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THE ROLE OF ERRONEOUS JUDGEMENT, PROVIDENCE AND EVIL IN SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

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Abstract

One of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, *King Lear* (1608) exhibits how error of judgement, the interference of fate and the presence of evil brings one's downfall. The play presents the tragic hero, Lear, who is in an elevated position in his society as a just king but gradually falls because of erroneous judgement and the evil, which is awakened primarily by his daughters, Regan and Goneril. The effect of providence similarly serves for the rise of the evil in the play. Considering himself too old to rule his country, King Lear makes the decision to divide the realm amongst his daughters, by which he shall measure the extent of their affection towards him as their father. However, unable to judge her daughters' love for him properly, he commits a tragic fault and banishes his most devoted daughter, Cordelia, from his court, which triggers the whole chain of tragic incidents (Richardson, 2008, 6). As a victim to his faulty judgement and the malevolent providence, Lear represents the human condition, love and dignity through his suffering and tragic end. Hence, this paper aims to analyse Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a tragedy reflecting the profound impact of erroneous judgement and the role of providence in one's life exemplified through King Lear, his daughters and evil characters.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Tragedy, Error of Judgement, Providence, Evil.

Introduction

Displaying the power struggle within a royal family and the main conflict arising from it, *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's four major tragedies depicting human suffering, despair and remorse. The play recounts the tragic story of an elderly king and father dividing his kingdom amongst his daughters based on false assumption and hasty decision. Realising his grave mistake only after it is too late, already too old and feeble, Lear is left to the mercy of his two ambitious

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daughters and the malevolent providence. The play ends with the disastrous consequences of Lear's misjudgement accompanied with evil and the interference of fate.

As a work of universal value reflecting the human condition, the play draws upon from various European sources. *The Chronicle History of King Leir* (1590) and *Chronicles of Holinshed* are considered among the major ones the play heavily leans on (Dunton-Downer and Riding, 2004, 347). The principal source is *Leir*, however it might have been pointed out by another important source, Sidney's *Arcadia*. The story of Lear's daughters and the triumph of the most graceful and virtuous younger sister, which is accompanied by the punishment of the element of vice is a well-known folk tale which is alike with the story of Cinderella (Ribner, 1958, 37). Furthermore, in a more general analysis, *King Lear* is associated with *Ecclesiastes* from the Old Testament in terms of dealing with "the issues of death and human life" (Kirsch, 1988, 156). Likewise, the reunion of Pericles and Marina is also observed in *King Lear* as "coming hither" and "going hence" as parallel to *Ecclesiastes* (*King Lear* V. ii. 10) and through the reunion of Lear and Cordelia before her death.

As with the historical context of *King Lear*, it is based in the pre-Christian or pagan times. Characters in the play mostly refer to pagan deities and gods as "revenging gods, kind gods, blessed gods, ever-gentle gods, and mighty gods" reflecting ancient times (Savvas, 1966, 560) whereas the titles and military positions refer to the sixteenth century. However, Shakespeare successfully turns his story which is in a specific time and place into a universal human story "toward physical sensations [suffering and pain], basic motives, basic emotions, [and] intimate family relationships" (Carroll, 2012, 86). In this sense, *King Lear* is among the plays that establish Shakespeare's position as a universal playwright.

***King Lear* as a Tragedy Play**

The play consists of a main plot and a subplot. Language-wise it starts in prose form with the conversation between the characters, Kent, Gloucester and Edmund until Lear enters in the thirty-fourth line to announce he shall divide his kingdom (Bradley, 2000, 44). The main plot is about Lear as a father and a king as well as his relationship with his three daughters and subjects, whereas the subplot reflects Gloucester's and his sons' involvement and relation in the unfolding of tragic incidents in the play. However, the subplot is complementary to the main plot and reinforces the action as it is "the structural principle that differentiates *King Lear* from Shakespeare's other tragedies" (McNeir, 1968, 188). When Lear asks for the love and loyalty of his daughters, Goneril and Regan reflect their hypocrisy in their behaviours and misguide Lear to divide his kingdom in haste. They reveal their true feelings for their father later towards the end of the first scene as part of the main plot (I. i. 286-310). Afterwards, Edmund's evil intentions and his trust in Nature and her ways are reflected in his famous soliloquy: "Thou, Nature, art my goddess. To thy law / My services are bound. Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom, and permit / The curiosity of nations to deprive me" (I. ii. 1-6).

The Impact of Erroneous Judgement

As the tragic hero of the play, King Lear is ready to be fooled by his daughters' false affection. He is full of hubris and "paternal pride" whereas he gets full of rage and disappointment by Cordelia and Kent's loyalty and honesty, which similarly reflects his hamartia (Savvas, 1966, 560). After long years of rigid rule and servitude by his people, Lear has forgotten he is a human being to the point that he even wants to test his daughters, which indicates his hubris. At that point, Lear faces an impossible challenge parallel with Shakespeare's another famous tragic hero, Hamlet, who "fails to grasp the meaning of any action in this world" (Yılmaz and Kamalova, 2019, 125). Yet, Lear's daughters are fully aware of their father's tragic fault:



GONERIL. You see how full of changes his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly. (I. i. 335)

However, with Act III, Lear begins to regenerate, which is paralleled with Gloucester's regeneration (Ribner, 1958, 40). Gloucester has an illegitimate son, Edmund, whom he favours over his legitimate and virtuous son, Edgar. Towards the end of the play, the incidents unfold in such a way that it seems like there is no more distinction "between the wise and the ridiculous, between the sane and the insane, between man and beast, or even between man and the gods" (Savvas, 1966, 560). Finally, the climax happens with Cordelia's death as Lear holds her lifeless body in his arms. Thus, "Lear's physical and emotional journey [is displayed] as he is progressively stripped of his crown, his kingly power, his reason, basic human comforts and his children" (Dunton-Downer and Riding, 2004, 355). This is the humane condition the play conveyed through the tragic ending mainly caused by Lear's faulty judgement, which bears similarity to Shakespeare's another great tragedy, *Othello*, in which the tragic hero, Othello dies due to his erroneous judgement whereas the evil remains in the end (Kaya, 2010, 82). Hence, Lear suffers the same pitiful fate.

The Providence in the Play

In the same vein, *King Lear* depicts a tragic story in which providence plays a great part in addition to Lear's hamartia. Shakespeare in this sense does not really reflect any certain principle about the divine justice. Indeed, the fate or providence brings justice in the form of punishment as a result of which both the good and the bad suffer alike. In other words, Cordelia and Edgar are the virtuous ones among their siblings but they are confronted with injustice and suffering. Lear and Gloucester are inbetween good and evil characters drawing similarity with morality play figures through their suffering as a result of their tragic flaws and the working of the providence. Their fate resembles to their fathers since Lear puts his trust in the wrong daughters while Gloucester in the wrong son (Löfgren, 2010, 3). On the other hand, Regan and Goneril manage to banish their father from their court, killing or excluding the ones they dislike such as Gloucester, and advance in their sinister plans. In parallel, Edmund schemes plots against Lear and Cordelia and achieves in his aim even at the expense of his father only until he repents for his sins. Thus, Shakespeare's "most unforgiving tragedy, *King Lear* is a profound examination of the essence of human dignity" which disregards the extent of hardship the virtuous face (Dunton-Downer and Riding, 2004, 347). It can be further interpreted as the process of human regeneration. Especially in Lear's case, spiritual rebirth is emphasised as a man cannot or should not get too old. In other words, "Shakespeare dramatically juxtaposes the physical age of his hero against the new manhood he attains through suffering" (Ribner, 1958, 34). His physical condition worsens as his spiritual awareness grows, as a result of which he comes out as an old man of wisdom towards the end of the play.

Furthermore, death and violence are significant issues handled in the play dramatically. Beginning from the beginning of the play, Gloucester arrogantly talks about the bastardy of his son, Edmund and comments on his conception in a light manner, which signals the counteraction of Edmund and Gloucester's awaiting death (Kirsch, 1988, 160). As Gloucester is violently blinded, in the scene the violent action is contrasted with Edmund's conception: "[t]he dark and vicious place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes" (V. iii. 163-64). After he gets blinded, Gloucester is comforted by Edgar, who desires to keep his father sane and tries to keep him strong with his words: "Men must endure/ Their going hence even as their coming hither./ Ripeness is all" (V. ii.



9-11), which underlines the importance of dignity and maturation in human life as opposed to death and violence.

The Function of Evil

The presence of evil and vice in the play is accentuated through certain characters. Primarily Regan and Goneril get the reader back to Lear himself for their evil actions as he is their father and maker (Ribner, 1958, 36): LEAR. "yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;/ Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,/ Which I must needs call mine" (II, iv, 224-226). He realises his tragic mistake of trusting them only in his state of madness: "Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh be-got/ Those pelican daughters" (III, iv, 76-77). Especially in the third and fourth acts, forces of good and evil can be clearly seen clashing with one another as "Edmund, Cornwall, Oswald, Goneril and Regan to darken our view of humanity, but on the other hand we have the selfless devotion of Cordelia, Edgar, Kent and the Fool to show the potentialities for good still within the human spirit" (Ribner, 1958, 40). It explains how the good and the evil are set against one another while sometimes the line between the two easily blurs, reflecting the fickle side of the human nature.

As a major evil character, Edmund sees Nature as his guide for his false actions, which can be explained as a Naturalist approach from a modern perspective. Then again, his actions can be justified on the grounds that he is always humiliated as a bastard son and wants to take revenge from those who have seen him as their inferior as reflected in his words: "Why brand they us/ With base? With baseness? bastardy? base, base?" (I. ii. 9-10). In this respect, as Erdem Ayyıldız argues, "he is victimised by the culture he lives in, not nature. Therefore, he justifies his evil actions to achieve restoring his rightful position [as an heir to his father's land] by climbing out of the discriminatory condition he is born into. For him, he is not born evil but made evil by the society discriminating against him as he is illegitimate" (2019, 1043). Thus, Edmund takes action to correct the wrongs of his nation in terms of legitimisation (Hendricks, 1999, 6). Moreover, he undergoes a change and repents for his sins towards the end of the play although he is too late to save Lear and Cordelia (V. iii. 162-251). It is interpreted as a dramatic defect of the play by some critics while some others take it as a sign for his love for Goneril which explains his silence till the very end (McNeir, 1968: 188). Another reason for his repentance is his father's death and the subsequent awakening of compassion in him. It grows with Kent's suffering and finally reaches its peak with Goneril and Regan's death. Thus, through "the awareness of one's mortality; then compassion for the suffering of others; then the recognition [...] of the justice of one's punishment; and finally an experience of the power of love" (Matthews, 1975, 27) he takes action to save others' lives. In the end, Edmund somehow finds repentance by realising his grave mistake.

A similar case is depicted in Regan and Goneril's situation. They are placed in a humiliating position by Lear the king as their father, when they realise they must compete among themselves to have the greatest part of his gift although they are fully aware that Cordelia is his favourite daughter (Hanly, 1986, 3). Indeed, their father puts them in a difficult position by asking them to prove their love for him, which unearths the already existing evil in their nature:

LEAR. [n]ow our joy,
Although our last and least, to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interested; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? (I. i, 82-86)
[...]
And again,
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest



On her kind nursery. (I. i, 122-124, italics mine)

Other Influential Characters in *King Lear*

Characters like Cordelia and Fool are Shakespeare's brilliant creations as contributors to the formation of the tragic situation in the play. Cordelia's characterisation is both "luminous" and "sharply focused" as she has a great effect on Lear's tragic decision in the beginning and likewise marks the tragic ending of the play with her death in his arms (Kirsch, 1988, 134). Her relationship with Lear is especially carved out the backbone of the play. From a Freudian perspective, Lear considers his three daughters as three fates of Greek myth, and Cordelia as goddess of death, which can be read as that rejecting Cordelia is equivalent to rejecting death (Halio, 2001, 63). Then again, when Lear is on the brink of madness in his tempest, he realises his love for Cordelia: "LEAR. [...] this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere I'll weep" (II. ii. 458-9). Furthermore, fearing about the possibility of an incestuous relationship between herself and her father, Lear, Cordelia withdraws her love from him in the beginning. From then on, she shall marry and devote all her love to her husband, who is later to be the king of France:

CORDELIA. You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
I return those duties back as are right fit:
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
Why have my sisters husbands if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. (I. i. 106-115)

From another perspective, Lear's thinking of her as a daughter, wife and mother calls forth his Oedipal tendencies and inexplicable rage towards Cordelia to banish her from his court and somehow force her to marry the king of France without a dowry (Czubak, 1989, 168). Then again, Lear and Cordelia's reunification in the end signals their shared death as they are involved in a kind of unfulfilled adulterous relationship which can only end in death (Hendricks, 1999, 4). Within this respect, their relationship as well as the extent of their suffering is in unison.

Another important character, the Fool, also acts like Cordelia's surrogate for he constantly reminds Lear of her and awakens his affection for her. The Fool, who is aware of their devotion to one another when Cordelia comes to support Lear with the French army and shortly after she dies followed by Lear's death, "weep[s] for joy and sing[s] for sorrow" (Kirsch, 1988, 164). As a final point, Lear's Fool is like a bridge between Lear and the audience and makes them understand him better. He also softens and humanises the tragic story for the audience and the reader to sympathise with him (Jesus, 2012, 12). In this sense, he serves as the chorus.

From a similar perspective, Edgar, Kent and Albany have a vital function in the play. Albany is Goneril's husband, a passive, weak and "ignorant" character in Act I (I. iv. 295). He has already become keen to the incidents and people around him by Act IV in which he realises Goneril is a hypocrite and "a fiend" hidden in the woman's body (IV. ii. 66-67). His perspective changes till the end of the play, however he does not know about fake behaviours and disguise as much as Edgar and Kent do. They employ disguise for different purposes. Edgar wants to protect himself against the dangerous plans of his brother, Edmund and to restore his position as he



explains: “to prevent the fiend and kill vermin” (III. iv. 64). Edgar preserves his vitality and faith in goodness, divine power and virtue (Maclean, 1960, 53). However, he prefers using other ways than disguise such as wit to resist and fight against his brother. On the other hand, Kent cannot employ disguise as successfully as Edgar does. Yet, he remains faithful to Lear to the point that he serves him till his death.

The Role of Servility in Good and Evil Deeds

The issue of servility and Lear’s feudal attitude towards his subjects and even to his daughters bring forth the role of servants and subjects in the play. The patriarchal figure, Lear expects obedience both from his vassals and his children as the lord. Yet, by refusing his duty and honour as a king, he refuses his subjects and thus puts his kingdom into the hard, tumultuous and disordered division, which unleashes the tragic events in the play. So, instead of promoting harmony in his kingdom, he chooses to create discord among individuals of different ranks. Nevertheless, Lear’s most loyal servants such as Kent never leave him alone even after he is sent away by his daughters. He is a true servant in two ways: he is loyal to his master and to the truth (Barish and Waingrow, 1958, 348-9). Accordingly, he leaves his role of servant for that of a peasant, Caius, which is interpreted as disobedience to his master, the king indeed reflects his devotion to Lear’s truth: “[t]his desperate stratagem failing, then to “wilful men / The injuriest hat they themselves procure/ Must be their schoolmasters” (II. iv. 305-307). Hence, Kent’s relationship with Lear and as a vassal to the king appears to be parallel with Cordelia’s relationship with Lear as they are all away from the court. Along with Lear’s banishment from the court, Kent also disappears and leaves the court to hypocrites, usurpers and false servants. He follows Lear wherever he goes and serves him although Lear acts grimly: LEAR. “Follow me; thou shalt serve me. If I like thee no worse after dinner, I will not part from thee yet” (I. iv. 43-45). Thus, their bond becomes “that of a document negotiable by a bond salesman, instead of a vital covenant expressive of mutual love and responsibility” (Barish and Waingrow, 1958, 353) as required by feudal servility

On the other hand, Oswald is the servant acting for the evil intentions of his lady, Goneril, as opposed to Kent’s virtue and loyalty, which appears to be the contrast of true service with bad service. Kent is dressed in humility and virtue whereas Oswald appears in eye-catching clothes in his mistress’ house, reflecting his and Goneril’s narcissism. He is made into a traitor and an evil servant by Goneril. Indeed, he is “the puppet’s puppet” (Barish and Waingrow, 1958, 349). Oswald is the victim of his own choice.

Conclusion

In brief, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* depicts the tragic story of Lear, who makes a false judgement due to his hubris, complicated feelings and the malevolent providence. All of these factors give way to the deaths of several characters including his three daughters as well as Gloucester and puts his country into social and political unrest. As a tragic hero, he is both the perpetrator of tragic incidents and the victim of providence since the evil and the virtuous are punished similarly in the ruthless and at the same time touching tragedy. It is for this reason that *King Lear* is a precious Shakespearean play that displays the human condition and human values in a most effective way touching the feelings of the audience.

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