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SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TRAGEDIES - A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

From blindness to insight , sufferings moves in Shakespeare's tragedy same as biblical job's. The fact that Job was blameless and being put to test by Satan and God , while it is Lear's folly and blindness, due to his excessive wealth and power, which leads to his downfall. It is Lear, who foolishly banishes Cordelia from his kingdom .

INTRODUCTION :

Lear, brought low by suffering, eventually comes to see how foolish he was to banish the only daughter who truly loved him from his kingdom and to give in to flattery and sweet talk by Goneril and Regan who are truly evil and scheming as well as ungrateful. Suffering thus leads to insight about reality and truth, as well as moral growth. Here is a king, who, owing to the possession of power for too long, is blinded by power to who his true friends and allies are, only appreciating those who exalt him on the surface and are his true daughter who genuinely loves Lear is banished because she refuses to stoop to flattery.

One might also read the play de constructively and see how good defines itself as the exclusion of evil, it is only in relation to the evil of Goneril and Regan that Cordelia's nature as a kind and good person shows. It is necessary for the perversion of justice by Goneril and Regan to take place to show how truly kind, good and pure Cordelia is when she comes to Lear's rescue and does not grudge him for banishing her from her kingdom. It is the opposition of their evil to Cordelia's goodness that justice, truth, mercy, goodness and charity are defined, so while one disapproves of Goneril and Regan's treatment of their father. It is necessary for their acts of darkness

to define in contrast the mercy and charity of Cordelia. . In this way it is shown that good does not exist in isolation from evil, it is necessary for good to exclude evil as a polarity and contrary for it to be defined. Cordelia's goodness and kindness only gain meaning in opposition to the evil of Goneril and Regan, her goodness is only illumined in relation to their darkness and evil. Hence the play demonstrates that the act of evil, while reprehensible, is necessary to exist, so that good may be illumined and defined, as such evil is a necessary metaphysical opposite and contrary that good needs to exclude and battle against in order to define itself. The play is also a powerful commentary on the destructive and all consuming nature of evil. Good has little power in relation to evil and darkness. Cordelia's meekness and Christian charity have little power in opposition to the schemes and darkness of Goneril and Regan, just as Edgar has little power in relation to the destructive evil of Edmund, but their oppression is temporary as divine justice restores the reputation and integrity of the well. Indeed, it is only a temporary victory that Goneril, Regan and Edmund have over Cordelia and Edgar, because divine justice sees to it that their deeds of darkness are duly punished and name and integrity are restored to Cordelia and Edgar. The play as such is about the redemptive nature of suffering, in this context, the play could be called Jobean.

driven mad by the realization that he has wronged Cordelia and bequeathed his kingdom to ungrateful and evil daughters, about how blind and foolish he has been, it is

his subsequent suffering that restores insights about the truths he had been blind to such as Cordelia's true goodness. It is thus Lear's suffering that spurs his moral growth and humbling insight that appearance is not the true measure of reality or truth. Madness thus paradoxically comes with insight, it is only in madness that Lear apprehends the truth, while in sanity he had been blind to the superficial flatteries of Goneril and Regan.

I would, however qualify a deconstructive reading of the play as while it is necessary for evil to be conceived in order to envision its metaphysical contrary good, this does not place good and evil on an equal basis as deconstruction would argue. The vision of the play is not thus deconstructive but Christian, in which divine justice restores the name of the best such as Edgar, Cordelia and Kent and good is valued clearly in a superior position to evil. This we see through Lear's recognition of his blindness and folly to Cordelia's goodness, and eventual reconciliation with her though she tragically dies. Goneril and Regan are also duly punished for their darkness and evil, as one is killed by the other out of jealousy over Edmund while the remaining sister commits suicide. The idea of suffering being refined and ennobling has clear origins in the bible. Hence, I would hesitate to call the play deconstructive as though it

is in relation to the darkness of her sisters that Cordelia's virtue derives meaning, the play clearly exalts good over evil as we see a moral progression in Lear's choice of Cordelia as his true kin over Goneril and Regan, who have been ungrateful and ruthless in usurping Lear's property. Shakespeare was thus not a moral relativist though he employed metaphysical structures of good and evil, in that he clearly exhorted the choice of good over evil as seen through the redemptive nature of Lear's suffering and his journey of blindness to insight and his clear choice of Cordelia over Goneril and Regan. The play is clearly moral in its vision and not locked in paradoxical indecision as deconstructionists would argue, its vision is clearly Christian through its choice of truth, mercy, virtue and good over evil and destruction. The play is not about moral paralysis and indecision about choosing between good and evil as a deconstructionist would argue, its vision is distinctly Christian in valorizing good over evil and depicting evil as something abominable and that suffers consequences such as divine retribution. Hence, Shakespeare in no way demonstrates sympathy for the devil as Milton does, while good and evil are depicted as metaphysical polarities and contraries Shakespeare is quite absolute in depiction of good being superior to evil. Lear, while choosing evil over good initially due to the seductive nature of its appearance, is brought through suffering to recognize the inherent moral superiority and beauty as well as the value of the good and truth over lies and evil. Indeed, Shakespeare's vision is Christian to the

extent that he depicts divine retribution for Goneril, Regan and Edmund as well as clear sympathy for the innate superiority of the virtue of Cordelia and Edgar to their evil counterparts. Evil is thus depicted as a force which is highly seductive and deceiving, as Goneril and Regan win their inheritance through flattery initially, but is destructive and self destructive as these initial allies turn against each other and murder each other as well as betray each other and experience no solidarity in the end.

Evil brings temporary victory and is more vital and domineering than good, but turns against itself in the end as its selfishness and self glorification brings about its own downfall. Truth is thus absolute in the play and it is depicted as Christian, as it is demonstrated that divine justice exists through the divine retribution that Goneril and Regan suffer. Indeed divine order had been disrupted in the play through Lear's choice of Goneril and Regan over Cordelia, thus introducing chaos and destruction in the kingdom, culminating in Lear's descent into madness on the heath. Divine order is only restored through Christ figure Cordelia's atoning death and the restoration of good to the kingdom. I would also qualify evil as the impossibility that makes the best possible as evil is depicted as the absence of good rather than the condition of possibility of good as deconstruction would argue.

Evil and sin are depicted as lapses, imperfections that fail to measure up to the absolute standards of good and morality rather than as necessary conditions to the thinking of good. Indeed evil is depicted as something destructive that ought to be eliminated in order to restore order to the kingdom rather than as something to be tolerated as a condition of possibility. Hence, while it is now fashionable to perform post-structuralist readings of Shakespeare's plays, these are not faithful to the religious and moral outlook of the plays. Indeed, Shakespeare may justly be accused of being essentialist, but would wear the label proudly when it comes to where his moral and religious allegiances lay. The existence of divine justice and retribution in his plays, especially his tragedies from Othello to Macbeth and Hamlet to Lear show that Shakespeare subscribed to a divine cosmos and a largely Christian universe in which evil did not go unpunished and order would eventually restore to the kingdom where a moral transgression had been made, such as in the case of Hamlet where the adulterous usurper of the throne is eventually brought to death by Hamlet. The tragedies normally begin with order being disrupted by a moral transgression, but typically end with a moral order being restored and the moral transgressors being brought to justice. Furthermore the play does not demonstrate that there is no difference between good and evil as deconstruction would argue, but that there is an essential moral hierarchy with good being the ascendant value.

Evil is shown to bring chaos to the kingdom which eventually goes punished by divine retribution and order being restored to the kingdom to the good cleared in a name and restored in reputation. I would thus argue that Shakespeare had no postmodern sympathies and was quite absolute where religion and morality was concerned. Hence it may be not be relevant to associate Shakespeare with postmodernism where his religious and moral convictions lie. Indeed, evil is shown to be a necessary structural metaphysical opposite of good, but not defined by Shakespeare as its condition of possibility but something to be defeated and overcome. Indeed, this moral defeat of evil is normally brought about in Shakespeare's plays through the enactment of divine retribution and a restoration of the moral universe and Christian cosmos. Indeed, it is popular to subscribe to postmodernism and moral relativism in the contemporary world. Faith has declined in modern Europe and there are even atheist preachers in some Scandinavian quarters.

However, I would argue this was not the context of Shakespeare's time. Faith had a strong foothold in much of Europe and this was the reason why the cosmos of Shakespeare's plays were largely Christian in which themes of redemption and divine justice and tiles were prominent. Hence good and evil are not merely relative designates

defined in opposition to each other, but metaphysical absolutes that are distinct from each other. Evil may be defined as the absence or privation of good, and evil is a falling short and missing the mark of good, which has an absolute, not relative value. Good is the absolute value which evil falls short of, is defined as its absence and privation rather than its conceptual opposite. Indeed the problem with seeing good and evil as mere conceptual opposites is that there is no moral basis to judge the value of these opposites. Good and evil are moral qualities rather than mere metaphysical opposites. The problem with a postmodern reading is that it does not account for the moral and order that is demonstrated in Shakespeare's plays. While this statement may make one vulnerable to accusations of religious and moral fundamentalism, there is nothing relative about the eventual defeat of evil in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare was firmly absolute about the vindication of the good and the defeat of evil in his plays, hence postmodernism, while fashionably associated with his plays structurally, does not apply morally or religiously, which were by and large Christian or at least a moral cosmos in which evil was duly punished and the name of the gods restored and vindicated.

CONCLUSION:

I argue that good and evil in the plays are not only metaphysical concepts, they are moral and religious values which have absolute rather than relative foundations. These

foundations are of divine origin, originating from God the absolute origin who revealed his will and ways through the Word. Perhaps Shakespeare would contest the idea of truth as relative and be criticized for being essentialist, but this is what the ideas of divine justice and telos and a moral order to his cosmos show. I would argue that Shakespeare was essentialist in an unapologetic way because there is nothing relative to the divine punishment of evil in his plays as well as the eventual victory of the good in Shakespeare's plays. Even if good does not eventually triumph, as the death of Cordelia shows, it is at least valorized over evil and ranked as superior to evil in Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare often depicted the struggle of good in relation to evil, one does not contest that, but valued good infinitely more than evil and was in no way a sympathizer to the devil as evil is invariably defeated in his plays and the moral order restored. Hence postmodernism, while very fashionable today, may not be historically relevant to Shakespeare's plays, which are arguably humanist and about timeless truths such as the eventual defeat of evil in a moral cosmos in which evil may reign temporarily like Goneril and Regan do but will eventually be defeated by good as the restoration of Edgar to the throne shows. While this assertion may render one vulnerable to the accusation of religious and moral fundamentalism and less complex than the world may be, the morals of Shakespeare's plays are resolutely absolute and not ambiguous in their eventual restoration of divine justice and order. The endings of Shakespeare's plays are

not sites of moral ambiguity, but about the reign of the will of a divine being whose ethics are moral, vindicating the good and defeating the evil. The ending of Lear is not morally ambiguous in any way. It shows the restoration of the virtuous Edgar as king. It shows the defeat of Goneril, Regan and Edmund. It shows that evil does not go unpunished by the divine order unfolding in history. It does not sympathize with the devil as it is shown that evil will eventually destroy itself and suffer consequences for its transgression and oppression of the good. Shakespeare as metaphysician shares more in common with the idealists than poststructuralists because his ethics had a foundation in an absolute origin rather than a nothingness or emptiness. Shakespeare chose good over evil and was not ambiguous morally.

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