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LEAR AND NATURE
by
MARSHALL COHEN

Professor Weitz characterizes "the Lear universe" in a number of ways that bear elucidating and distinguishing. For instance, he thinks that it lacks "ultimate meaning" and he often takes this to mean that the distinction between good and evil is somehow undermined, or called into question, by the play. Thus, he says that Shakespeare "dissolves this simple, absolute good and evil into the ambivalence of all value in a morally indifferent universe". But, in fact, the distinction between good and evil is rigorously maintained throughout the play, and the play's moral assumptions and judgments are far from ambivalent.

The idea of nature provides the key to the distinction between good and evil in the play and the members of Lear's party are plainly distinguished from the members of Edmund's party by their attitude toward nature. Cordelia, Edgar, and Kent accept the traditional conception of nature and uniformly act according to its precepts, while Edmund, Goneril, and Regan reject this conception and (short of Edmund's recantation) consistently act in a way that is unnatural according to its standards. Coleridge does them no injustice when he says of Goneril and Regan that they are "the only pictures of the unnatural in Shakespeare - the pure unnatural." The contrast between Cordelia, on the one hand, and Goneril and Regan, on the other is, then, simple and absolute.

Of course, this view is not universally accepted. Attempts have been made to find fault with Cordelia (the appeal to a 'bond' is found chilly and unforthcoming) and Peter Brook, in his celebrated production of the play, sought to generate sympathy for Goneril, and perhaps even to excuse her behavior, by accepting her charge that Lear's knights are "disordered, deboshed, and bold" (I. iv. 232). But these arguments are generally unpersuasive. Lear himself shows the propriety of Cordelia's usage (at II. iv. 173), and we have every reason to accept his own characterization of his train (at I. iv. 254-257). Besides, arguments of this sort are not put forward by Professor Weitz to substantiate his claim.

To be sure not all the characters are simply good or evil. Lear himself is not. The play may be regarded as, in some degree, a traditional psychomachia, and we observe the forces of good and evil contend for Lear's soul. But this kind of complexity does not, in itself, generate ambiguity or ambivalence. For it is plain enough which of these impulses, and which of their manifestations, are good and which evil. No one doubts
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that Kent is right when he tells Lear that, in rejecting Cordelia, he "dost evil" (I, i, 166), or that, in doing so, he "falls from bias of nature", as Glouster says (I, ii. 108). This nature, with its clear biases, provides the basis for the decisive moral judgments that the play encourages. And these moral judgments are incompatible with the "ambivalence of all values" that Professor Weitz finds in the Lear universe.

Sometimes, Professor Weitz's claim appears to be, not that the play undermines the distinction between good and evil but that it cannot find any "standard in nature" that supports, or grounds, this distinction. The difficulty here is, I believe, that he identifies nature with "brute" nature, and fails to see that there are two, radically opposed, conceptions of nature at work in the play. It may be that there is no standard in "brute" nature that supports the distinction between good and evil, but it does not follow that there is no such standard in the traditional conception of nature. Professor Weitz's phrase "brute" nature is, for a variety of reasons, a highly appropriate characterization of the Nature to which Edmund appeals in his soliloquy, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" (I, ii. 1-22). This Nature does not, in fact, provide a metaphysical grounding for any of the received moral notions. Indeed, it is invoked by Edmund to call such notions into doubt. Fine word, "legitimate" he declares, and he refuses to stand in "the plague of custom" or to be deprived by the "curiosity of nations". But it is a very different Nature to which Lear appeals in his soliloquy, "Hear, Nature, hear" (I, iv. 266-280). For Lear's Nature prescribes precisely those modes of behavior that Edmund rejects. Its requirements are alluded to later, in Lear's address to Regan: "Thou better know'st/The offices of nature, bond of childhood, Effects of courtesy, duties of gratitude" (II, iv. 172-174), he says. These are, however, precisely the "offices" that Edmund has already dismissed as "plagues" and "curiosities" and that Regan, like Goneril, refuses to honor. Such offices are unprotected by the law to which Edmund's services are bound, but from the play's point of view they are the very essence of nature and of law.

It is these varying conceptions of nature (with their associated conceptions of reason, society and need) that are examined in Lear's great speech "O reason not the need!" (II, iv. 259-281) If we understand human nature and human need as Goneril and Regan would have us understand them "Man's life is cheap as beast's". But Lear's conception of nature incorporates a notion of need that includes man's need for accommodation. Unaccommodated man, as he tells Edgar, is no more than a poor, forked animal (no more than a part of "brute" nature). On Lear's view man needs raiment, and patience, if he is to be fully natural. And Lear comes to wear fresh garments, to show patience, after he suffers that
purgatorial convulsion of nature – the madness on the heath, the tempest in his mind.

In my view, then, Nature in Lear's, as opposed to Nature in Edmund's sense, does provide "a standard of behavior", and a norm of human development, and it is not correct to say that human values are simply the king's coinings, that they are royal Stevensonian proclamations. Indeed, I believe that Professor Weitz misconstrues the very passage on which he bases his interpretation. Lear claims that "they" cannot touch him for coinage and what he means is that, since he is king, what he coins is genuine. But these coins are by no means the symbols of all value and, besides, and more importantly, their value derives, ultimately, from the King's place in nature, "Nature's above art in this respect" (IV, vi. 86) Lear observes in the very next line, relying on this fact. The validity of all standards, like the value of the king's coinings, is ultimately guaranteed by nature. This is the play's assumption.

As against Professor Weitz I would argue, then, that the play maintains a rigorous distinction between good and evil, and that it finds support for this distinction in the traditional conception of nature. But it does not follow from this that goodness inevitably triumphs, and if this is what Professor Weitz means when he says that values have "no secure place" in the Lear universe, or that this universe indifferently destroys good and evil, one can agree with him. The death of Cordelia, no matter how it is mitigated by the allegorical quality of her presence, or complicated by the ubiquitous suggestion that she is endowed with a Christlike nature, is humanly unacceptable, and morally inexplicable. (For this reason I have sometimes been tempted to think that the play illustrates the maxim, Ask a silly question, get a silly answer.) The dramatic impact of Cordelia's death is surely evaded by a critic like Maynard Mack when he remarks that "the meaning of our fate is not in what becomes of us, but in what we become". The meaning of Cordelia's fate is profoundly affected by what becomes of her, both for the characters who survive her, and for the audience that witnesses Lear's final entry with Cordelia in his arms. In the Lear universe the fate of the virtuous is precarious, and the remittance of pain brief. One accepts, simply as true, Kent's observation about Lear: "He hates him/That would upon the rack of this tough world/Stretch him out longer." (V, iii. 314-316)

But, if we cannot ignore what becomes of the characters (and it is worth remembering that if the existence of the virtuous is precarious the self-destruction of the wicked is shown to be inevitable), it would be equally distorting simply to ignore "what they become" or, as in the case of Cordelia (who doesn't "become" anything), what they are. Goneril may not be worth the rude dust the wind blows in her face, but the question of
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one's worth is insisted upon in the play (hence the resonance Professor Weitz hears in Lear's remark about coining) and there can be no doubt about the worth of Kent, of Albany or Edgar, of Lear or Cordelia. Lear's painful acquisition of self-knowledge, his rejection of pomp for solicitude and rashness for patience, his capacity to achieve natural ripeness and to endure, all these are regarded as profound and secure achievements by the play. Above all, Cordelia's faithfulness to her bond, and the gracious efficacy with which she overcomes the unnaturalness between parent and child, are felt to have a significance and value that the tragic catastrophe does not dissipate. After Lear Shakespeare turned his attention from tragedy and a constant theme is the reconciliation of fathers and daughters. We feel the force of the Gentleman's claim that Cordelia "redeems nature" — and take it for a "true report".

1. For an elaboration of the distinction between the two conceptions of nature see John F. Danby's Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature. Despite my great admiration for this work I am not wholly persuaded by Danby's identification of these concepts of nature with those of Hooker and Hobbes.

2. Professor Weitz's claim that in the Lear universe man's worth is an accommodation, a piece of raiment, "not needed, but deeply required" is not strictly accurate — for in this speech Lear insists that this deep requirement is a "true need".

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