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“The Cup of Their Deservings”: An Exploration of Divine Justice in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

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Abstract:

The battle of good VS evil has always been one of the most recurring themes in all literature, depicting evil may triumph for a while but it is the good that finally prevails and emerges as victorious. Such works suggest that there is a moral order in the world that has a control over every human being and thus everyone is to be rewarded or punished according to one’s deed. Shakespeare’s *King Lear* appears to challenge this age-old belief in the triumph of goodness and the fall of evil. It presents a world where goodness does not always guarantee a fair reward. Good people can suffer equally along with the wicked ones. The play poses before its readers/spectators certain profound philosophical questions like Is this world a meaningless place? Do the gods exist or there is no god at all? If the gods exist, are they benevolent or malevolent? If the gods are just, why do they allow the wicked to prosper and good to suffer? Or Are they completely indifferent to human affairs? Whether the sufferings of Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia are just or are they people “more sinned against than sinning”? The paper attempts to examine that whether there is any moral order in the Lear world? As Albany states, “All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deservings.” or Are humans mere puppets in the hands of gods? As Gloucester remarks, “As flies to wanton boys are we to god/ they kill us for their sport.”

Keywords: error, sufferings, punishment, justice, divine justice, redemption

William Shakespeare is undoubtedly the greatest playwright the world has ever seen or would ever see. No amount of introduction would ever be adequate enough for describing this luminous giant of English Literature. Words seem hollow and insufficient against his incredibly profound and prolific oeuvre. His influence over literature is such that it is almost impossible to think of literature in general and English Literature in particular without him. His genius is unparalleled and everything that flew from his pen turned into masterpieces in their own genre. The greatness of Shakespeare’s work lies in his penetrating understanding of human psyche and his inimitable style of handling those complex human emotions.

The present paper aims at discussing the existence of divine power and divine justice in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. *King Lear* has been regarded as the most powerful tragedy of Shakespeare. Samuel Johnson, the great 18th C English critic writes that “There is perhaps no

play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed; which so much agitates our passions and interest our curiosity.”(Notes from the Plays of Shakespeare, 1) According to Hazlitt, “The best of all Shakespeare’s plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest. He was here fairly caught in the web of his own imagination.”(Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays, 13) About the popularity of the play among its readers/spectators, A. C. Bradley writes that, “If we are doomed to lose all his dramas except one, probably the majority of those who know and appreciate him best would pronounce for keeping *King Lear*.”(Lec VII, 243) L.C Knight considers it as, “the great central masterpiece, the great exploratory allegory, to which the earliest plays lead and on which the later tragedies depend.”(As quoted in L. C. Camaior’s Shakespearean Readings) While *King Lear* has been appreciated immensely, it has been at the same time disapproved by many critics on account of its bleak and pessimistic portrayal of the world. It presents a world where evil prosper and good suffer, a world where cruelties go unchecked, a world where kinship has no value. The excessive sufferings of good characters namely Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester and the thriving success of the wicked ones like Goneril, Regan Edmund, Cornwall collapses the long-held faith in the triumph of virtuous. Thus, the play poses before its readers/spectators some profound philosophical questions like- Is this world a meaningless and hostile place? Do the gods exist or there is no god at all? If the gods exist are they benevolent or malevolent? If the gods are just, why do they allow the wicked to prosper and good to suffer? Whether the sufferings of Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia are in proportion with their sin or are they characters “more sinned against than sinning?” (KL, 3.2.58-59)

The death of Lear and Cordelia has been subjected to various critical interpretations over the years. During the Restoration period, the Irish playwright Nahum Tate argued that *King Lear* lacks an overarching moral order and changed the ending with a happy one. In the Tate version of *King Lear*, Lear is restored to the throne and Edgar and Cordelia marry each other. This change was supported by Critic like Samuel Johnson who likewise found the death of Cordelia “contrary to the natural ideas of justice” (Dr. Johnson on Shakespeare,2). As he writes "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor."(2-3.) August Wilhelm Schlegel avers that had Lear not died at the end of the play, the entire play would have lost its significance. He avers that, “after surviving so many sufferings, Lear can only die; and what more truly tragic end for him than to die from grief for the death of Cordelia? And if he is also to be saved and to pass the remainder of his days in happiness, the whole loses its signification.” (Schlegel, Critical Study of William Shakespeare) A. C. Bradley in his *Shakespearean Tragedies* (1904) argues that the gods are just and the sufferings are not punitive but rather redemptive. He adds a Christian dimension to the play and perceives it as a tale of Lear’s enlightenment and education. He writes, “Should we not be at least near the truth if we called this poem The Redemption of King Lear, and declared that the business of 'the gods' with him was neither to torment him, nor to teach him a 'noble anger', but to lead him to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and aim of life? (Lec VIII, 285) Likewise, Kenneth

Myrick asserts that, “A Christian interpretation of Lear has for many years seemed to me the only kind that can make sense” (As quoted in G.I. Duthie, ‘King Lear ‘And The Gods) While E.R. Elton claims that reading *King Lear* as a Christian play “ involves a serious misinterpretation of the tragedy.” (As quoted in G.I. Duthie, ‘King Lear ‘And the Gods)

The play opens with King Lear’s decision of dividing his Kingdom among his three daughters on the basis of their profession of love for him. He organizes a kind of contest in which one has to outdo the other in their expression of something as genuine as love. Though, Goneril and Regan, the two elder daughters of Lear express their love in the most exaggerated and hyperbolic way, Cordelia, the youngest, who loves Lear the most fails to match her sisters’ hypocritical praises and thus invites Lear’s anger. Lear in his rage deprives Cordelia of her share of the kingdom. The inability of Lear to see the truth and honesty behind the genuine expression of “ Obey you, love you, and most honour you (1.1.98) and the façade behind Goneril and Regan’s declaration of love, projects him a shortsighted and foolish person. John Dover Wilson in his Introduction to *King Lear* writes, “And to his fault of vanity is joined the fault of rashness. When his pride receives an affront he reacts intemperately. He lacks self –control. Passion usurps the place of reason.”(xvi) Undoubtedly, Lear has committed a mistake but the amount of humiliation, pain and cruelties he undergoes, seems too much for an old man to endure. His sufferings are manifold. As a king, he slips from a state of power into utter powerlessness. As a father, he suffers filial ingratitude and then as an old man, he undergoes the unendurable wrath of nature in the form of a furious storm. Lear prays,

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,

As full of grief as age; wretched in both (KL, 2.4.461)

Indignant at the cruel treatment by Goneril, Lear invokes both; nature and divine power to punish her cruelty, “Hear Nature, hear goddess, hear!” (1.4.268) but his prayers remain unanswered, his invocations unheard. Instead, the storm grew more furious. More thunder and lightning is seen. And it is discussed by the characters of the play that they have not seen such storm ever. A kind of storm in which even animal would be scared to come out. Next, we see Cordelia, the most innocent character paying the price of her being simple, non-crafty and non-pretentious as against her two elder shrewd and imposter sisters- Goneril and Regan. While Cordelia is disowned from the property and undergoes the rejection of her suitor, Goneril and Regan’s falseness is rewarded with opulence. Later we see them mistreating Lear and indulging in ingratitude. Lear, who is not only a king and therefore, Goneril and Regan have their obligations to him but, Lear is their father and an old man at the same time. They are simultaneously committing the grave sin of defying a king, disobeying a father and violating the dignity of an old man. We, as a reader/spectator expect them to suffer heavily. Gloucester is betrayed by Edmund and is blinded by Cornwall for helping Lear. However, we see that the person responsible for his suffering i.e. Edmund thrives in his political career. He is being favored by the two sisters and is promoted to higher position. In the end, we see Lear die pathetically.

Cordelia too dies and so does Gloucester. The world appears as an intensely bleak and hostile place where no moral order exist and human beings appear nothing more than the flies killed at the whim of wanton boys. As Gloucester puts it “as flies to wanton boys are we to the’ gods/ They kill us for their sport.” (4.1. 38-39) King Lear presents a chaotic world which can be read as an absurd and existential play. It depicts a world which is predominated by meaningless, an arbitrary world where people are born to suffer. Goodness has no role to play in the well-being of a person similarly wickedness also does not ensure a miserable life. The good and the bads can suffer alike. Professor G.B Harrison in his *‘Plays and the Sonnets’* writes that Shakespeare has morphed “an old tale in which evil is punished and good restored into a tremendous and pessimistic drama of which Gloucester ‘s words form the most fitting motto.”(781)

However, concluding the play as a pessimistic play devoid of any divine justice shows a complete negligence of the ample evidences that support that “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instrument to plague us.”(5.3. 168-69) The sufferings of Lear, Gloucester and Edgar excluding Cordelia are to a great extent the outcome of their own follies. Lear being an aged man and with the experience of a ruler should have acted more wisely and maturely. His decision of dividing kingdom on the basis of a public display of love is childish, immature and vain. Moreover, his getting flattered by the false proclamation of love made by Goneril and Regan shows his foolishness. His disowning of Cordelia speaks of his rashness and shortsightedness. As a king he fails to maintain the justice and instead of finding an able successor for the kingdom, he put a love contest as decisive criteria. He fails as a father and commits the mistake of disinheriting one of his daughters only because she fails to please his ego in the most exaggerated manner. His suffering during the storm is although pathetic but seems necessary. It plays the role of educating and enlightening Lear. Gloucester suffers on account of his bastard son. He has committed the sin of adultery and therefore whatever he undergoes can be seen as reaping the consequence of his sin. His sin of adultery coupled with misjudgment becomes the reason of his sufferings. As Edgar remarks, “The dark and vicious place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes” (5.3.170). It is Edmund, his bastard son, who informs Cornwall about Gloucester decision of secretly helping Lear that resulted in his Gloucester’s blindness. Likewise, the sufferings of Edgar are the result of his own credulous nature. He does not bother to do any research on his part and starts doubting his own father. He needs to be educated to become worldly wise. It is his sufferings that grant him the profound understanding of the meaning and mysteries of life that Lear calls him a philosopher. After Lear’s death he is fit to occupy the throne and we hope he won't commit the mistakes Lear has done.

The Wicked characters in the play though flourish for sometime but are finally perished in the end. Goneril and Regan, the evil daughters, who were earlier partners in humiliating Lear, a little later becomes envious of each other. Goneril poisons Regan and she herself commits suicide. Edmund who himself accepted his villainy in the beginning of the play and says that nothing can change the evilness in him is now able to see divinity in human affairs. At the time of his death he realizes that the wheel has come to full circle. Cornwall is also dead by a fatal stroke of

dagger during a fight with one of his servant. A. C. Bradley writes, “It is a great satisfaction to think that he endured what to him must have seemed the dreadful disgrace of being killed by a servant.”(299) Albany’s utterance,

“This shows you are above,

You justice, that these our nether crimes

So speedily venge! (KL, 4.2. 79-81)

when he hears the news of Cornwall’s death echoes readers/ spectator feelings also.

Thus we see that all the wicked character that created havoc in the life of others, they themselves perished as the play proceeds towards the end. Thus, the belief that evil may flourish for a time but ultimately it would suffer can be seen working in Lear world also. In his preface J.D. Wilson writes that though Lear and Gloucester had to endure a little more that they deserve but this does not makes the play a pessimistic one nor does it shows that the gods are unjust. He writes,

But, if tempted by the appalling sufferings of Lear and Gloucester to regard this as a ‘pessimistic ‘drama, we must bear in mind a second point. The gods are merciful. If, after all their agony, Lear and Gloucester died uneducated, unregenerate, then we should indeed have spoken of pessimism. But both, as they die, are wise, and redeemed. ‘Nothing is here for tears’ –unless we weep for the means that conduce to the end, for the dreadful cost of salutary outcome... Yet the unassailable fact remains that the gods, in benignity, permit Lear and Gloucester to die in a state of spiritual health. Their sufferings are redemptive. There is no ultimate ground for pessimism.”(Introduction, L)

He further writes, “Shakespeare traces the progress of a foolish man towards the attainment of wisdom- and the wisdom Shakespeare has in mind is the kind of wisdom he himself values most highly. That is the wisdom of Christianity.”(Introduction, xxiii) Lear in the end of the play is different from what we see him in the beginning of the play, from the proud, vain, egocentric and impatient, he has changed into humble, patient man, who is able to sympathize and empathize with his distressed fellow beings. Once rash and ruthless has now become an epitome of patience and humility. At heath, he invokes, “You heavens, give patience- patience I need!” (2.4. 460)A little later he says, “ No, I will be the pattern of all patience’(3.2.37) Paul A. Cantor observes that ‘ Lear finally realizes that the king is not by nature superior to other human beings but instead shares the physical limitations of humanity’(232, The cause of thunder : Nature and justice in King Lear) “They told me I was everything: ’tis a lie; I am not ague-proof.(4.6.103-104)

However, it is the death of Cordelia which is the most tragic one and which shakes readers/spectator faith in divine justice. One wonders that the gods are cruel and completely indifferent to human. As for why the most innocent Cordelia has to suffer along with the other

characters when she has not committed anything that can be termed as mistake or error. We really feel the cruelty of Cordelia's death along with Lear when he says,

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,

And thou no breath at all? (5.3.304-5)

In this context we can agree with A.C. Bradley who in his 'The substance of Tragedy' writes that "There is no tragedy in its expulsion of evil: the tragedy is that this involves the waste of good" (37) For him "Shakespeare was not attempting to justify the ways of God to men, or to show the universe as a Divine Comedy. He was writing tragedy and tragedy would not be a tragedy if it were not a painful mystery" (38) J.D. Wilson writes, "God overthrows the absolutely evil- he destroys the Cornwalls, the Gonerils, the Regans: he is just. God chasten those who err but who can be regenerated- the Lears, the Gloucester- and in mercy here deems them: he is just, and merciful. But again, God moves in a mysterious way- he deals strangely with the Cordelias of this world. His methods are inscrutable. Shakespeare presents the whole picture- the mysterious as well as that which is plain."(Li, Introduction) Hunter writes, "King Lear concludes with a very public act of justice in which legitimacy triumphs over illegitimacy. Even Edmund ,who originally laughs at all notions of moral fitness in the world, sees a kind of moral logic to his defeat, a sense of a natural cycle; " The wheel is come full circle, I am here" ((As quoted in The cause of thunder: Nature and justice in King Lear,243) R.V. Young writes, " King Lear may be understood as a profoundly Christian vision of human of human reality unfolding in a decidedly non-Christian setting among pagan characters."(Hope and despair in King Lear: The gospel and the crisis of natural law, 254) A.C Bradley writes,

...the beings in whom this evil appears at its strongest are able, to a certain extent, to thrive. They are not unhappy, and they have power to spread misery and destruction around them. All this is undeniable fact. On the other hand this evil is merely destructive: it founds nothing, and seems capable of existing only on foundations laid by its opposite. It is also *self*-destructive: it sets these beings at enmity; they can scarcely unite against a common and pressing danger; if it were averted they would be at each other's throats in a moment; the sisters do not even wait till it is past. Finally, these beings, all five of them, are dead a few weeks after we see them first; three at least die young; the outburst of their evil is fatal to them. These also are undeniable facts; and, in face of them, it seems odd to describe *King Lear* as 'a play in which the wicked prosper' (Johnson)(Lecture VIII,304)

He further continues, "The 'gods' it seems, do not show their approval by 'defending' their own from adversity or death, or by giving them power and prosperity. These on the contrary, are worthless, or worse; it is not on them, but on the renunciation of them, that the gods throw incense."(306)

The world of King Lear is as incomprehensible as the real world itself. To conclude it can be said that a complex play like *King Lear* cannot be reduced to a single conclusion. It resists a final

closure and contains the flexibility of being interpreted and reinterpreted according to one's experience of the world. Herein lays the greatness of the play and the reason why it captures the imagination of the readers of every age. Shakespeare's intention here is neither to preach Christian value to its spectators nor to shake their faith in the divinity. But rather he must have tried to capture the world as it. Just like sometimes world and its ways appear as a simple pattern of action and consequence and at the very next moment turn too mysterious to be resolved by the application of human logic. Edward Dowden rightly puts it, "Good and evil in this play are clearly severed from one another- (more so than in Macbeth or in Othello) - and at the last, goodness, if we judge merely by external fortune, would seem to be, if not defeated, at least not triumphant. Shakespeare has dared, while paying little regard to mere historical verisimilitude, to represent the most solemn and awful mysteries of life as they actually are, without attempting to offer a ready-made explanation of them" (Critical Study of William Shakespeare's King Lear)

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