's) eyes". (I.ii.154) Of course, order is perceivable after a prolonged suffering. Suffering has the purifying effect. It is another matter that the suffering is disproportionate to the punishment meted out to the King. Cordelia's death is no loss to her. This is for the purification of human emotion for the triumph of love in the human world. The play apparently presents man in his most glorious robe, but it also reduces man to his utmost nakedness. Destiny also plays a significant role in this play. 'Why do the innocent suffer?' This question is raised most poignantly though no answer has been given. In fact, the tragedy of the play lies in suffering as well as challenging the moral validity of suffering. King Lear is a man " more sinned against than sinning." (III. ii. 54-55) Cordelia is perfectly innocent, but she is brutally killed. The Fool is a good man, but he suffers. The evil people are punished, but the good people are not rescued. Therefore, many people rightly think that it is a pessimistic play, a play of despair, in which there is nothing redeeming.

In the beginning King Lear is a fool. He does not distinguish between the good and the bad. He has no knowledge about the nature of his daughters. He wants to play the role of a King where he should have acted as a father. He takes the words of flattery seriously. He misreads Cordelia. He appears to be quite ignorant of the fact that authority without crown cannot be respected. He begins to behave foolishly. Thus his suffering starts. Through this suffering he gains knowledge. Ultimately, he realises that man is nothing more than " a poor, bare forked animal."

(III. iv.102- 03). He now knows his limitations. Seeing naked Edgar in the Storm scene, he exclaims, "First let me talk with this Philosopher". (III.iv.148) Man should know himself, should acknowledge that external accusations are mere covers beneath which lies nakedness, the animal-helplessness, the power to suffer and to do nothing else. Thus this play is a journey from ignorance to knowledge, from foolish vanity to philosophical wisdom. King Lear at the end becomes bold enough to face whatever awaits him.; "...readiness is all," (V.ii.211) says Hamlet, and this is the Christian theme of this play as well. Lear becomes a symbol of excessive punishment. This reminds us of storm beaten, battered and bleeding King and Christ nailed on the Cross. Thus the old Lear is dead in the storm, and the new Lear is born in the scene in which he is reunited with Cordelia. His madness also marks the end of this egotistical monarch in him. This is the spiritual regeneration of King Lear. In other words, we may say that awakening comes into the life of Lear. That is why, he unlearns hatred, and learns love and humility. He loses the world and gains his soul:

We two alone will sing like birds in the
cage;
When thou dost ask me blessing,
I will kneel down,
And ask of the forgiveness. (V.iii.10-11)

But in the last scene we find Cordelia being butchered, and Lear raising the dreadful and unanswerable question, and furiously stressing the nothingness of life:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life?
And thou no breath at all? Thou wilt
come no more,
Never, never, never, never! (V.iii.36)

In spite of all this, the play is not pessimistic. According to Kenneth Muir, "it is rather an attempt to provide an answer to the undermining of traditional ideas by the new philosophy called all in doubt". (Muir 43) He further holds that Shakespeare goes back to pre-Christian world and builds up from the nature of man himself, and from revealed religions, these same moral and religious ideas that were undermined. In the world of lust, cruelty, greed, with extremes of wealth and poverty, man reduced to his essentials, needs neither wealth, nor power, nor even physical freedom, but rather passions, stoical fortitude and love; needs, perhaps above all, mutual forgiveness, the exchange of charity and sacrifice. J.C. Maxwell

is right when he says that *King Lear* is a Christian play about a pagan world. The fact that Shakespeare can assume in his audience a different religious standpoint from that of any of his characters gives him a peculiar freedom, makes possible an unusual complexity and richness.

Some have thought that Shakespeare as well as Gloucester believes that

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods:
They kill us for their sport. (IV.i.37-38)

Others have supposed that he would have subscribed to Kent's exclamation that the stars govern our condition; or more possibly, that he would have agreed to Edgar's stern summing up:

The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instrument to plague us. (V. iii. 197.)

The above ejaculation on God's callousness is another factor that brings this play close to our times. Ours is a world wherein God's very existence is being questioned, man feels alienated. God has become Godot and waits for Him. It is being thought to be an exercise in futility. But as our world needs a religio- medici, so does the world of *King Lear*. King Lear points to simplicity and humility as virtues. This message is best transmitted through nature. Here we find "Tongues in trees and sermons in Stones." King Lear suffered when he put on robes and crowns. These are symbols of authority and pride. He became a wise hermit and became one with nature when he was clad with flowers and leaves. Further, all these statements about the gods are appropriate to the characters who speak to them, and to the immediate situation in which they are spoken. An objective artist as Shakespeare is, he remains in the background and allows his pagan characters to explore the social values in their own characteristic way.

The tragic writer is necessarily selective, and it would be foolish to regard the author of the romances as optimistic, as to suppose the author of the tragedy pessimist. It is not that the world of tragedies, especially, the world of *King Lear* is exclusively evil. There is an attempt at restoring human values through the loyalty of Kent and the Fool, the fortitude and forgiveness of Edgar and Cordelia, the humanity of Cornwall's servant. Ultimately, goodness prevails upon evil. Heilman shows that "the reason in madness" theme is balanced by that of "madness in reason." (Heilman 97) The wicked children including Edmund are all destroyed by their

superficially sane pursuit of self-interest. They all believe in looking after themselves; they all deny that we are members of one another. They all assume that man is a competitive rather than co-operative animal. All these people are destroyed.

It is true that Lear and Gloucester suffer excessively, but they also learn through their suffering. We see Cordelia and Kent uncontaminated by evil around them. We see Albany being raised in moral stature as he frees himself from his infatuation. We see Edgar change from a credulous fool to a brave and saintly champion. "Pessimism does not consist in seeing evil injure good", says Heilman justly, "it is rather the inability to see good, or to discover total depravity, but no grace." (110) In fact, it is not pessimistic, but realistic to assume that without Edmunds, there can be no Cordelias.

Moreover, Cordelia dies. Critics like Bradley think that it would have been better if Shakespeare had allowed the miseries of Lear to be concluded in the reconciliation scene. But it is because of her virtues that Cordelia is chosen to be a victim of the ruthless destiny that broods over the tragic scene. Cordelia's death purifies the universe. How can pure innocence survive? Innocence survives in our hearts to balance evil which is also in our hearts. Cordelia's death makes us look into ourselves and recognise and respect our own innocence.

To sum up, we can say that the play has a universal appeal, because it applies to everyone. A man may have vanity, but when he suffers, he sees the light of wisdom and goodness eclipses evil. He may be spiritually blind, but it is his suffering which removes his blindness and shows him the right path of spirituality as it happens with Lear. Another thing is that Shakespeare does not side with any character, rather he leaves it to the moral judgement of the readers to accept what appears true to him.

Works Cited

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