

The Vengeance Theme in William Shakespeare's King Lear

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Abstract: *The idea of vengeance plays a great role in all human societies . Most of the writers and philosophers have deeply studied it to know its roots and to get the best way to achieve it. This in turn will lead to happiness and peace in the world.*

William Shakespeare is one of those writers who devoted his writing to dig deep in the significance of vengeance . This issue is greatly preoccupied his mind.

The present paper is concerned with the theme of vengeance in Shakespeare's King Lear. Here, Shakespeare reveals the motives of characters to perform the theme under study.

Introduction

The play of *King Lear* is one of “the most profound of all Shakespeare’s tragedies”ⁱ. The question of vengeance occupies a special dimension of the dramatic conflict of the play . Thus, some modern critics state that “in writing *King Lear* Shakespeare deliberately examined such concepts as divine Providence and vengeance”ⁱⁱ.

The issue of vengeance, in *King Lear*, has taken into a philosophic predicament, that is , the function of vengeance itself has come into question. It is no doubt the theme of vengeance reaches its culmination in *King Lear* because the play centres around familial obligation.

The dramatic construction of *King Lear* is uniquely interwoven . It consists of two plots of equal size and impact. The subplot, a story of the fortunes of Gloucester who suffers from filial ingratitude and false judgment of his children, serves as a catalyst to enrich the theme of the main plot; Lear and his daughters.

From the outset of the play, Shakespeare draws the audiences' attention to the idea of vengeance . As the tragedy opens, we are aware of the main character, Lear who has decided to retire and divide his kingdom among his three daughters:

we have divided
In three our kingdom. And 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths while we
Unburdened crawl toward death.

(I, i, 38-42)

King Lear decides to cast off the burden of government and wants to enjoy a comfortable old age. He is introduced to us by an image of absolute authority which makes him use that power directly in the first scene. He ,as a ruler intends to achieve “justice[vengeance] and wields that power by virtue of his kingship”ⁱⁱⁱ .

As far as King Lear is concerned , Shakespeare applies the two limbs of justice as it appears to Aristotle, the distributive and retributive justice to achieve vengeance. He uses the first when he decides to distribute the kingdom among his daughters equally. Although our understanding of distributive justice as social justice, Lear wrongly applies his justice upon merits. He wants to test the affections of his daughters towards him. Goneril and Regan succeed in the test because of their flattery. Cordelia, on the other hand, does not satisfy her father’s claims of merit. In doing so, retributive justice comes to work at once upon an ungrateful daughter and a rebellious servant, Kent. Cordelia is disowned and dowerless. She loses her right in the kingdom and then her supposed lover, Burgundy who withdraws immediately after Lear refuses to give Cordelia any dowry:

Burgundy: I am sorry you have so lost a father

That you must lose a husband.

(I, i, 248-249)

The action of "the division of the kingdom"^{iv} reflects the mistake done by King Lear. The consequences of this grave error lead to his tragedy at the end of the play.

Throughout the events of the play, Lear suffers from the ingratitude of his daughters. He is severely shocked to the extent that he feels a loss of identity:

Doth any here know me? This is not Lear

Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?

Either his notion weakens, his discernings

Are lethargied-Ha! waking? 'Tis not so.

Who is it that can tell me who I am?

(I, iv, 238-250)

When King Lear saw the negative side of his daughters, he absolutely turns into an incensed desire for vengeance. He is pathetically described because he comes to recognise that he committed a mistake but it is too late. Lear gives all his property to evil daughters who neglect and treat him cruelly ;

You unnatural hags,

I will have such revenges on you both

That all the world shall-- I will do such things--

What they are, yet I know no, but they shall be

The terrors of the earth.

(II, iv, 281-285)

Lear loses his status as a king. He becomes a mere idle man as Goneril puts it scornfully. In his ordeal, Lear finds time to examine thoughtfully his kingship, the sanctions of royal power and justice. Everything becomes apparent, and there is nothing hidden before Lear's eyes. Honor Matthews remarks that "one pattern, ... Which serves to show the unity within the multiplicity of *King Lear*, is made up of the threads under consideration here-justice, mercy, vengeance and false-seeming"^v. Lear's experience leads him to see deeply beneath the superficial skin of appearance, and at each level of knowledge he looks vainly for vengeance until he comes to deny its existence.

Lear goes in a journey to discover the reality of evil. The quarrel with Goneril begins with his comment on a change in her appearances, her beauty no longer dazzles him:

How now, daughter! What makes that frontlet on?

Methinks you are too much of tale i' the frown.

(I, iv, 207-208)

Her visage becomes wolfish and below the beauty of which she had boasted so glibly lies her evilness. Lear sees in her hidden reality a new face of a monster;

Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,

More hideous when thou show'st thee in a child

Than the sea-monster!

(I, iv, 281-283)

He asks them what Cordelia, his faithful daughter, had offered freely, love. He aspires for it which he had once refused: 'The offices of nature, bond of childhood' (II, iv, 181).

Lear is ignored and left to the mercy of nature. And in an agonized vision, he recognizes the false image of his authority. It is the cruel authority of an absolute justice by which his mind had been enslaved. He feels that he has committed an error in his judgment. According to John M. Lothian, Lear's developments find "its culmination in his appalling vision of chaos, of the chasm between reality and justice"^{vi}.

During his suffering, the dismissed king has come to reject authority as the antithesis of love. He has come to understand that he was flattered and obeyed not because of his own inner worth but because of the mantle of authority which has been casted off in the storm Scene (III, iv). His hard experience teaches him that his authority is only an illusion of false flattery.

They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white

Hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there.

(IV, vi, 97-98)

Lear is exploited by his daughters . His justice is bribed by the vanity of love. His daughter's love is not faithful.

In the mad scenes, there is no veil for Lear to identify evil. He begins to see reality as it is without modification. He talks about "the endless hypocrisies of the administering of justice"^{vii} . Concerning his dilemma ,Lear not only acquires self-knowledge but also realization of "the injustice of what so far he has accepted as heavenly dispensation"^{viii} . In a less furious mood, he finds one source of possible good in this turmoil of the elements. He expects that God who presides over nature may execute justice upon malefactors who in peaceful times hide their crimes:

Rive your concealing continents and cry

These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man

More sinned against than sinning. (III, ii, 58-60)

Lear thinks deeply of the matter of vengeance . He concludes that vengeance is difficult and even impossible of attainment for the heavens themselves are not just. He asks why do the heavens above make a distinction between rich and poor, why some people are rich while others, reducing to poverty, misery and nakedness. These philosophical questions lead him to connect between his situation and the elements of nature. He looks to the rain, wind, and thunder as agents of evil, pour upon a poor, weak and despised old man who gave all his property to his daughters:

I call you servile ministers

That have with two pernicious daughter joined

Your high-engendered battles 'against a head

So old and white as this. (III, ii, 21-23)

Ifor Evans points out that in *King Lear*, Shakespeare intends “ to link the fate of Lear to the whole nature of human experience”^{ix} . For Lear is throughout thinking of his own experience in relation to the general experience of humanity, generalizes his calamity as the following poignant and personal lines show:

That keep this dreadful pother o'er our heads,

Find out their enemies now. Tremble, then wretch,

That hast within thee undivulged crimes

Unwhipped of justice. (III, ii, 50-53)

Lear's hard experience leads him to think in the origin of things, to the essence of nature. He becomes more interested in biology. He wants to find out what makes people cruel. He, in anatomizing Regan, wants to know what causes hard hearts and what is the cause of thunder. He links between human nature and external nature . In the human world, he traces the cause to naked mad Tom, disguised Edgar, who is very poor, barefooted, and pitiful. The poor Tom who owes 'the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume' (III, iv, 107-108) represents the dark aspect of life.

The mad parody of a trial in Act III, Sc. Vi, sheds light upon the invalidity of the principle of vengeance and its insignificance in human life. The symbols of justice in this trial are madmen. They are Edgar as poor Tom, the fool and the king. Here, Lear is the accuser, and he is mad too. The judges who are sitting upon his cause are crazy. The whole vision shifts and dissolves into nothingness. This refers to the futility of Lear's concept of justice. In the central mad scenes, "Lear retains a precarious contact with the world; his mind slips, surrendering to fixed ideas then steadies again and grapples with real problems[like] justice, ingratitude, man's inhumanity to man"^x . The scene is followed by the second phase of the tragedy, which is represented by Gloucester and his sons. Because of the ingratitude of Edmund, the traitorous illegitimate son of Gloucester, Cornwall, Regan's husband puts Gloucester's eyes out. In doing so, Cornwall diverts justice to the vengeance of wrath which is served by mere power beyond man's control. The injustice of the false justicer meets with his death at the hands of one of his servants. The final mad Scene (IV, vi), "is generally felt to embody Lear's most searching insights into justice and authority"^{xi}, to use A.L.French's words. In his anguish, he sees before himself a sorry procession of human sacrifice to the idol of an absolute morality:

See how yond Justice rails upon yond simple thief.

Hark, in thine ear, change places and, handy-dandy,

Which is the Justice, which is the thief?

(IV, vi, 155-157)

The above lines personfy justice as a living thing. It is used as a power to attack the poor. Lear returns again to the subject of justice and authority. He claims to his fellow sufferer Gloucester that:

There thou mightst behold the great image of

Authority. A dog's obeyed in office.

(IV, vi, 161-162)

He reflects the corrupt and evil nature of the dispensers and the instruments of justice. All men are sinners, and successful men hide their crimes and vices by the power of gold. For Lear, justice is merely an instrument of the rich and powerful men to oppress the weak and poor people. In this world of conflicting values, it is very difficult to distinguish between the judge and the criminal.

Meanwhile, Lear discovers that living with his two daughters is unbearable . He is so outraged by their cruel behavior him that he curses them and rushes out into a violent storm. During his exposure to the elements he is accompanied by Kent, the Fool (his court jester), and eventually by Edgar, who has disguised himself as a lunatic beggar named "poor Tom."

Gloucester tries to help Lear and his followers but is betrayed to Cornwall and Regan by Edmund. As punishment, Gloucester is blinded and sent out into the storm, too. Edgar, still disguised, discovers his blind father and leads him to Dover, where he joins Lear, who has gone mad from exposure to the elements and the anguish he has suffered at the hands of his daughters.

The news of Lear's treatment had reached Cordelia, and the King of France has sent an invading force to England to help restore Lear's rights to him. In Dover, where they have landed, Cordelia finds Lear and helps to restore his sanity by loving care.

While preparing to fight the French invaders, Goneril and Regan have developed a passion for Edmund. But before they can do anything about it, the battle is fought. The French lose, and Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoners.

Edmund sends Lear and Cordelia to prison with orders for them to be secretly killed. When Albany enters, he accuses Edmund of treason for plotting with Goneril against him and the interests of the state. Edmund is given the chance to defend his honor in a duel. Edgar appears in a new disguise to take up this challenge and mortally wounds Edmund. Goneril sees the handwriting on the wall and flees from the scene. Edmund confesses all his crimes as a servant enters and announces that Goneril has poisoned Regan and killed herself. Edmund then reveals that he has ordered Lear's and Cordelia's deaths. Albany sends soldiers to prevent it, but he's too late. Lear enters carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms. As he weeps for her, surrounded by the bodies of Goneril and Regan, the survivors can only stare in respectful awe.

Shakespeare presents Edgar as a touchstone for Lear's deep understanding of justice. They see themselves as mirror images of one another. What is absent in Gloucester, Edgar's father, is wholly present in Lear. He not only names Edgar, but actually he knows who Edgar is. Indeed, Edgar is Lear himself, possessed of the same great fault as a child that undoes Lear as a parent. When Gloucester first encounters Edgar "disguised" as Tom O'Bedlam, his "son came then into his mind" as the embodiment of wretchedness (IV, i, 35), but when Lear in his "madness" first encounters as Tom O'Bedlam, he recognizes him for what he is, "a man of justice" (III, vi, 38). Lear, the parent, tries at the beginning of the play, to found justice upon

love, that is, to divide the kingdom in accordance with the extent to which each of his children loves him. Throughout the opening actions of the play, Lear thinks of love in quantitative terms—as when he equates the amount of love that Regan and Goneril feel for him with the number of knights they will permit him to retain—as a basis “for a rough kind of distributive justice”^{xii}. In other words, the more you love, the more material goods you deserve. Edgar wants to found love upon justice. he wants to earn, through deeds and other “proofs” of his world, the affections of his father. Both of these projects drastically miscarry, but the son, partly by watching his two deserted men expose in body and in speech the dark anatomy of love and justice in all their forms (IV, vi), also by coming to see the faults in his own strategy with Gloucester and by feeling the successive shocks of losing first Gloucester and then Lear.

The more we come to understand Lear, the more we come to understand Edgar. Both men learn from opposite sides of the problem of ingratitude. To witness the long pilgrimage of Gloucester and Edgar is “to fathom the importance of law and justice as an aspect of parental and filial devotion, even as we grow to feel the inadequacy of justice as the sole basis for parental and filial love”^{xiii}.

It is remarkable that in *King Lear* that there are repeated references to divine justice. When Albany, Goneril’s husband, hears that Cornwall is killed soon after he had plucked out Gloucester’s eyes, he comments:

This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our neither crimes
So speedily can venge. (IV, iii, 78-80)

And the deaths of Goneril and Regan make him assert that:

This judgment of the Heavens, that makes us tremble

Touches us not with pity. (V, iii, 231-232)

This reveals that whatever evil act is committed, it will bring consequences which are far more evil than the original one. This divine justice, “operates like an avalanche or an echo in an enclosed space”^{xiv}. It serves as a warning to those people who commit evil acts. Also it proves that the source of justice is divine, the fact which is suspected by Lear throughout the play.

As the play moves towards its end, Cordelia, Lear’s loyal daughter, encounters her father again. The old man, who bears the scars of his suffering, kneels before her who humbly begs his blessing. In coming to rescue her father, Cordelia is giving him what she has refused to give in the first scene of the play, namely her total love and devotion. In him, Cordelia sees that her father is treated cruelly by her sisters. He “is degraded to the condition of a beggar”^{xv}. She maintains her integrity as an individual. She now risks the fortunes of a kingdom and her life to the aid of her father. This reveals the goodness, virtue and purity of Cordelia. Also it shows the shallowness of Lear’s judgment.

Lear is no longer thinking of taking revenge upon people who hurt him. He seems to be that he will leave revenge to heaven. In other words, “his notion of justice is still sternly retributive”^{xvi}. He does not want to forgive the sinners.

At the end of the play, the broad lines of justice become clear. Edmund who is a scheming villain, meets his death at the hands of Edgar, his brother, in the final duel. His ambition drives him to his downfall. His evil is manifested in the play by his despicable lust for power, for the inheritance of his brother, and for the bodies of the two evil sisters. In striking him down, Edgar comments that God is just, and Gloucester’s blindness is the inevitable result of going into a whorehouse to beget Edmund.

The evil daughters of King Lear, Goneril and Regan mirror the evil side of human beings. They are degenerated by disclosing lust for Edmund. Because of him, they become jealous of each other, and each one seeks to prevent the other from enjoying him. This battle between the two sisters ends with Goneril who commits suicide and her sister, Regan who is poisoned by her.

Lear accepts the vengeance of God. He speaks of it as a turning of the wheel of the fortune:

Thou hast spoken right, 'tis true,

The wheel is come full circle; I am here.

(V, iii, 173-174)

Most modern critics agree that, “the events of the last act, especially Lear’s death by heartbreak over the dead body of Cordelia..., make the existence of a retributive justice”^{xvii}. His first error caused the audience to accept his tragic fate as an act of justice. Therefore; his death comes “as a punishment for his selfish abandonment and parcelling out of the kingdom, his general petulance and his blind misjudgment of his daughters”^{xviii}. The play ends in a manner that satisfies the audience’s sense of justice. The most powerful kind of satisfaction is the recognition of the vengeance at the end and the acceptance of the chain of events between climax and catastrophe as motivated naturally and logically developed. John F. Danby says that, in *King Lear*, “Justice, Authority, the kingly nature, Patience, hypocrisy-each of the great theme is touched upon, but all of them twisted awry”^{xix}.

Despite the fact that there are many themes, in *King Lear*, the idea of vengeance is highly demonstrated. Lear and Gloucester’s dark view of vengeance show that as the poor are hungry and cold, the self-indulgence of the rich is an offense against divine justice. Lear presents, “a bitter and cogent indictment of the powers that be: The judges are themselves criminals at heart,

and they apply a double standard to rich and poor, since sin ceases to be sin when plated with gold^{xx}.

So, Lear gets mad and moves from the kingship of the first scene to the company of a naked man. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare concerns himself with the contrast between the two bodies of the king

one lives by ceremony, administers justice in a furred gown, distinguished by regalia which set him above nature. The other is born naked, subject to disease and pain, and protected only by the artifices of ceremony from natural suffering and nakedness^{xxi}.

The painful experience makes Lear think deeply on the vengeance, actually in creation as a whole. Through his pain, Lear becomes individuated. He reached to self-knowledge of man and society. What do we conclude that King Lear commits mistakes when he divided his kingdom. He put his fate on the hands of his daughters while he has the ability to go on ruling. Shakespeare here presents an eastern value. In other words, man should not leave everything to his children while he is still powerful.

Notes

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- ⁱ Theodore Spencer, Shakespeare, Shakespeare and the Nature of Man (New York : Collier Books, 1967), p.135
- ⁱⁱ Johannes Allgaier, “Is King Lear an Antiauthoritarian Play? *PMLA*, 83, 1973, p.1033.
- ⁱⁱⁱ C. J. Sisson, Shakespeare's Tragic Justice (London : Methuen & Co. 1965), p. 91.
- ^{iv} Fredson Bowers, “The Structure of King Lear”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* .31. (N.J. Madison, Summer 1979), p.16.
- ^v Honor Matthews, Character & Symbol in Shakespeare's Plays (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1962), p.145.
- ^{vi} John M. Lothian, *King Lear: A Tragic Reading* (Toronto: Irwin, 1949), p. 96.
- ^{vii} Northrop Frye, *On Shakespeare*, ed., Robert Sandler (London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 116.
- ^{viii} S. C. Sen Gupta, *Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Calcutta: Oxford University Press), p.117.
- ^{ix} Ifor Evans, *The Language of Shakespeare's Play* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 173.
- ^x Mark R. Schwehn, “King Lear Beyond Reason; Love and Justice in the Family” <www. http. King Lear Beyond Reason. Html> 1993. P.11
- ^{xi} Ibid. p.11.
- ^{xii} E. A. J. Honigman, Shakespeare-Seven Tragedies (London : Western Printing Services Ltd., Bristol, 1976), p.109.
- ^{xiii} A. L. French, Shakespeare and the Critics(Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1972) p.177.
- ^{xiv} Clifford Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 14.
- ^{xv} E. A. J. Honigman, p.55.
- ^{xvi} *Shakespeare: Life and Plays. Vol.V. The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, 18 vols. < Www.http. Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and King Lear> p.4
- ^{xvii} A. L. French, p. 189.
- ^{xviii} Johannes Allgaier, p. 1038.

^{xix}John F. Danby, "Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature" *A Study of King Lear: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed., Leonard F. Dean (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 191.

^{xx}Paul Delany, *King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism*. *PMLA*. 92. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 436.

^{xxi}A. E. Dyson, "Shakespeare: King Lear. A Selection of Critical Essays, ed., (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993), p.21.

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