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THE COINAGE OF MAN: KING LEAR AND CAMUS’ STRANGER

by
MORRIS WEITZ

No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am
the king himself. (King Lear, IV. vi, 83–34)

How much is a man worth? In spite of their vast differences, King Lear and L’Étranger I shall propose, offer the same ultimate answer: Nothing. Yet from this answer, Camus derives nothing; Shakespeare, everything. How this is done it is the task of philosophical literary criticism to discern. That it is done is of the utmost importance to philosophy itself in its perennial quest to determine the place of human values in the world.

It is generally admitted that King Lear is the most baffling of Shakespeare’s tragedies. Not that any of them is not full of difficulties but King Lear, unlike the others, even with the brilliant insights of its great critics from Coleridge to Bradley, has yielded no convincing reading. Elucidation of its characters, plot, imagery, symbolism, themes, or Elizabethan dramatic and ideational context has not explained the play or located what is central in it. Contemporary interpretations, which range from King Lear as a Christian tragedy of redemption to an early version of Endgame, leave the drama as baffling as, perhaps even more baffling than before.

Where so many critical angels have not feared to tread and some fools have dared to walk, perhaps there is room for one more trespasser. However, I may as well confess that I certainly do not know what King Lear means, what it is about, or even more soundly, what may be hypothesized as central and unifying in what I am convinced is a unified masterpiece, perhaps supreme in western dramatic art. This uncertainty is in what I shall have to say about the play.

In Hamlet, Hamlet proclaims to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason,
how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express
and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension,
how like a god: the beauty of the world: the paragon of
animals: and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

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THE COINAGE OF MAN: KING LEAR AND CAMUS' STRANGER

In *King Lear*, Lear asks Kent and the Fool about Edgar, disguised as a madman:

> Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated: thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off. off, you lendings! Come: unbutton hie. (The Arden Shakespeare edition, III. iv. 105–112; all quotations from *King Lear* are from this edition, edited by Kenneth Mure.)

With all of his suffering and self-laceration, Hamlet never reaches the depths of despair about the nature of man that Lear does. For Lear's descent is from man as god-like to man as naked animal. As the play develops, especially during the storm, both outside and in the hovel, Lear comes to see that man's accommodated virtues - his humanity - have no secure place in brute nature. In Elizabethan terms, Hamlet calls into question the truth of the Chain of Being and man's link in it; Lear, on the other hand, is forced to reject it forever as he explodes on his wheel of fire.

That man lives in a world without ultimate meaning - without God, gods, providence, moral laws - becomes the central fact of the Lear universe. Lear's own development - one can hardly call it progression - is from metaphysical kingship with all of its prerogatives supposedly guaranteed by nature to royal man who comes to realize that humanity is only his proclamation and no longer a true report on his place in nature.

There are many ostensible philosophical themes in *King Lear*: That good and evil are absolute and that though evil destroys good, it too is destroyed. Almost all of the characters and much of the plot seem to support this theme. Indeed it is remarkable how simply and completely good Cordelia, Kent, Gloucester, and perhaps Albany are, and how simply and totally evil Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Edmund, and Oswald are. And it is remarkable precisely because Shakespeare dissolves this simple, absolute good and evil into the ambivalence of all value in a morally indifferent universe.

Another theme, recently explored and exploited, is that of the contrast between sight and insight. Much of the imagery reinforces this contrast: and both Gloucester and Lear come to see - without their eyes - what they did not see before. But this contrast and its further contrasting theme of appearance and reality remain obscure until we can ascertain exactly what it is they come to see, just what the reality is behind the appearances they penetrate.
A third theme, that the world is ruled by justice—Albany’s “justi­cers” above (IV, ii, 79) — like Gloucester’s
As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’ Gods;
They kill us for their sport (IV, i, 36–37),
or even Edgar’s
Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;
Ripeness is all (V, ii, 9–11),
reduced to a platitude by Gloucester’s
And that’s true too (V, ii, 12).

though articulated in the play, does not in its intimations of moral order,
Fate, or Stoicism express the brute indifference of the Lear universe.
Nor, it seems to me can one read the play in Christian terms. Lear
comes to realize he has wronged Cordelia; and they finally are recon­ciled. But in spite of his
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness (V, iii, 10–11),
or even his final
Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there! (V, iii, 310–311),
and although Lear dies happy, he is hardly redeemed or saved in any
Christian sense. Lear’s
Never, never, never, never, never! (V, iii, 308)
shatters everything. And the play ends with Edgar’s
The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (V, iii, 323–326)

This, too, is obituary, not rebirth.

Philosophically central in King Lear — an important if not central
strand of the whole drama — is man’s worth in a morally indifferent
universe. Shakespeare’s answer, I propose, is that man’s worth resides in
his commitment to his humanity: a commitment without any metaphysical
justification; indeed, sub specie aeternitatis, it is a complete super­fluity. In the imagery of the play, his worth is an accommodation, a piece
raiment, not needed, but deeply required if man is to rise above the
beasts or is not to become "like monsters of the deep" (Albany, IV. ii, 49), preying on themselves. Human values are luxuries without which human life is impossible. Man mints his own values. But his currency is backed by no standard in the natural world, only by his own regal proclamation. For him, his coinage is everything; for nature, it is worthless, nothing.

Lear first states this philosophical theme of the place of human value in an indifferent universe in his rejoinder to Goneril and Regan as they proceed to strip him of his retinue.

Con.  Hear me, my Lord.
What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?

Reg.  What need one?

Lear.  O! reason not the need; our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs.
Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous.
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true
need, —

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need! (II. iv, 262–273)

Lear reiterates this theme of human values in an indifferent world throughout the rest of the play after his final encounter with his two pelican daughters in Act II. One example is his refusing to tax the elements with unkindness during the storm on the heath. Kindness and cruelty, like all virtues and vices, he perceives, are human attributes, utterly foreign to nature's provenance. But his most provocative statement of it comes in Act IV when, broken and mad, he enters, ranting

No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am
the king himself. (IV, vi, 83–84)

Some scholars annotate this as Lear refusing press-money for military service. But the line cries out something more. Lear's utterance here is a clear reminder of his royal prerogative, joined with its immediate overtones of man as sovereign over his own economy of values. As I read
the line in its context of Lear's discovery or insight and in its wider context of the theme of man's worth in a bare universe, what Lear proclaims is that as king, it is his prerogative to coin money; what he coins is therefore genuine. To counterfeit, to melt him down, to touch him for coining, consequently, is at once necessarily to acknowledge his genuineness, his true coin. Thus, in human terms, to reduce him to a bare, forked animal is already to recognize his humanity.

So Lear sees – Shakespeare sees – that the counterfeit is not coequal with the genuine but parasitical on it. Hence to reduce man to mere animal is not to destroy him but to accept man in order to reduce him. Shakespeare also implies here that good and evil are not coequal either; rather, that good is man's commitment to value which evil can only reject and violate but cannot deny and destroy since evil must acknowledge good in order to exist at all. There are, then, good and evil in the Lear universe. But like the coinage of man, they rest on human prerogative, with no standard in nature to back them up. Evil cannot exist without good any more than the counterfeit can without the genuine. Nevertheless, value, like money, is, from nature's standpoint, utterly worthless. In King Lear, nothing ultimately comes from nothing. But in between – in man – everything comes from nothing.

To return to the play: in King Lear, I want now to argue. Shakespeare dramatizes this paradoxical philosophical theme of the metaphysical superfluity of human value and yet the absolute requirement of value for man and society in the specific theme of filial gratitude.

Here is Lear on its negation, filial ingratitude:

(1) To Goneril

Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous, when thou show'st thee in a child,
Than the sea-monster. (I, iv, 267–269)

(2) To the Fool

Monster Ingratitude! (I, v. 40)

(3) Regan. I am glad to see your Highness.

Lear. Regan I thing you are; I know what reason
I have to think so: if thou shouldst not be glad
I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb,
Sepulchring an adultress. (II, iv, 129–133)

(4) To Regan, about returning to Goneril

Never, Regan.
She hath abated me of half my train;
Look'd black upon me, struck me with her tongue. 
Most serpent-like, upon the very heart. 
All the stor'd vengeances of Heaven fall 
On her ingrateful top! (II. iv, 159–164)

(5) Again, to Regan

thou better know'st

The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;
Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endow'd. (II. iv, 179–183)

(6) To the storm on the heath

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!
Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
That makes ingrateful man! (III. ii, 1–9)

(7) To Kent, before the hovel

Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm
Invades us to the skin: so 'tis to thee;
But where the greater malady is fix'rl,
The lesser is scarce felt. Thou 'ldst shun a bear;
But if thy flight lay toward the roaring sea,
Thou 'ldst meet the bear i' th' mouth. When the mind's free
The body's delicate: this tempest in my mind
Both from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there — filial ingratitude!
Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to 't? But I will punish home:

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No. I will weep no more. In such a night
To shut me out? Pour on; I will endure.
In such a night as this? O Regan, Goneril!
Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave
all, —
O! that way madness lies; let me shun that;
No more of that. (III. iv. 6–22)

(8) To the Fool and Kent about Edgar, disguised as a madman
Didst thou give all to thy daughters?
And art thou come to this? (III. iv. 48–49)

What! has his daughters brought him to this
pass? (III. iv. 63)

and

Death traitor! nothing could have subdu’d nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! ’twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters. (III. iv. 70–75)

(9) Albany to Goneril

What have you
done?
Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform’d?
A father, and a gracious aged man. (IV. ii. 38–40)

and, finally,

(10) Kent to a Gentleman about Lear’s shame in meeting Cordelia

A sovereign shame so elbows him: his own
unkindness,
That stripp’d her from his benediction, turn’d her
To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights
To his dog-hearted daughters: these things sting
His mind so venomously that burning shame
Detains him from Cordelia. (IV. iii. 43–48)
That Lear is obsessed by filial ingratitude throughout the drama is indisputable. Quantitatively, it is the most articulated theme of the play. But, more importantly, it is as generative of the plot as any other element. It drives Lear from his two older daughters out into the storm and to his ensuing madness. It moves France and Cordelia to invade Britain which, in turn, precipitates the blinding of Gloucester and then the deaths of Cordelia and Lear. Also, or anyhow so it seems to me, it makes dramatic sense of the first scene, especially the love contest. Read as a final, formal request — in reality, a royal command — for an expression of filial gratitude from his three daughters, a request-command which Lear accepts as an integral constituent of kingship and fatherhood in his universe of absolute values, Lear's contest becomes his last official royal proclamation, scarcely the wilful, stupid act of a selfish, vain, puerile old man, as many critics and actors have conceived it. Interpreted as such an act of absolute royal command, sanctioned by a universe that justifies it, his banishment of Cordelia, though extreme, is understandable. Her

Nothing, my lord,

followed by her

Happily, 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. 100-104).

is a sardonic rebuke. Lear's punishment is of course extreme and foolish — as events show it to be — but it is consistent with his absolute commitment to royal kingship and human fatherhood in a value-structured universe.

King Lear, then, as I see it, begins with Lear's conception of filial gratitude — one among absolute values — as a need that can be reasoned, that is, that can be justified as a requirement built into the nature of things. His whole development — and here we can call it progression — is from this need as reasoned requirement through this need as an illusion (especially in the hovel when he sees man as unaccommodated animal) to his final insight that filial gratitude, indeed, all human values, cannot be reasoned or justified. Humanity, itself, he sees, is man's royal proclamation and commitment, with no metaphysical justification. The difference between man and animal, brutal and brute, kin and kind rests on tenuous and ephemeral projection, no longer on universal nature which sanctions nothing. Lear says at the beginning.
Nothing will come of nothing: speak again. (I. i. 90)

But as the play ends, he intimates and we see: “Except everything.”

In *King Lear*, then, Shakespeare dramatizes, through the specific theme of filial gratitude, the proclamatory rather than metaphysical role of human values in a neutral world. As a philosophical theme it explains much of the play. But, we must now ask, does it tie up with all of the constituent elements of the play? Is it an integral or maybe even the central, controlling element of the play? As I have tried to show, it explains Lear’s action, much of the plot, some of the imagery, almost all of Lear’s (critically neglected) powerful, staccato, non-metaphorical imperatives, such as

Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill! (IV. vi. 189),
as well as the traditionally attributed themes of sight and insight, good versus evil, and appearance versus reality.

How does the theme of unreasoned, unjustifiable value in an indifferent universe relate to the sub-plot: to the pristine goodness of Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar, and to the absolute evil of Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund; to the suffering and moral regeneration of Lear; and to the tragic in the play?

Much of the Gloucester-Edgar-Edmund sub-plot parallels the main Lear plot. In both, filial gratitude carries the major burden; in both, there is deception, self-deception, and final insight. The great difference is that although both die undeceived and reconciled with their true kin, Gloucester never learns what Lear does, which applies to Gloucester, too: that filial gratitude, required for human life, is an utter metaphysical superfluity. Edgar’s words on his father’s passing

I ask’d his blessing, and from first to last
Told him my pilgrimage: but his flaw’d heart,
Alack, too weak the conflict to support!
’Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly (V. iii. 195–199),
as even Lear’s last imperative – dare I call it proclamation? –
Do you see this? Look on her. look, her lips,
Look there, look there! (V. iii. 310–311),
must be read in the finality of
Never, never, never, never, never! (V. iii. 308)

That both Gloucester and Lear burst smilingly contradicts nothing about the fundamental philosophical fact of the Lear universe, that nothing comes from nothing, except all that is human, including their last moment of ecstasy.
Good and evil are not coequal in *King Lear*. Instead good is primary and evil dependent on it. Nor is good as primary a natural fact in a value-infused universe. Of course, Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar are good, and Regan, Goneril, Cornwall, and Edmund are evil; but their evil is a violation and, through violation as counterfeit, an acknowledgement of the genuine, primary character of good. However, since good is proclamatory, hence metaphysically superfluous, in *King Lear*, the goodness of Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar is like filial gratitude to Lear: an unjustifiable requirement for human as against animal life, but having no place in a universe that indifferently destroys both good and evil. There is thus no good or evil in the Lear universe except that human beings project them so—in their ephemeral commitments to their values or to their counterfeits, which vanish forever as nature swallows them one by one.

Lear’s suffering and moral regeneration directly relate to filial gratitude, and to its emotional and intellectual consequences. Goneril and Regan drive him to madness through ingratitude. And Cordelia forgives him his own parental ingratitude, the other side of filial ingratitude. This brings him peace, as he expresses it in his poignant transcendency of suffering:

*Come, let’s away to prison;*
*We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage:*
*When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,*
*And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,*
*And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh*
*At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues*
*Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too,*
*Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out;*
*And take upon ’s the mystery of things,*
*As if we were Gods’ spies: and we’ll wear out,*
*In a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones*
*That ebb and flow by th’ moon.* (V. iii, 8–18)

Lear’s royal command is finally obeyed. But moral and religious order are not restored. Only his human commitment has been met. Lear has been touched, but not for coining. Like Job, Lear has solved the problem of evil, through Cordelia and without God.

Finally, what is tragic in *King Lear*? That Lear, Cordelia, and Gloucester die? That good is destroyed by evil? That Lear regenerates himself? That the play purges us through pity and fear? Why not?—Any of these will do, as will any of the other traditional theories of the tragic.
However, just as securely tragic is the vision of the play that man coins his own values in a world in which he and his currency are as ultimately worthless as the metal and paper it is printed on. And echoing throughout, even more distinctly than in *The Tempest*, is the idea of the poet as the coiner of words, proclaiming the worth of his own currency, that can be neither melted down nor reasoned, yet which gives human life its tenuous significance even though its value comes to naught in a universe ultimately without discourse.

Camus’ *L’Étranger*, like *King Lear* at least in one of its major strands, dramatizes the philosophical problem of human worth in an indifferent universe. Through Monsieur Meursault, who has no given first (Christian?) name, hence is Everyman, Camus presents the ideal existentialist hero, that is, the man who defines his own existence only when confronted by death. A protagonist of nothing, no idealist, not even a thinker. only a seemingly ordinary guy, forced by economic circumstances to place his mother in an old-people’s home and to earn a living as a clerk, Meursault’s total involvement is with his present and immediate future: in ordinary food and friends, in ordinary sex and swimming, in everyday sun and shade, but with no greed or even conscious commitment to these as his philosophy of life. Although he is without ordinary responses to death and marriage and ambition, he is normal enough to his friends and to those, like Raymond Sintès or Salamano, who make minimal demands upon him. It is one of these demands, to help Raymond get even in a sordid affair, that prepares the way for his undoing when, during a beach party, for no reason at all, except that “And just then it crossed my mind that one might fire, or not fire – and it would come to absolutely the same thing” (Vintage edition, tr., Stuart Gilbert, p. 72; all quotations are from this edition), he kills a man, Meursault is duly arrested, interrogated, tried, and condemned. As the trial proceeds, we are made to realize that he is being prosecuted and finally punished not only for killing a man but also for being “an inhuman monster wholly without a moral sense” (p. 120).

In prison, awaiting his execution, Meursault poses the problem of inevitability. He is guilty and must die. The machine in which he is a cog works, and the only consolation he finds is that it should work efficiently. The prison chaplain enters to offer him a different kind of certainty in God and immortality which he rejects in an “ecstasy of joy and rage” (p. 151). Completely purged after this incident, he summarizes and justifies his whole life:

> Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well why... What difference could they make to me, the deaths of others, or a mother’s love, or
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his (the chaplains) God: or the way a man decides to live, the fate he thinks he chooses... (p. 152).

Meursault’s epiphany ends on a Spinozistic rapture: “for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe” (p. 154). Everything, he finally sees, comes to nothing.

Meursault is an existentialist hero, but L’Étranger is not an existentialist novel, unless existentialism includes in its mixed bag the nihilism which is central in that novel. For relentlessly nihilistic it is.

With the rigor of a deductive system Camus in L’Étranger demonstrates that nothing ultimately, hence derivatively, matters. The basic premise of his argument is this: That we live in a world without ultimate meaning. This premise is true and its acceptance the mark of authenticity. As a consequence nothing makes any difference, not even our present or immediately future gratifications. The second premise is that most of us refuse to accept this truth. Instead we live as if there were something significant in love, religion, institutions. Because of this self-deception, this demand for inauthenticity, we ruthlessly punish those who attack our game of self-deception or who, like Meursault, will not play the game. Outsiders will not be tolerated. Even so, the conclusion stares us in the face: We are all of us condemned to a meaningless universe, hence as “guilty” as Meursault, and our only hope is his — that the machinery of execution will work without a hitch. Thus, Meursault becomes each one of us, stripped of illusion, thereby authenticated as a bare, forked animal, awaiting annihilation in a benignly indifferent world. We are all outsiders, in a world that accommodates none of our illusions, whether we play the game or not.

Further theorems follow. It does not matter if one fires or not. There is no difference between killing a man and swatting a fly. Nor is there any real distinction between remorse and vexation, as Meursault suggests to his interrogator. Thus, man’s worth in an indifferent universe, even as a tenuous, ephemeral proclamation, is all illusion, adding up to zero.

As appalling as Camus’ philosophy is in L’Étranger, as magnificently as it is worked into the novel, as hard-headed and courageously honest as it seems, and as rigorous as the argument for nihilism appears, there is it seems to me one further theorem that Camus does not bring into the novel but which is implicit in it, especially in Meursault’s integrity, and which, once deduced, breaks its back entirely. Nihilism, let us assume, is the true view about man in his universe. Nevertheless, we may ask, why should we accept it as our philosophy? What difference does it make whether we accept it or not? Why play the nihilistic game rather than the conventional one? Without some commitment to truth as a
value, however superfluous in the universe, and without some commitment to the rejection of falsehood, nihilism simply cannot be urged. Once urged, however, it is seen for what it is – a counterfeit of Shakespeare’s true coin in King Lear.