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The Triumphant Tragedy of King Lear

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King Lear Final Paper

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The Triumphant Tragedy of *King Lear*

The ambiguous ending of Shakespeare's *King Lear* has been the subject of much debate, particularly regarding Lear's ultimate philosophical outlook. Does Lear adopt a nihilistic outlook, or does he obtain some good from his sufferings? Shakespeare remains silent on whether or not Lear dies "smilingly" (5.3.203), as we learn of his friend Gloucester. Nevertheless a careful study of Lear's development throughout the tragedy can lend powerful insight into his ultimate stance and the message of *King Lear* as a whole. A proper understanding of any play involves placing it in historical context, and Shakespeare's works must be read in light of Elizabethan culture and its Christian foundation. *King Lear* can only be fully understood within the framework of the New Testament paradoxes concerning strength, wisdom and freedom which St. Paul outlines in his epistles: "When I am weak then I am strong" (2 Cor 2:10), "the foolishness of God is wiser than men" (1 Cor 1:25), and "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18). Whether or not Shakespeare intended *King Lear* to convey a Christian message, the tragedy does reflect his Elizabethan upbringing. The paradoxes of which St. Paul writes provide the key to unlocking the supreme Christian paradox at the heart of *King Lear*: the nature of love as a free gift that brings triumph over this world to those who empty themselves to receive the gift.

Shakespeare sets the tone for his tragedy in the first scene of *King Lear* by introducing Lear and dramatizing his tragic flaw: what Siegel calls "the selfishness of his proud willfulness" that is "the vice of the king" (Siegel 330). Lear's intense self-focus feeds off his kingly power to create in his mind an image of himself as a self-sufficient, clever ruler who can freely act as he pleases. The falsity of this image becomes apparent through dramatic irony, beginning with

Lear's grand entrance in Act 1.1. When the old King announces he will divide his kingdom among his three daughters in order to "shake all cares and business from our age...while we/ Unburdened crawl toward death" (1.1.39-41), we see not only his selfishness but also his pathetic condition and lack of perception. In his old age, Lear wants to live as a child again, free of cares and responsibilities but enjoying life. But he foolishly thinks he can simultaneously retain his kingly prerogative of commanding others to do his bidding. As Stuart writes: "[Lear] wants to have all the privileges but none of the responsibilities of living well" (Stuart 178). His desire for power and his desire for pleasure conflict, and this conflict precipitates his downfall.

Lear's tragic fall begins when he asks his daughters to profess the extent of their love for him, planning to reward each with land in proportion to her love. But paradoxically, this fall also marks the beginning of Lear's upward journey towards true happiness. Although Lear's overconfidence prevents him from seeing the vulnerable position he puts himself in, his vulnerability to his daughters creates a breach in his self-enclosed world which opens him to suffering, experiencing his utter contingency as a human being, and finally to losing himself enough to experience love. This development in Lear unfolds slowly, but it begins when Lear, unbeknownst to him, opens himself to experience the suffering that will reveal his weakness, folly and servitude.

In Act 1.1 Lear believing himself to be powerful, wise and free to do what he wills. He confidently awaits extravagant praise from his daughters, and his two oldest daughters succeed in meeting his expectations with their profuse pronouncements of total devotion (1.1.55-76). But Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia, surprises him with her simple and honest response to his demand for a declaration of love: "Nothing" (1.1.87). Her heart shines through in her actions, not her words. As she says in an aside between her sisters' flatteries: "What shall Cordelia speak?"

Love and be silent” (1.1.62). When Cordelia says nothing, Lear refuses to believe his ears and asks her to rephrase her answer. But she will not renounce truth and stoop to her sisters’ practice of spouting meaningless words in order to gain material possessions. Her pure love allows her to scorn the things of the world in favor of the truth about her love for her father.

Cordelia’s response sends Lear into a rage and he immediately disowns the daughter that only moments ago he held in such esteem: “Here I disclaim all my paternal care...And as a stranger to my heart and me/ Hold thee from this forever” (1.1.113-16). This rash response of Lear’s reveals his “proud willfulness,” and simultaneously it reveals his weakness, servitude and foolishness. It shows his weakness in that he lacks control over his fleeting emotions, allowing his anger to get the better of him. It shows his servitude in that he acts as a slave to his anger. And it shows his foolishness in that his momentary fit of passion succeeds in clouding his judgment, leading him to condemn the daughter who truly loves him.

Lear’s foolishness increases when he refuses an opportunity to see the truth through the wise words of his faithful servant Kent. Kent cares for Lear’s wellbeing more than for his own self-preservation: “My life I never held but as a pawn...nor fear to lose it,/ Thy safety being motive” (1.1.156-58). For this reason he remains unwavering under Lear’s threat of punishment, courageously speaking the plain truth. Kent says to Lear: “To plainness honor’s bound/ When majesty falls to folly” (1.1.148-50). Kent can see the folly of Lear’s actions because, unlike Lear, he sees and judges with his heart. He knows from personal experience that Cordelia loves Lear and tells him so: “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,/ Nor are those emptyhearted whose low sounds/ Reverb no hollowness” (1.1.153-55). Kent implores Lear to heed his words, for he recognizes that in the heat of his passion Lear needs to hear a rational perspective from an onlooker: “See better, Lear, and let me still remain/ The true blank of thine eye” (1.1.159-60).

But Lear's response remains a refusal to see this truth, and Kent's honesty, like Cordelia's, wins him only Lear's anger and banishment.

Lear's treatment gives Kent every right to abandon Lear for good, but his love forbids him to abandon his master even for a moment. In Act 1.4 Kent reveals to the audience his plan to disguise himself in order to serve Lear incognito. Similarly Cordelia's heart never abandons her father and she continues to work for his good while apart from him. Later in the play, as her husband's army prepares to take up Lear's cause, she expresses to herself the causeless love she holds for him: "O dear father,/ It is they business that I go about...No blown ambition doth our arms incite,/ But love, dear love, and our aged father's right" (4.5.24-28). Even in exile Cordelia's thoughts center around her father's wellbeing, although she could not possibly receive any practical benefit in return for her actions. The only explanation for the love exhibited by Kent and exemplified in Cordelia, a love that appears utterly foolish to the eyes of the world, is the conviction that there exists transcendent truth worth living and dying for and that the values of this world cannot satisfy the human heart. Only at the end of the play has Lear emptied himself sufficiently to adopt this view.

Having rejected his most loving daughter and his most faithful servant and having surrendered all of his land, Lear's position becomes extremely vulnerable. For a while he succeeds in deceiving himself for a while that he will be happy living with his two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, whose empty words of love he has believed. But by the end of Act 1.1, Shakespeare reveals Lear's pathetic position to the audience through a dialogue between Goneril and Regan:

Goneril: He always loved our sister most, and with what poor
Judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

Regan: 'Tis the infirmity of age. Yet he hath ever
but slenderly known himself.

Goneril: The best and soundest of his time hath been
but rash. (1.1.294-99)

In this dialogue Shakespeare reveals Lear's folly and the cold-heartedness of Goneril and Regan. He also removes for his audience any lingering doubt of Cordelia's love for Lear by her sisters' admission of Lear's foolishness in rejecting her. Regan's statement that her father "hath ever but slenderly known himself" is particularly telling. Lear lacks self knowledge, believing he is self-sufficient when in reality he exists as an utterly contingent being. Only when Lear's daughters reject him in Act 2 does he realize his helplessness.

But before Lear begins to recognize his human limitations, Shakespeare includes an important dialogue between Lear, Cordelia and the King of France, Cordelia's suitor. After Lear has disowned Cordelia and left her without a dowry, he asks each of her two suitors if he would still take her. The suitor from Burgundy refuses this impractical offer, but not so with France. When he realizes Cordelia has committed no real offense, he takes her hand and pledges himself to her out of pure love. France's words beautifully capture the message at the heart of *King Lear*: the paradox of love which St. Paul's paradoxes regarding weakness, foolishness and servitude severally point to. France declares:

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor,
Most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised,
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon,
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away.
Gods, gods! 'Tis strange that from their cold'st neglect
My love should kindle to inflamed respect. (1.1.254-59)

This statement clearly lacks logic. To Lear at this point in his development it means nothing, for it does not follow the seemingly reasonable maxim he expresses to Cordelia when she refuses to verbalize her love for him: "Nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.90). France's words convey a truth beyond the grasp of a mind rooted in the logic of this world, but paradoxically they describe

the very core of reality which allows the world to exist. For France touches on the nature of what Shakespeare's Elizabethan culture would have understood immediately as God's creative love that began and sustains the world, and the love that saves sinners: a pure gift that comes to those who have nothing to commend them and nothing to necessitate their reception of the gift. Lear only begins to fathom the kind of love France has for Cordelia—a love that needs no incentives and thrives all the more without them—when he loses himself completely and so can receive the selfless love of the very daughter whom he had so cruelly mistreated. In Lear's case the mystery of love abounds all the more, for while France's love has the incentives of Cordelia's beauty and virtue, Cordelia's silent love for Lear runs much deeper in that she loves him although he truly has no merits and she has grounds for abandoning him because of his cruelty. But like Kent, she gives of herself and looks for nothing in return. Contrary to what Stuart claims, Lear does not learn from Cordelia "the reciprocity of love and duty," the inability to receive what you do not give (Stuart 172). Rather he discovers the overwhelming reality of love's undeserved character, for Cordelia loves Lear not as a duty owed but as a gift given.

Lear's discovery, however, comes only after a long and painful process. In the words of Siegel: "The suffering of...Lear is, however, more than punishment; it is a purgatory which burns away their previous selfishness" (Siegel 326). Lear must undergo a violent self-emptying which he himself does not initiate but that brings him to such desperate straights that he surrenders to the powers above him. This purgatorial process that brings Lear from weakness, folly and slavery to strength, wisdom and freedom that transcend this world's values begins in the final scene of Act 1 when Goneril, with whom Lear has been staying with a hundred knights, complains that his knights have caused problems and demands that he reduce their number. This

enrages Lear, for he considers himself entitled to control all that happens in his life in order to gratify his desires.

Lear had expected an easy life in retirement, impatiently demanding food and servants at his beck and call: “Dinner, ho, dinner! Where’s my knave, my fool?” (1.4.42). His self-centeredness and belief in his control over his circumstances parallels Hamlet’s initial view that he could control and remedy the “unweeded garden” of life (*Ham* 1.2.135-37). But Hamlet learns in the final act of the play that “the readiness is all” and he must “Let be” (5.2.220-222). He recognizes his limitation and surrenders to God’s providence. Lear comes to a similar realization, but in Act 1.4 he cannot yet see the general truth of his human weakness, a truth that those around Lear see clearly, as show by the words of Goneril’s servant Oswald: Goneril says to Oswald concerning Lear: “Idle old man/ That still would manage those authorities/ That he hath given away!” (1.3.17-19).

But Lear does only knows that his trust in Goneril’s words has been mistaken, and he upbraids himself for this: “Beat at this gate that let thy folly in/ And thy dear judgment out.” (1.4.270-71). Lear’s solution of turning to Regan for support, however, proves just as ineffective.

In Act 2.4 Lear arrives at Regan’s home with the confidence that Regan will love and accept him. He declares: “I can be patient. I can stay with Regan./ I and my hundred knights.” (2.4.231-32) “O me, my heart, my rising heart! But down!” (2.4.119). But he soon discovers that Regan wants as little to do with him as does Goneril. Regan’s words to Lear highlight the true weakness of Lear’s helpless position, a weakness he only begins to realize at the end of Act 2. Regan says: “I pray you, father, being weak, seem so” (2.4.202). She also tells Lear that he should act as the slave that his condition has made him rather than as the powerful king he formerly was: “You should be ruled and led” (2.4.148). Though Lear considers Regan’s words cruel and unjust, he

does begin to admit his need for divine intervention when he prays after his rejection by Regan: “O heavens,/ If you do love old men...Send down and take my part” (2.4.191-93).

Lear realizes he no longer remains strong and free to act as he chooses, and his desperate situation brings about a turning point in his development. Hole notes that while Lear does finally look to the gods for help, he still retains the illusion of power, his words implying that the gods are “at his command,” and only “When he abandons this attitude, at a critical stage of his development, he begins to approach humility” (Hole 228). Hole identifies this “crucial stage” as Lear’s plea to the gods for “patience” in the midst of his passionate speech beginning “Oh, reason not the need!” (2.4.266). In the course of this speech Lear for the first time expresses a heartfelt conviction that truth extends beyond the limits of natural reason, and this conviction leads him into what appears deeper folly. As Hole writes: “He has come to recognize his lowliness shortly before he loses his reason” (229). Lear loses even his semblance of reason when he rashly leaves his daughter’s home and runs outside into a violent storm. But paradoxically, this foolishness brings him to a more profound understanding of his insignificance in the larger cosmos and of the nature of reality.

Act 3 portrays a significant turning point in Lear’s life: his realization that he is a man like everyone else. He begins Act 3 with the proud confidence that he “will endure” (3.4.18). But the relentlessness of the storm quickly brings him to see himself as the “Unaccommodated man” that he is: a weak human being dependent upon his possessions and the help of others for his survival. During the storm Lear still sees himself as a righteous sufferer, “a man/ More sinned against than sinning” (3.2.59-60). But his suffering from the violent weather as he exposes himself to its blast allows him to make the crucial link between himself and all suffering souls. By standing in the storm, Lear first begins to surrender to his circumstances and to deliberately empty himself, even

stripping off his clothing (3.4.105-8) in order to “feel what wretches feel” (3.4.34). In a moment of intense suffering Lear loses his selfishness enough to see clearly how little care he had taken of the poor in his kingdom (3.4.32), and he joins them in solidarity by giving up his clothing. He even, in an unprecedented act of selflessness for Lear, invites his Fool enter the shelter of a hovel before him (3.4.105-8). To the eyes of the world, even good people, Lear is crazy. Even Kent says “his wits are gone” (3.6.87). But really Lear has become wiser than he was in his blindness.

Shakespeare sheds light on Lear’s movement toward true perception by acknowledging his human frailty by weaving into *King Lear* the parallel plot of Gloucester’s blinding and reconciliation with his son Edgar. Like Kent, Edgar disguises himself in order to serve his loved one who has rejected him. He does not want recognition, but he loves and wants to redeem his father. Gloucester becomes so despairing that he tries to commit suicide, but Edgar manages to save him. Gloucester realizes his folly, and he accepts his need for continued help from Edgar. Gloucester’s telling statement reveals his increase in wisdom: “I stumbled when I saw. Full oft ‘tis seen/ Our means secure us, and our mere defects/ Prove our commodities” (4.1.19-21). Gloucester’s statement essentially states St. Paul’s paradox that only when we recognize our weakness can we become truly strong; only by looking outside of ourselves and acknowledging our dependence on others can we experience love.

In Act 4.6 Lear seems to have gone completely crazy, wearing a crown of weeds and yet declaring of himself: “I am the/ King himself” (4.6.83-84), words reminiscent of his description of Poor Tom in the storm when Lear realized his utter contingency: “Thou art the thing itself” (3.4.105). Yet Lear’s subsequent words in act 4.6 reveal the irony he now perceives in this statement. When Gloucester asks to kiss Lear’s hand, for example, Lear says “Let me wipe if first; it smells of mortality” (4.6.133). He has come to terms with the mortality he shares with all

human beings and no longer puts himself on a pedestal. He considers his kingship now as naught, knowing now from his experience of suffering the falsity of his daughters' flatteries. Lear now can declare of their words: "They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof" (4.6.104-5). By the end of this scene, Lear has reached what he believes to be his lowest point when he is captured by soldiers sent from France. He now clearly perceives his weakness, foolishness, and servitude: "No rescue? What, a prisoner? I am even/ The natural fool of fortune" (4.6.190-91). But paradoxically, Lear's capture ends up giving him true freedom for the first time, for in prison he meets Cordelia and finally receives her forgiveness and love.

When Lear sees Cordelia in Act 4.7, he declares: "Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound/ Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears/ Do scald like molten lead" (4.7.48-49). He sees his guilt clearly now and knows he is at the mercy of his daughter, whom he so cruelly mistreated. For the first time words fail him: "I know not what to say... Would I were assured/ Of my condition!" (4.7.55-58). He admits his foolishness outright: "I am a very foolish fond old man" (4.7.61). Lear does not dare hope Cordelia will forgive him, for she has no cause. He says to her: "If you have poison for me I will drink it./ I know you do not love me, for your sisters/ Have, as I do remember, done me wrong./ You have some cause, they have not" (4.7.73-76). This powerfully reveals how far he has come since his naïve confidence in Act 3 that he could endure all things patiently, using his will power to overcome adversity.

But Cordelia defies Lear's logical expectations in that she needs no cause to forgive Lear; she loves him unconditionally. Cordelia's love for the first time enables Lear to experience true freedom. As Hole writes: "Lear regards his captivity with Cordelia as a new kind of freedom...he envisages a future with Cordelia in the service of the gods" (231). In the final scene of the play Lear expresses his joy at being in prison because he is with his beloved daughter. He

says to Cordelia: “Come, let’s away to prison./ We two alone will sing like birds I’th’ cage.” (5.3.8-9). This attitude suggests an earlier expression of his servant Kent while imprisoned in the stocks says ““Nothing almost sees miracles/ But misery” (2.2.168-69). Now Lear sees everything through childlike eyes, wondering at the world around him. He no longer focuses on himself, rather focusing on his beloved Cordelia. Lear finally experiences love of another, and this love brings his fulfillment. When Cordelia dies at the end of the play, Lear is naturally devastated. But his devastation gives way to gratitude and wonder. Asking a servant to undo his button, he thanks him, and then he dies looking upon the lips of his daughter, presumably believing them to move in indication of her spiritual life (5.3.315-17). Lear’s death brings sadness to his remaining servants, but what Shakespeare emphasizes is the greater miracle of Lear’s life and transformation into a loving human being. Kent puts it best when he responds to Edgar’s statement that Lear “is gone indeed” with the words: “The wonder is he hath endured so long./ He but usurped his life” (5.3.322-24).

The ending of *King Lear* only makes sense in light of the paradox of love that Lear experiences as a result of the paradoxes about strength, wisdom and freedom that he learn through his sufferings. As Siegel says, “Adversity brings for the good the miracle of love” (326). Yet Shakespeare makes it clear the love comes not only to the good, but especially to the undeserving. The love shown by Cordelia and Kent surprises us, defying human logic. And yet without this love human life lacks fulfillment and completeness. Only when Lear loves Cordelia can he experience freedom, strength and true wisdom. Although Cordelia’s death brings Lear the greatest suffering of all, Lear derives from this evil the greatest good he could receive: a peaceful death that unites him with his beloved daughter for whom he now lives rather than for himself. Lear has finally learns the paradox of love, the love that needs no cause to give itself to another.

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