HUMAN MALEVOLENCE AND PROVIDENCE IN KING LEAR

Humanity must perforce prey on itself,  
Like monsters of the deep. (4.2.49-50)

In 1903, Bertrand Russell captured the essence of the modern secular worldview in a well-known passage in “A Free Man’s Worship”:

Brief and powerless is man’s life; on him and all his race the slow, 
sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless 
of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. (115)

This materialist conception of man as a despairing orphan alone in an indifferent universe, still a staple theme in Shakespeare criticism, has always provided a double difficulty. On the one hand, there is the problem of aligning such a conception with the spiritual dimension in Shakespeare’s works, with the various ghosts and faeries and with the anthropology of sin, suffering and restoration, if not resurrection, employed in various plays. But on the other hand, at least for part of the last century, King Lear, taken alone, seemed like a possible exception, as perhaps Shakespeare’s momentary lapse into spiritual despair and rejection of Christianity, perhaps even his prophetic sense of the impending secular worldview. However, to Christian critics that view always seemed anachronistic in projecting a modern mindset onto a Jacobean play, and it clearly envisions an extraordinary break in theological continuity between Measure for Measure and the romances.

Here I shall argue that the play is not a theodicy, an indictment of divine justice of the sort that came in during the late seventeenth century and after, but instead an indictment of human malevolence, a theological position that was current during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. King Lear is indeed a naturalistic representation (as the secular critics have argued), but more precisely the postulated depiction of a pagan world placed against an implied theistic background and showing us the starkness of a world subject to human malevolence. Shakespeare inquires into the source of evil and points the finger of indictment, not at the gods whom he all but removes, but at human beings given over to passion and malice. Thus it is not the universe or the gods who are indifferent to the human suffering, as the secular critics would have it, but rather sinful humanity, who “must perforce prey on itself, like monsters of the deep” (4.2.49-50). Obviously,
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this concentration on human malevolence would lose focus with the direct intervention of the gods, and so Shakespeare found it aesthetically necessary to reduce the divine element to the laws and operations of natural theology, of time and nature. Rather than problematizing theistic faith, *King Lear* probes the optimistic humanist faith in human nature, as for example with Erasmus’s fragile anticipation in 1517 of “the near approach of a golden age,” so quickly shattered by the Reformation engendered by Luther and Henry VIII. He raises precisely the questions Voltaire and his descendents have never been able to answer regarding the origin of human evil, the problem of suffering, the basis of human dignity, the fragility of human dependency on relationships, all the problems that affront the Enlightenment belief in optimism, autonomy, tolerance, the brotherhood of man and individual freedom. It is no wonder that the play appeals to the secular mentality as tragedy par excellence, since this hypothetically pagan world of Lear reflects the widely accepted worldview described by Russell. In the light of the brutal excesses of the twentieth century, however, it ought to have relevance as a study in human evil, rather than as a challenge to divine justice. The Enlightenment optimistic view of human nature requires the source of evil to be found in God. But to locate evil in God forces an anachronistic interpretation of Shakespeare from a modern perspective well outside the Medieval-Renaissance theological context that located evil in the “hard hearts” of mankind (3.6.76-77).

Let us for the moment retrace some past lines of interpretation of *King Lear*. With considerable simplification, to be sure, we might describe theological discussion over the past forty years as divided into three general approaches, two of which proceeded from rationalistic assumptions that stand in the way of an accurate assessment of the theology of the play.² The optimistic Christian interpretation, pursued by such critics as G. Wilson Knight and Roy Battenhouse, made out the ending of the play to be redemptive, or at least purgative or regenerative in some sense, in that suffering leads to growth in self-knowledge, patience, humility and love (Elton 3). For example, Ivor Morris, following Granville-Barker and Bradley, sees Lear as achieving a renunciation of the world and experiencing the value of the bond of love:

Should we not be at least near the truth if we called this poem *The Redemption of King Lear*, and declared that the business of ‘the gods’ with him was neither to torment him, nor to teach him a ‘noble anger’, but to lead him to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and aim of life?³

The problem is, of course, that at the end of the play Cordelia is hanged and Lear dies in a delusional state of mind, something well short of any