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“For the Worst or the Best, the Psyche is a Mess”: Good and Evil in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

Over 50 years ago, Dr. Philip Zimbardo conducted his famous Stanford Prison Experiment— an infamous experiment where assigned “guards” —who were given sunglasses for anonymity, labels of power, and cell numbers to degrade “inmates” to— took their acting roles too far and stripped, cursed at, and traumatized innocent prisoners in a definitively cruel way. From this, Zimbardo concluded that concealing identity, bestowing power, and fostering dehumanization can make good people do evil things. But it seems as though Shakespeare has the true claim-to-fame to this experiment, having conducted it over 400 years ago in his play *King Lear*. A psychological tragedy at its crux, *King Lear* declares that man tends towards evil when presented with opportunities to deceive, seize power, and dehumanize— particularly in the figures of Regan and Edmund. But, beyond Zimbardo, *King Lear* presents the converse too: the conventionally moral characters — Edgar and Cordelia— are most compassionate when they are humbled, recognize the dignity of others, and foster transparency. By presenting the weight of situational factors on character, Shakespeare wants us to preempt the near occasion of evil out of fear of what we could become, and in hopes of what we should become.

By showing the different paths yet similar ends of Edmund and Regan, Shakespeare emphasizes that a plot of deception, followed by a reception of power, and concluded with a degradation of human dignity can turn anyone evil. Regan’s path begins first when playing her father’s love-game to earn his land— competing against Gonnerill’s flattery, Regan claims that

Gonnerill “names my very deed of love. / Only she comes too short”, since Regan is “alone felicitate / In [his] highness’ love” (Shakespeare 1.1.66-67, 70-71). Regardless of how absurd this kindergarten-one-uppery is to the audience, Regan recognizes how desirable her words are to Lear’s ears given his deprecating condition, and she deceptively responds as such to acquire half of his kingdom. Consequently, Regan uses her acquired power to affirm her standing, particularly in the context of belittling her father– with her sister, she rips apart her father’s ego by fake-pleaing “I pray you, father, being weak, seem so... You will return and sojourn with my sister, / Dismissing half your train, come then to me” (Shakespeare 2.4.194, 196-197). Issuing Lear this conditional invitation and eventually ripping him of his whole train, Regan rudely sets Lear in the out-group, attributing to him a lowliness and impoverishedness that he didn’t anticipate. Trace Regan to any instance forward where she is confronted with a character degraded of dignity –like Gloucester– and the fullness of her cruelty paints itself. Labeled as a traitor for conspiring with France, Gloucester is ripped of his dignity– his testimony is disregarded, his body is binded, and his eyes are gouged out– leaving Regan in a position of visual anonymity, corporal power, and vindictive dominion, from which she acts with sheer bitterness: “Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell / His way to Dover” (Shakespeare 3.7.92-93). Even before a hapless and helpless man, Regan lashes out due to how lawfully, emotionally, and morally inconsequential her actions are to her fallen self.

Edmund’s primary route to evil begins with framing Gloucester as a traitor before Cornwall to gain status. Acting victim to circumstance, Edmund professes that “This is the letter which he spoke of, which proves him an intelligent party to the advantages of France. O heavens, that this treason were not, or not I the detector”– to which Cornwall responds by taking him into the powerful circle stationed within Gloucester’s walls (Shakespeare 3.5.8-10). By deceptively

fabricating loyalty and innocence, Edmund gains the trust of Cornwall and the attraction of Lear's cruel daughters. Playing to these sisters' delight, Edmund further secures his power through their favor and objectifies them, proclaiming that "To both these sisters have I sworn my love... Which of them shall I take?... Neither can be enjoyed / If both remain alive" (Shakespeare 5.144-46). He reduces the dignity of the sisters to be mere objects for his political and emotional gain, and from there, he continues with his flattery to obtain what he wants and wreck the family further: Regan bestows Edmund with all her share, saying "the walls is thine. / Witness the world that I create thee here / My lord and master," to which Gonerill promptly poisons Regan in envy (Shakespeare 5.3.70-73). As a result of his passionate desires and his positioning to satisfy them with little consequence, Edmund, already having built up a character of deceit, falls straight into a usatory and apathetic approach which perpetuates sibling conflict and manipulates these women without their knowing. By even bringing together Edmund and Regan romantically, Shakespeare forwardly compares these two characters in their shared deceptiveness, disregard, and dominion to depict the universality of their recipe for evil. Moreover, as Benjamin Spencer explains, "between the aggrieved inhumanity of Edmund and the impulsive bestiality of Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall, much of the range and character of modern barbarism is to be found" (Spencer 305-306). As recognized by Spencer, Shakespeare's presentation of the route to malice across many characters of varying brutality and slyness also functions to allegorize the play to our real-life tendencies towards cruelty— further insinuating how Shakespeare wants his play to educate our future confrontations with evil.

Given Shakespeare's niftiness in his character construction, it's no surprise that he starkly contrasts his recipe for evil through Regan and Edmund with their sibling counterparts, Cordelia and Edgar, to provide a route towards compassion— basing one's self, valuing others, and

empathizing to allow for genuineness. From the onset, Cordelia humbles herself in the same scenario that Regan deceives Lear—when provided the opportunity to flatter her father to inherit the kingdom, Cordelia boldly pronounces “Nothing” to her father’s ask of love, clarifying that “I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less” (Shakespeare 1.1.84, 87-88).

Aware of her father’s eruptiveness given his condition, Cordelia not only neglects her share in the kingdom but also subjugates herself to expulsion out of obedience to the natural order of the family. Exiled until the end of the play, Cordelia’s speechlessness before her father for the sake of moral righteousness puts her in a place to show great filial piety beside Lear’s bed. Distraught by Lear’s deprecating condition yet making every effort to connect with him, Cordelia calls out to Lear and inquires “How does my royal lord? How fares your majesty?”—returning lost dignity to his name (Shakespeare 4.6.41). Cordelia displays a distinct daughter-like care towards Lear in her royal praise, contrasting the sole neglect Lear has felt since his division of the kingdom.

Betty Stuart likewise confirms this perception of Cordelia’s uniqueness of love, especially as Cordelia shows “such devotion when none is deserved”: here, Cordelia “shows Lear that she is and has all along been what a daughter to whom a father need not prove himself” (Stuart 172).

Corroborating Stuart’s claim, by loving her father regardless of what he has done – and not done— for her, Cordelia displays how her exiled condition, counterintuitively, does not make her unconditional love more difficult, but rather more accessible through empathy and shared suffering. After exalting him, Cordelia emphasizes the question “Sir, do you know me?” until Lear proclaims “For, as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia” (Shakespeare 4.6.45, 66-67). By ensuring that her identity and character as Lear’s daughter are made known to him, Cordelia enables herself to pour out filial love in its deepest expression: joyous yet somber weeping in front of a disabled Lear who cannot handle it—“I pray, weep not” (Shakespeare

4.6.71). In only the slightest act of love –crying–, Cordelia acts precisely contrary to how Regan does before the figure of the frail-old-man: whilst Regan chastised blind Gloucester and sent him away from her, Cordelia blinds herself in her tears to express her compassion to her father in his suffering.

Edgar follows a similar route in compassion, with the exception that he does not make his identity known due to the circumstances of his plight. As a result of Edmund’s plot to frame Edgar, Edgar is forced to base himself to the status of a bedlam beggar and ensure that “Edgar I nothing am” to evade Edmund and Gloucester (Shakespeare 2.4.21). Although his self-humbling wasn’t voluntary, Edgar is nonetheless belittled in stature to Poor Tom– hunted and powerless– readying him for empathy and companionship to others of poor fortune– as soon happens with his father. With his eyes gouged and left only to smell his way to Dover, Gloucester is picked up by Edgar as his guide, and Edgar returns to him his dignity and authority, calling out “Bless thee, master” (Shakespeare 4.1.38). In self-moderation out of concern for Gloucester’s health, Edgar dignifies Gloucester in an honorable way without acknowledging his own sonship, still showing his compassion and respect for an authority in his life –his father. Adjacent to Cordelia’s bed-side scene, Edgar’s equivalent appears when he tricks Gloucester into a new appreciation of life. Faking agreement with Gloucester’s desire to suicide, Edgar brings Gloucester to a short drop-off from which he tells Gloucester that “the fishermen [below] that walk upon the beach / Appear like mice”, allowing Gloucester to experience pre-suicide catharsis (Shakespeare 4.5.17-18). Although Edgar seems to cause trauma, he perfectly executes the awakening of spirit that he knows Gloucester needs, and he takes advantage of the situation to introduce himself anew and aghast as a heartfelt-plebeian, helping Gloucester appreciate the overlooked truth that “Thy life’s a miracle” (Shakespeare 4.5.55). Experiencing ostracization first-hand, honoring

Gloucerster in name, and presenting himself in a genuine way, Edgar sets himself up to love Gloucester by leading him to cherish his own life once again, albeit with psychological means. Brought together, the figures of Cordelia and Edgar show that, when we bring ourselves down to eye-level or below with those around us, and make clear our common human nature, we set ourselves up to empathize, show compassion, and love.

With reference to *King Lear* in “The Everest of Poems”, Charles Harrison heralds that “Shakespearean roles generally are not psychologically complex” (Harrison 669). And, in truth, Shakespeare’s claim of what drives people to be good or evil within *King Lear* is quite simple: power, concealment, and depreciation of others creates villains, whilst humility, transparency, and praise of others creates heroes. Within *King Lear*, “what we can not doubt is that the distinction between good and evil is real, imperative, and persistent” – but what we also can’t doubt is how equally controllable good and evil are presented to be (Harrison 670). Much like how Zimbardo found his circumstances to affect the victimization and villainization of his participants, Shakespeare’s manipulation of circumstances to create extremes of both good and evil serve one purpose for his audience for certain: we ought to watch out where we find ourselves, as our circumstances will likely change us, for better or for worse.

Works Cited

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