

## *Lear's Journey Hence :* Another Meaning of the Storm in *King Lear*

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1

"The tragedy of Lear is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare", observed Dr Johnson (Johnson, p.295). The play has many aspects to move the reader as well as the audience. "The artful involutions of distinct interests, the striking opposition of contrary characters, the sudden change of fortune, and the quick succession of events, fill the mind with a perpetual tumult of indignation, pity, and hope."(*Ibid*, 295) It is to the hero of the play, the lofty, arrogant, and yet truly great man, to whom the heart of the tragedy is attributed. His greatness lies in his miraculous change in personality at an age—"fourscore and upwards"—when such a change would be as hard as for "a camel to pass through the eye of a needle"; it is not merely a great change but a miracle: A miracle which demands the dearest price.

The old king has determined to descend the throne and retire. An old man, a born king and demigod in his realm as he is, he has to face approaching death now. He announces his intention:

. . . and 'tis our fast intent  
To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we  
Unburthen'd crawl toward death (i. 1, 37 - 40).

Although old, he is far from being foolish. He sees the necessity of a preparation for death. At this moment it is not clear if it may merely mean to divide his kingdom into three and bestow them to his daughters and their spouses and to "set his rest on the kind nursery" (i. 1.) of his favourite daughter. His words can also be taken to suggest a religious or spritiual significance. We may well assume that Shakespeare has made him do this also; this is taken for granted according to the tradition of the age. "Skeletons in medieval wall paintings warn of the inevitability of death" (Barley, p. 142). *Memento mori* was common knowledge. For:

In everything ye do, think of how your life ends and of how you will stand before God. Nothing is hidden from him. He cannot be bribed. He accepts no excuses. He will judge what is right (Kempis, p.57).

Therefore:

The medieval notion of a good death was by definition a gradual one. Sudden death was bad. It prevented the making of proper arrangements and the drawing of lessons. Montaigne (1533-92) shocked the world when he claimed that he wished to go suddenly while digging cabbages. Time and again the early medieval period restates the proposition that the good man *knows* when his end is nigh and arranges for it to happen in the right place. (Barley, p.143)

Yet man is reluctant to think of death; he tries to forget about it and tends to enjoy worldly pleasure. He does "clean forsake God; He uses the seven deadly sins damable" (*Everyman*, 35-6). God summons Death, "His mighty messenger" for an errand to bring Everyman to his presence with a sure reckoning of his life in this world. Death sees him "walking full little thinking on his coming" (*Ibid.* 80-1):

His mind is on fleshly lusts and his treasure,  
And great pain it shall cause him to endure  
Before the Lord, Heaven King.

(*Ibid.* 82-4)

Naturally Everyman is shocked by the abrupt approach of Death. He has thus to go through the final and painful struggle for penance and contrition before making himself ready for the pilgrimage to God's presence.

There is a clear contrast between Everyman and Lear; unlike Everyman, Lear has been aware of the inevitable approach of death. Everyman under the old Catholic tradition has a definite way through which his sins are forgiven—the sacraments. For Lear living in a pre-Christian age there seems to be no way to ensure his forgiveness and redemption. Yet under the cover of paganism there lies an obvious Christian faith, which is Catholic, in the play as in other works of Shakespeare. According to Peter Milward, "In his final plays we cannot help noticing an underlying religious tendency, though its starting point and direction is not so clear, and though it was partly concealed beneath a use of pagan terminology necessitated by the Act of 1606 'in restraint of abuses'—forbidding the profane use of the divine name on the stage." (Milward, 1987, pp.56-7).

Lear was not so foolish as Everyman as to forget Death and his unexpected way of coming; his age contributed to his wisdom, despite his wicked daughter's remark about him: "he hath ever but slenderly known himself (i. 1, 295-6)". He has time for his preparation. He is as fortunate as King Hamlet was unfortunate. Hamlet was not allowed time to prepare for his death. He, "sleeping within his orchard, his custom

always of the afternoon”, was poisoned with “juice of cursed hebona” and deprived of his “life, crown and Queen”; what is more — the assurance of his salvation. For he was:

Cut off even in the blossoms of his sin,  
*Unhouseled, disappointed, unaneled,*  
No reckoning made, but sent to his account  
With all his imperfections on his head —

(i. 5, 76-9)

For him it was the *most horrible* state of affairs. Compared to him, Lear is fortunate, even if he is to go through a hell—purgatory to be precise—on earth.

About Lear, another evil daughter predicts rightly: “how full of changes his age is” (i. 1, 287). A great change in his character awaits him after a profound agony. Thus the two wicked daughters have a keen insight into and precise knowledge about their father’s character; they are familiar with his weaknesses. This is precisely why they pander to his arrogance by flattering to deceive him in the beginning, while their sister is too loving, honest and noble to flatter him. To take advantage of human weaknesses is the devil’s way. Iago is quite successful in destroying Othello. At the very beginning of human history, according to the Old Testament, Satan enticed Eve by stimulating her curiosity to lead her and her spouse to commit Original Sin. The devil is always the keenest reader of the human mind.

It should be stressed that Lear is essentially a wise old man. This is incompatible with his Fool’s words to his master: “Thou should’st not have been old till thou shouldst been wise (i. 5, 41)”. The truth is that Lear in the beginning of the play is wise enough; but true wisdom is to come at the greatest cost that a man, a king and a parent is expected to pay in this world. Paradoxically the true wisdom does not come until he loses the sanity of mind.

## 2

Lear is a born king and the king of kings. He is *every inch a king* and even in his madness he never doubts this; he declares:

When I do stare, see how subjects quake.  
I pardon that man’s life (iv. 6, 109-10).

His speech naturally carries the royal authority. His monosyllables are magnificent, especially those directed to Kent who is not a mere gentleman but a major nobleman: *Peace, Kent!* (i. 1. 120); *Kent, on thy life, no more* (*Ibid.* 153); *Out of sight!* (*Ibid.* 157).

For such a sovereign pride is an inevitable attribute as if it were part of his nature. He is proud enough to blame his favourite daughter's "pride", which is in truth a reflection of his own pride: "Let pride, which she calls plainness marry her" (*Ibid.*, 128).

His pride gets rid not only of Cordelia and his most loyal subject among others but also engenders and enhances hatred in his older daughters. Pride breeds multiple sins. It "leads to destruction, and arrogance to downfall." To free himself from it Lear is to go through a tremendously violent storm.

There are a few steps towards Lear's liberation from pride and it is not a straight, clean-cut progress. Anger and despair, sanity and insanity are mingled in it. In this turmoil the king contends with the raging elements that correspond to the agitated elements within his own microcosm. His journey is a very hard and winding one but he is not allowed to rest midway; Fortune exacts him to the last moment of his life and forces him to undergo the most cruel trial. This implies how difficult it is for an arrogant person to abandon pride and acquire modesty.

### 3

Lear is a man and a king who lacks the ability to suspect people about him. It is precisely because of his birth and upbringing. It is part of the nobleness of character which he shares with Othello. They have the lion's magnificence, dignity and courage. Like Duncan they are miraculously free from the fox's cunning. Here one wonders how Lear has not only survived but also been successful as a monarch till retirement; and Othello as General till middle age. Now the time has come when this inability of suspicion would lead to an inevitable and cruel trial which paradoxically only suits great men like them.

Lear's naivety and arrogance prevent him from reading others' minds— most of all his own daughters'. His ignorance of their characters is so incredible that it is almost ridiculous. Yet his greatness does not diminish. Despite these fatal weaknesses, he has his most faithful and noble followers to the very end. This is one of the most evident differences between him and other rulers such as Macbeth. The latter, starting out as an ideal warrior and lord, ends his life as a villain in despair without a single faithful follower. Both Lear and Othello kept the nobleness of mind to the very end, and this Hamlet shares with them. Through the final stage of his journey Lear is to learn the great virtues of sympathy and humility.

To the divine plan evil is only instrumental. Just as Satan follows God's will to try Job's faith, the evil in his elder daughters is used to inflict profound anger and pain in Lear which leads him to the storm for purgation of his sins. Otherwise, we cannot help wondering together with Kent about his three daughters in whom the starkly vivid demarcation of good and evil is drawn. Cordelia is aptly characterized to incarnate divine grace (Milward, 1987, p.95), while her elder sisters, Goneril and Regan are on

the side of Satan, or rather, the devil incarnate like Iago; both the princesses and Iago are keen and accurate readers of the human mind. In their eyes Lear and Othello are but like new-born babes whose minds are most easy to read. At the same time they are ruthless practitioners of their schemes. Being Satan's faithful followers, or even his incarnation, they too have fatal faults through which they have to perish. Thus, the widest gap between Cordelia and her older sisters cannot be attributed to the influence of the stars alone.

Yet the way of evil is pernicious. Most probably for the first time in his long life Lear has to confront open disobedience in the form of *filial ingratitude* in his daughters. This has utterly been unexpected and comes as the greatest shock that makes him lose himself. Hitherto he has been accustomed to be obeyed. This has been quite natural as the king, the deputy of the Gods in his kingdom. So accustomed is he to his position, he has long since taken it for granted; he is unable in his mind to separate his own person and his position with its attributes. He never doubts that his commands will be obeyed fully even after he descends from the throne. Royal power and authority are attached to the throne; they are not essentially his personal attributes. Although his daughters and subjects around him distinguish his position and his person, Lear could never do it. From his birth it was natural for him to regard them as one and the same.

When he feels the full impact of his elder daughters' ingratitude, Lear sheds tears probably for the first time in his long life, despite his words: "let not women's weapons, water drops / Stain my man's cheeks"; he continues:

I have full cause of weeping but this heart  
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws  
Or ere I'll weep. O Fool I shall go mad.

(ii. 4, 282-4)

Especially to the contemporary audience it must have been shocking to see Lear in tears.

Enraged by his daughters' disobedience and hatred of him which were utterly unthinkable for him, Lear has pondered on punishing them by "the terror of the earth"(ii. 4, 280). At the same time both anger and despair have helped him to lose his arrogance. To fathom his daughters' love by the number of the knights he is *allowed* to accompany him is ludicrous; he says to Goneril:

I'll go with thee  
Thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty,  
And thou art twice her love.

(ii. 4, 256-8)

Has he ever experienced such humiliation in his long life? His Gods demand that he go through more humiliation. They make him say :

You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!

(ii. 4, 270-1)

Thus does the extremity of his suffering begin ; it can well be compared to the fire in purgatory. Spiritually speaking the "East of Eden" is Lear's "dark night of the soul" as well as purgatory where he is contending not so much with the "fretful elements" as his daughters' filial ingratitude and his own vices.

Now his agonizing growth begins. It is to be attained only by being stripped of everything he has and had. His nakedness in the wilderness, the East of Eden, is symbolic of this; he is now a bare self. To become one he has to become mad. Madness exposes his unconscious mind and true self. It serves at the same time to protect him from greater pains; and above all it brings him what he could not have when he was sane and still on the throne: *wisdom*.

In his suffering the last virtue to rely on is patience. Just before going mad he cries to Heaven :

You Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need !

(ii. 4, 267)

When deep in trouble patience is one's last resort ; but the deeper and greater the trouble, the more difficult to find patience. Echoing Lear, G. M. Hopkins forcibly expresses the difficulty :

Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray,  
But bid for, patience is! Patience who asks  
Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;  
To do without, take tosses, and obey.

(‘Patience, hard thing! . . . ’)

Obviously the poet Hopkins has seen much in common between his own affliction and Lear' agony and found inspiration for his poems in the Shakespearean work. A great sixteenth century mystic assures the power of patience :

The truth is that they will be doing quite sufficient if they have patience and

persevere in prayer without making any effort.

(St. John of the Cross, p.71)

Yet the affliction is such that it overwhelms the former king. When even patience is not possible, both the elements inside and out constituting himself and nature, microcosm and macrocosm coincide to lose balance. The result is insanity which is his last resort.

Now Lear is "outside the British dominion" where the disguised Kent and Edgar and other followers gather in the storm. Symbolically, by banishing Cordelia, Lear is forced to get rid of Kent and eventually himself.

In this wilderness probably for the first time Lear shows consideration for others; he even prays for the poor who have to endure the "pelting of this pitiless storm" like himself:

I'll pray and then I'll sleep.

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O ! I have ta'n  
Too little care of this. . . .

(iii. 4, 27-33)

Although in the kingdom in his own reign, as in his fathers' and before, there were countless "poor naked wretches", Lear has "taken too little care of this". His attention has always been on his own person and all others around him have been those who existed to serve him; he has not thought of the commoners, let alone the "poor naked wretches". Now having gone through the trials he has at last come to notice their very existence and to sympathize with them. This is because he finds himself among those seemingly — i.e. outwardly insignificant and wretched fellows; and now, though he has a crown of wild flowers on his head, he is no different from them. He thus has learned to sympathize with them and those "whereso'er they are". Sympathy is a virtue deep rooted in humanity; it is a virtue not only valued in Christianity but also in other religions and philosophies. Naturally, T. S. Eliot regards it as one of the three virtues expected to redeem the barren spirituality of the inhabitants of the waste land.

The storm in the wilderness is precisely compared to the fire in purgatory to burn Lear's sins and purify him. Even though he himself thereafter considers himself in hell, the storm has not only burned his sins but also deprived him of his sanity. His condition now is:

A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch  
Past speaking of in a King.

(iv. 4, 201-2)

When he has a reunion with Cordelia, Lear says to her:

You do me wrong to take me out o'th' grave;  
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead.

(iv. 7, 45-8)

This is Shakespeare's other idea of purgatory and is perhaps more intense and condensed in imagery than that described by King Hamlet.

#### 4

Lear's reunion and reconciliation with his daughter is so touching that it never fails to move the reader or audience. Lear's forgiveness has come by no means naturally nor easily; his penance and act of contrition in Christian terms have been the essential condition for it. They have occurred in the storm in the wilderness.

Through his rage and hatred against his daughters' filial ingratitude — "Monster Ingratitude" (i. 5, 37)— he has been forced to face the reality about himself as well as others and the world. In the violent storm within himself he has had to learn to become "the pattern of all patience" (iii. 2, 37); he has come to a bitter realization that he is the "natural fool of Fortune" (iv. 6, 189) instead of the central figure in the world, the born king of Britain. From this humiliating realization derives wisdom which is accompanied by modesty. We can clearly see that his haughtiness has been transformed completely to modesty when he asks forgiveness of his daughter whom he now realizes he has wronged. He even says:

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me; . . .

(iv. 7, 72 - 3)

These and his repeated admittance to his being "old" and "foolish" and "fond" were utterly unimaginable when he banished his daughter without his "grace, love" or "benison" (i. 1, 264)

Lear's forgiveness and reconciliation with his daughter have been purchased dearly. Destiny has been cruel to them. Now Cordelia with her kiss "repairs" the



“ violent harms” that her father has been suffering :

O my dear father! Restoration hang  
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss  
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters  
Have in thy reverence made!

(vi. 7, 26-9)

Like many of Shakespearean heroines, Cordelia is apparently assigned a supernatural power. She could be associated with either the Blessed Virgin or divine grace or with both. This view of a supernatural as well as an ideal womanhood is a strong part of Shakespeare’s mediaeval inheritance (Milward, 1987, pp.4-15).

The role assigned to her is expressed by a gentleman :

Thou hast one daughter  
Who redeems nature from the general curse  
Which twain have brought her to.

(iv. 6, 203).

It is significant that this observation is made not by a character like Kent who has the most precise insight into her personality but even by a gentleman who is simply Cordelia’s attendant. This strongly suggests that her supernatural attribute is so apparent that it is clearly perceptible to ordinary courtiers. It is a great pity that this was not perceived by her own father. Or is it that Lear was aware of it but was so arrogant as to reject divine grace embodied in his daughter? If so, this was a typical attitude of a sinner. It is not without cause that pride has been regarded as the first of the Deadly Sins; this is a fatal vice that man shares with Satan.

There is an ambiguity in these lines above which is centered on the word *twain*. In the context of the play it is natural to take it for Goneril and Regan, as Milward (Milward, 1983, p.112) and Kenneth Muir does in his annotation in the Arden text (p. 171).

It would be reasonable to interpret that just as Iago these women belong to the medieval tradition of religious plays; they are characters that have been developed from the allegorical character of Evil. Otherwise, their perfect wickedness is incomprehensible. It is their wicked tongues which instigate their younger sister to speaking only the bare minimum without a touch of flattery. Hearing their insincere eulogies, she says to herself: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent” (i. 1, 61). The same idea is repeated in her next aside. She believes her love is “more ponderous” than her tongue. Thus she replies to her father: *Nothing*, and she repeats the word.

This hurts Lear's pride and provokes him to fury. Her elder sisters know throughly well the characters of their father and younger sister. It is Lear with his pride who commits the "original sin" by expelling Cordelia and then follow suffereings and miseries. It is, therefore, not convincing that his elder daughters, who are "twain", commit "the original sin" in this play. Rather they ensnare them, just as Satan did Eve and through whom Adam, thereby to introduce the "general curse."

Yet the Gods do not end Lear's suffering in his reconciliation with his daughter. They demand his daughter's life to multiply his affliction before demanding his own. No one cannot but be shocked by the old and insane Lear holding his dead daughter uttering :

And my poor fool is hang'd! *No, no, no*, life!  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come *no* more,  
*Never, never, never, never, never!*

(v. 3, 304-6)

This is nothing but the epitome of the extremity of human suffering. There is no one sadder than a parent holding his (or her) dead child in his (or her) arms. This naturally reminds one of Mary bearing her Son in her arms (quite contrary to the view of Cordelia being the second Eve — i.e. Mary). Lear's repeated *never* and *no* echo his favourite daughter's *nothing's* in the beginning of the play and reverberate even after it ends. The dark and negative intitial sound is highly symbolic.

As Cordelia prophesized in the beginning to her sisters :

Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides ;  
Who covers faults, at last with shame derides.  
Well may you prosper!,

(i. 1, 279-81)

it is time that unfolds the truth about things in this world. It is also time that brings one's journey in this world to an end. It is in this sense Death's servant together with "sickness, poison, war" and others.

On thee thou must take a long journey ;  
Threfore thy book of count with thee thou bring,

(*Everyman*, 103-4)

tells Death to Everyman.

Lear would now have little hesitation or fear to present his “book of count” to his Gods. Unlike Everyman he was conscious of the approach of death and had time and will to prepare for it. Echoing Hamlet, Edgar, though young, significantly remarks:

Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:  
Ripeness is all.

(v. 3, 9-11)

The last stage of Lear’s “ripeness” has been violent and cruel. It has nevertheless contained a miracle. It has been to abandon all that encumbers his passing through “the eye of the needle” and to acquire what is vitally necessary for it. Contrary to Gloucester’s cynical and pessimistic view of man as a fly which Gods kill “for sport” (iv. 1, 36-7), human life is not a mere joke. It has the most serious meaning. If not, Hamlet’s trouble, Macbeth’s despair and Othello’s agony, let alone Lear’s madness, are all sheer nonsense. It is not “Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to decay” and then is heard no more.

Following his master Kent is now aware of his own “journey hence.” He replies to Albany when he is asked to rule the state jointly with Edgar:

I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;  
My master calls me, I must not say no.

(v. 3, 320-1)

Thus Edgar not as a member of the *twain* with Kent but as *one* will have to rule the kingdom to be reunited as one. The “general curse” has been lifted from it after many sacrifices have been offered. The is the pattern common to all the great Shakespearean tragedies. The most important sacrifice offered in *King Lear* has been Cordelia who has redeemed her father, his kingdom and above all, nature.

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