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Love And Justice

Face To Face

In

King Lear's Family Relationships

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T.S.Eliot once said that “Shakespeare’s criticism will always change as the world changes” (1). It is meant that the underlying world-view and critical assumptions of Shakespearean commentators vary from generation to another. In the present era of complex and diverse critical theories concerning Shakespeare, it is occasionally beneficial to examine the unconscious and preconceived notions that critics often bring with them to an examination of his plays. One of these notions is the idea of love and justice.

The matter of combining love and justice in the governance of the relationships between parents and children is crucial to the moral formation of the young. This balancing act also demands the most strenuous and careful exercise by those who would be good parents of the very moral virtues that they are fighting to cultivate in their offspring. This philosophical hypothesis can only be experienced by living through a series of more immediate and personally focused dilemmas. However, not all of us are parents, but we have all been children, and we might ask ourselves whether we love our parents for themselves or for what they have been able to accomplish. In other words, can love be founded upon justice or vice versa?

To test the matters of love and justice in relationship between parents and children, we need the most profound guidance. Hence, we must turn to the poets . In this context, Samuel Johnson says, “the very best poetry does not simply instruct us and move us ; it instructs us by moving us.” ⁽²⁾ For our purposes here, one of the poems that most movingly and truly gathers up the great themes of love and justice is Shakespeare’s King Lear.

No doubt, Shakespeare's King Lear is virtually a poetic work which is mainly based on two conflicting ideas, that of love and justice. The abundance of poetry makes those ideas enjoy a versatile and panoramic form which is actively worked out through the combination of both elements of poetry and drama. Though L.C.Knights who explains general considerations in Shakespeare's plays believes that the "essential structure of the play has been sought in the poetry rather than in the more easily extractable elements of plot and character".⁽³⁾ Yet, the dramatic construction of King Lear is unique .It is constituted of double plots which are equal in size and impact . Each one completes the other and forms an integral part to expose the whole vision of life .In this respect, S.C.Sen Gupta thinks that " King Lear is the one tragedy in which Shakespeare weaves one plot into another and presents through them his comprehensive vision of life" ⁽⁴⁾

From the very beginning of the play, we perceive the several difficulties involved in managing a union of love and justice in relationships between parents and children. As the tragedy opens, we are confronted by Lear who has already decided to divide the Kingdom in accordance with the extent to which each of his daughters love him. He tries to found justice upon love. Throughout the first two acts, Lear thinks of love in quantitative terms .He equates the amount of love that Regan and Goneril feel for him with the number of Knights as a basis for a rough kind of distributive justice .The more you love, the more material goods you deserve. Lear looks at love as something one can earn not as instinctive thing. This is, in fact, the effect on Lear of the experiences he undergoes in the first two acts .

Cordelia's refusal to compete with her sisters in singing her father's praise reflects her nobility .She had forgone the inheritance of a kingdom in order to maintain her integrity as an individual. A. C. Bradley admires " Cordelia's hatred of hypocrisy and of the faintest appearance of mercenary processions".⁽⁵⁾ Her view of love is quite different from her father. Lear's love generates from his rank as a

king and what does the king represent in an absolute moral order. He demands the surrender of that inner worth of a person to him. According to him, love can be raped by power and authority ,more clearly by a reward . But actually the bond of human fellowship can never be based on reason and justice alone. In the absence of love, the terrible vision of the future becomes real as Yeats conjectures:

*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed , and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned .*

“The Second Coming”

Goneril and Regan have allowed their power of love to be usurped by a king and what the crucial thing is that they have accepted payment for it . So, in the end even reason and formal justice are drowned in the flood of hate that seeks to avenge the rape of two human souls

Therefore; Cordelia’s words which reflect the noble simplicity and tranquil grandeur, come as a panacea or the only source from which a free man may derive an obligation. To maintain the very bond of love that unites Cordelia with her father and all free men she sacrifices her fortunes by declaring:

I love your Majesty

*According to my bond ,no more no less
(I,i,94-95)*

She brings the magnitude of Lear's demand into proper perspective by contrasting her love as a daughter, which by its very nature is limited by the authority of a father, to the love of a wife, which is one of free choice:

*Why have my sisters husbands ,if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and my duty
(I,i,101-104)*

During this first section of the play, the sharpness of justice comes face to face with the sincere love . The former is represented by Lear who "is justice and wields that power by virtue of his kingship"⁽⁶⁾ . The latter is represented by Cordelia who is a representative of innocent love . As a result of this unequal confrontation, Cordelia is disowned. She loses her right in the kingdom and inheritance.

Lear expects love from his other two daughters. He arrives in Goneril's household supposing the obedience of his whims to which he has presumably been accustomed, only to discover that he becomes subject to his daughter's will. Then he consoles himself that he has another daughter who is kind and comfortable, but finds Regan to be as stony and intransigent as her sister.

His reaction to these grievous shocks is one of sheer disbelief. He does not expect this kind of ingratitude. He begins to doubt in the legality of his daughters “Are you our daughter?/ Does day here know me ? This is not Lear (I,i 238-246)

The evil daughters represent the evil side of King Lear himself, the hidden ego. According to John Wilders ;

“ King Lear repeatedly portrays the restless intolerance of the young towards the old. The powerlessness of virtue in the face of craft, the helpless vulnerability of old age, the fragility of the bonds which hold families and communities together, and the hidden nature of the supernatural beings,...,which govern our lives.” (7)

Thus, Lear gives away his kingdom and refused all visible manifestations of love by daughters. He begins to suffer from the absence of true love. He is deceived by the vanity of love which is not genuine. Unable to comprehend this painful reality, he retreats in a world fabricated by his frenzied imagination in which he is restored to his former power, arraigning Goneril and Regan, and, supported by the learned justicers ; poor Tom, and the fool sits in judgement over them. At this point, Lear resolves to be nothing. His removal from Lear as a king to poor Lear is gradual. This, in turn, reflects Shakespeare’s integrity to make a comparison between Lear and new comer, poor Tom in the second phase of the tragedy.

Nevertheless; Cordelia encounters her father again in Act IV, the old man, bearing the marks of his suffering, kneels before his daughter who humbly begs his blessing. Cordelia now is giving Lear what she has refused him in the beginning, namely, her total love and devotion. He receives the very love that she had

previously reserved for her husband. As if she were reminding him of her view of love, Cordelia says:

*O dear father,
It is thy business that I go about.
Therefore great France
My mourning and importun'd tears hath pitied.
No blown ambition doth arms incite,
But love, dear love, and our ag'd father's right.
(IV,iv,23-28)*

Lear's purgatorial suffering has been ended by reconciliation between father and his daughter. Johannes Allgaier affirms that , "if the subject of Shakespeare's drama had only been the conflict between Cordelia and Lear [love and justice] , it might have ended with the reconciliation between daughter and father."⁽⁸⁾

The conflict between love and justice is resumed in the second phase of tragedy. Shakespeare remains in control of the chaotic drama he has created by organizing characters and actions in a series of parallels and contrasts. In doing so, the second part of tragedy comes to enrich the subject matter of our title and at the same time to complete Shakespeare's dramatic actions.

The other major character who falls victim to his misjudgment is Gloucester. Like Lear, he is cheated by his illegitimate son, Edmund. At the beginning of the play, Edmund has recently returned from an absence of nine years, and at once contrives to win the inheritance that rightfully belongs to Edgar, the legitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester. By the use of forged letter, numerous slanders, and other

more delicate and sinister stratagems, Edmund convinces Gloucester that his beloved son Edgar is plotting to kill him. Now the threads of two stories are met. Like Cordelia, Edgar is banished from his home. He is described as traitor. This leads to disown and disinherit him.

The summary of this entire complex development reflects the fragile understanding between father and son which lead Gloucester to fall prey so easily to Edmund's plot. Therefore; the battle is declared between Gloucester who bars all escape routes and summons all the powers at his disposal to seek Edgar out and kill him. Edmund, on the other hand, informs Edgar that their father has flown into an inexplicable rage against him. He arranges for Edgar's escape from Gloucester's castle, and he urges Edgar to be armed against the very force that Edmund has encouraged Gloucester to unleash against him. Edmund poisons both Gloucester and Edgar minds. To avoid the confrontation with his father, Edgar "shifts into the madman's rags"⁽⁹⁾. He mortifies his body, ties his hair in knots, covers himself with grimes, and goes about in the guise of a blithering beggar.

However, the conjoint operation of love and justice is shown clearly in the actions of a parent and his child. Edgar's and Gloucester's pilgrimage does not tell us simply what happened or what will happen between a particular parent and a particular child. On the contrary, it shows "what happens when a child has been unjustly despised and rejected by a parent"⁽¹⁰⁾

Gloucester has fallen prey to more of Edmund's machinations. The poor old man has been blinded and cast out of his own castle to endure a terrible storm on the heath. Thus, the action of the play lurches forward from one unforeseen disaster to another. The three characters, Lear, Gloucester and Edgar are all subject to humiliations far more painful than they could have foreseen and in which they are left with nothing to sustain themselves but their own powers of endurance. Their

suffering are brought about by the callousness of their children which is released by their parents' credulousness and misplaced trust.

Ironically speaking, one of these efforts to save his father involves an astonishing deception. Edgar convinces the suicidal Gloucester that he has led him to the brink of a precipice, and after the poor man flops over into the ground while there no precipice at all.

The meeting of Edgar and his father shows the love which is founded upon justice is in action. Edgar is not sincere with his pitiful father. When he encounters the bleeding and blinded visage of his father, he overhears Gloucester repent of his wrath against him. At the very moment, Gloucester was blinded, he learned that Edgar has been true to him. He realizes that Edmund distorts Edgar's picture. Indeed Gloucester says within Edgar's overhearing, "Might I but live to see thee[Edgar] in my touch,/ I'd say I had eyes again"(IV,i,25-26). Gloucester, in other words, is quite aware of his error judgment and looks for salvation. He does not need to be guided through a long pilgrimage, tested, deceived, and "save from despair" through cunning stratagems. Instead, Gloucester needs only to "see Edgar", his beloved son.

Edgar has other plans for his father. Actually, he exploits his father for his personal aims. In the sense that he will not give his father an opportunity to make amends until he has revealed himself as worthy of his father's love. He will win his way back into his father's affections by offering proof of his merits. In other words, he will found love upon justice. Edgar will earn love in its old fashioned way. He declares:

Mark the high noises, and thyself bewray

When false opinion whose wrong thoughts defile thee

In thy just proof repeals and reconciles thee.

(III, vi, 118-120)

Edgar becomes egotistical and cruel. Thus, when he first sees his blinded father, he thinks only of himself. This egotism quickly gives way to cruelty. For Edgar, knowing that his father “would say that he had eyes again” if only he could see Edgar in his touch, nonetheless, remains disguised. He wants to capture the very moment of the chance to reveal himself. Edgar who seeks to earn love must wait until he is at the height of his power before he lays claim to it. This moment never comes and even when it comes, it was too late. So, the quest for complete worthiness as the condition of love can end only in death. This stratagem makes Edgar lose his dearest father. He is self-deceived and this is natural result for those who seek to earn parental love and make its attainment impossibly difficult.

Cordelia’s logical discussion of love and devotion to her father on demand and for a reward implies her earlier distinction between filial and conjugal love. In other words, the love between the two persons who are akin and the love between husband and wife who are not akin.

King Lear dramatizes these conundrums from the opening scene through to the end of the play. Thus, Cordelia’s opening speech to Lear in the first scene expresses her love for her father in precisely the terms of filial obligations that derive from the “greatest benefits” conferred upon children by their parent. “Good my lord/ You have begot me, loved me ,bred me.I/ Return those duties back as are right fit. / obey you, love you, and most honor you”.(I,i,97-100) .Yet by the end of the play Cordelia has more than “equalized” the relationship between herself and her father. A love in the highest of best sense between Lear and Cordelia involves works of supererogation by Cordelia that are the very image of charity, as Lear has become the image of patience. Her moving love for her father has come to exceed him for her, and this seems just and fitting in part because of the magnitude of the action.

The several tragic dynamics of love and justice continue even to the very end of the play. Edgar, as we have seen, has risen in both stature and understanding. He comes to recognize that in matters of filial love, at least, we should “speak what we feel” and so reveal ourselves to our parents instead of being driven forever by the need first to achieve what we ought to achieve in order to earn their admiration.

Unlike Edgar, Cordelia directly hears her father disown her, disclaiming all of his “paternal care, propinquity, and property of blood” (I,i,115-116). Yet throughout most of the play, greatly present in her absence from the action, Cordelia does what she resolved to do from the moment of her first aside: she loves unconditionally and she is silent. She loves simply, and she simply loves. She loves when love is not justified at all.

Unlike the imperfect reconciliation between Edgar and Gloucester, the one between Cordelia and her father is almost unspeakably beautiful.

We conclude, in the causes of Lear, Gloucester and their noblest children, that we have witnessed lifetimes unfolding before us. We learn from all these characters in action that love between parents and children cannot be equalized by loving “in proportion of the merit of the parties”. At times, there is no need for justice. The duty and love become one sometimes. Yet, parents must show justice in their dealings with their children, specially in that part of the parental task that involves discipline, but children must also practice justice toward their parents in that their characters are involved, along with blood and love, law, with their parents love for them.

Finally, the great question Lear forces upon us is that if the mingling of love and justice is necessary, is it necessarily tragic. Edgar’s and Lear’s great suffering would seem to suggest that the need to mingle justice and love in parenthood cannot help but lead to a wide variety of tragic outcomes. This happens only if there is no understanding between parents and their children.

Though the logic of both parental and filial love certainly involves matters of blood, law, and merit, it also involves matters of trust perception and sentiment.

Notes

1. T.S. Eliot, “ *Shakespearean Criticism : I. From Dryden to Coleridge*” , *A companion to Shakespeare studies*, ed. Harley Granville – Barker and G.B. Harrison (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1934) , p.288.
2. Samuel Johnson, Jonson’s “*Preface*” in *the plays of William Shakespeare I*, Xiv . (Chicage : University of Chicago Press, 1952), p.33 .
3. L.C. Knights, *Some Shakespeare Themes and An Approach to Hamlet* (London : Penguin Books Ltd. , Chatto and windus, 1960), P.13 .
4. S.C. Sen Gupta, *Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Calcutta : Oxford University Press, 1972), P. 117 .
5. A.C. Bradely , *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Greenwich, Conn. : Fawcett, 1966), PP. 266-67).

6. C.J. Sisson, *Shakespeare's Tragic Justice* (London : Methuen and CO., 1965), P.91.
7. John Wilders, *New Prefaces to Shakespeare* (London : Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988),p.208.
8. Johannes Allgaier, “ *Is King Lear an Antianthorifarian play?* *PMLA*, 83,1973, P. 1037.
9. GB. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (New York : Harcourt Brace Tovanovich Inc., 1968). All quotations will be to this edition .
10. Mark R. Schwen, “ *King Lear Beyond Reason: Love and Justice in the family*” < [www.http. king Lear Beyond Reason . Html](http://www.kingLearBeyondReason.com) > 1993 . P.4 .

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