King Lear and the "Deadly Sins"

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It may seem strange to speak of sin as a dominant theme in *King Lear*, a drama set in a pre-Christian, polytheistic world in which the gods are found to be inscrutable and humanity, good and bad, is doomed to suffer. In such a world, of course, a sense of sin may exist. There is only necessary man's belief in the divinities as givers of law divine or moral and man's awareness of guilt when he breaks their laws. Indeed, in *King Lear* the hero himself utters memorably, "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning." (III. ii. 58-9)[1] Moreover, references to certain of the *Old Testament* Ten Commandments, notably "Honor your father and your mother. . ." and " You shall not commit adultery," are implicit or direct in some of Lear's strongest speeches.[2] Certain anachronistic Christian references have been pointed out in the play. Lear clearly has a strong moral sense, as he frequently invokes the gods to punish his cruel daughters in particular and sinful mankind in general. In fact, the other major sympathetic characters as well--Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, Gloucester, Albany--all call upon the gods to aid goodness and deal justly with evil. A. C. Bradley has pointed out that in *King Lear* "References to religious or irreligious beliefs and feelings are more frequent than is usual in Shakespeare's tragedies, as frequent perhaps as in his final plays."[3]

If, in spite of such evidence and testimony, we still find it difficult to accept a sense of sin as a strong effect of *King Lear*, we have good reason for our difficulty. Besides the question of the gods' concern for moral man, we are met in the play with evil as a reality that is powerful, brutal, and

remorseless in the villainous characters. (In the last speeches of the dying Edmund, I hear regret but little or no remorse.) And the fact that the good characters so often petition the gods for help that is not forthcoming or that comes too late against exceptionally evil foes makes us think not of the presence of sin, which deserves punishment and repentance, but of the stark reality of evil and of the dark question of the gods as providential. *King Lear*, says Bradley again, "is certainly the most terrible picture that Shakespeare painted of the world. In no other of his tragedies does humanity appear more pitiably infirm or more hopelessly bad."[4] Surely the many hateful words and deeds of Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund, characters representing several families, give us a far stronger sense of comprehensive and ruthless evil in the world than is present in any of the other mature tragedies. Though these characters die and their plans are thwarted, so destructive has been their evil that we feel it as a force not easily explained by religious beliefs, and as a force that is as elemental in the universe as goodness and almost as powerful. This, I think, is our sense of evil in the play.

Yet however compelling is this sense of evil as morally unconcerned and as all but triumphant, I believe Shakespeare meant to depict the world of *King Lear* as a sinful world. In this world we may recognize the evil, whether seen as temporary but grievous faults in the basically good characters or as unmitigated vice in the basically bad characters, as one or more of the "deadly sins." Let us in a limited way consider the presence of the deadly sins in the play, and also the connection of animal imagery in the portrayal of certain of these sins.

The concept of deadly sins (that is, sins leading to damnation) is traced as far back as the second century A. D., but it did not become prominent in religious thought until the sixth century, when the sins were discussed by Gregory the Great, pope and apologist.[5] The sins were pride, envy, anger,

sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. In the later Middle Ages these sins were often presented in both religious and secular writing, notably in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The sins were often featured by name, as personified abstractions, in the Morality plays, which were allegories of the struggle between the virtues and vices for the soul of man. Shakespeare was familiar with these plays,[6] which were popular in the early Renaissance.

In both *Old* and *New Testament* writings, as well as in much later literature, sin is identified with a wild and hostile or a gross animal. In *Ecclesiasticus* of the Apocrypha we read, "Avoid wrong as you would a viper, for if you go near, it will bite you; its teeth are like a lion's teeth, and can destroy the lives of men." St. Peter wrote,". . . the devil, like a roaring lion, prowls round looking for someone to devour."[7] In *King Lear*, as critics have long noted, the animal imagery is pervasive.[8] The cumulative effect of the images is a picture of man as debased and cruel, foul and vile. It is of course ironic that animals should be used as examples of what is worst in man, for animals, lacking moral sense, cannot but be innocent creatures, innocent both in the sense of "blameless" and in the older meaning of "harmless"--for harmless they are save when hungry or threatened. Shakespeare, however, with unique imaginative and dramatic force, follows the tradition of depicting cunning, selfish man as close kin to the beasts as we imagine them at their worst to be, driven by self-serving passion and instinct. The more cunning the bad man, the more bestial he was, because the more dangerous. The villains in *King Lear* are very crafty; "monsters" is therefore what they are called at times, deformed even as animals because of the perversion of their reason.[9]

King Lear, though not evil, yet comes to ruin because of the foremost of the deadly sins, pride. Traditionally, pride is the sin that is not only fatal in itself but also inclines one toward the other sins, because the proud man

believes he can do no wrong. To the ancient Greeks, this sin was *hubris*, an exaggerated or presumptuous self-confidence that brought retribution from the gods. In Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, the king ridicules the blind prophet Tieresias, but bitterly learns that the prophet spoke truth. In Lear, pride takes the form of vanity. When Cordelia, whom he loves most, refuses to flatter him publicly, he denounces and banishes her.

It is interesting that Lear exhibits not only pride and anger in this opening scene (these two sins are often found together in the tradition), but also sloth. To Shakespeare's playgoers the spectacle of a healthy king abdicating his throne and dividing his kingdom among powerful dukes must have been shocking, a deed that might well lead to civil war, the horrors of which they were aware of from Shakespeare's early history plays. The diction supports the impression of negligent weariness in the king, rather than one of incapable old age. Lear will "*shake* all cares and business" from his "age" and will "Unburdened *crawl* toward death." (I. i. 39-41; italics mine) The image of crawling and of shaking off duties as burdens suggests the tired beast and not the king, who should act with dignity and responsibility to the end. Edgar's phrase, "hog in sloth," in his description of animalistic mankind in Act III, Scene iv, is too strong to apply to Lear here, yet we may note that the hog was associated with the sin of gluttony as well as sloth, and that Lear is later criticized by Goneril for keeping at her house a retinue of followers who are "deboshed" (debauched) and given to "epicurism" (gluttony) and lust, turning her palace into a "tavern or a brothel." (I. iv. 237-42) Lear flatly denies her charge, but there is probably some truth in it, and since it is unlikely that his followers would act so boldly without their master's tolerance, at least, of such behavior, we may say that Lear is guilty to some extent of countenancing if not actually himself engaging in the sin of gluttony.

But to return to Lear's fault of sloth, we find the picture of lazy

self-indulgence reinforced when Lear tells Kent, who would defend Cordelia,

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind *nursery.* (I. i. 122-4; italics mine)

Now indeed the thought of rest and nursery is no more, and the wrathful dragon, the Lear of pride and cruelty, must go to rage in humiliation on the stormy heath until anger and haughtiness are burned out of him and, after an exhausted sleep, he awakes in tears and falls to his knees before Cordelia. (IV. vii. 45-58) He has reached humility. Also he has gained that other virtue which he had called for in his shame and rage--patience, the contrary virtue to anger. And what of his physical wants, or the hundred knights and squires he had wanted so much ? He answers this later for us. Led off to prison with Cordelia, it is as though there at last he will have his nursery with her. He tells her,

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;
When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness; . . . (V. iii. 9-11)

The image of the singing, caged birds is almost the only favorable animal image in the play. The mad dragon could not be contained on the heath, but chastened by suffering and restored by love, he has become like a songbird, and is happily confined with the source of his joy.

In the fate of the Earl of Gloucester, the sin of lust plays a significant part. The immediate cause of his downfall and suffering is his credulity to the lies of his bastard son Edmund against his lawful son Edgar. Yet Shakespeare makes it clear that a basic cause of Gloucester's tragedy is his adultery and his attitude toward the deed. Early in the play we are shown Gloucester's brazen stand, as in talking with Kent in the presence of Edmund he acknowledges the "breeding" of the "whoreson" and says he no longer blushes to speak of

it. That he has been even more unkind in dealing with Edmund is revealed when he tells us that he had sent the young man away for nine years and will soon do so again. (I. i. 7-32)

Moreover, Edmund later declares his resentment that illegitimacy should deprive him of an inheritance and determines not to let this happen. (I. ii. 1-22) Gloucester, in despair after his blinding, first voices his terrible explanation for human misery:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport. (IV. i. 36-7)

Then a few minutes later, miserable still but now a man again, he cries out to Edgar (thinking, however, he addresses not his son but a madman) and invokes the gods respectfully:

That I am wretched
Makes thee the happier. Heavens deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly! (IV. i. 64-8)

The term "lust-dieted" may have the general meaning of "desire-fed," but as applied by Gloucester to himself, as one who had ceased to "see" long ago because he had ceased to "feel" the shame of his lust in adultery, the sexual meaning is foremost. Later, as Edgar stands over his dying brother, he speaks of their father's sin:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us:
The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes. (V. iii. 68-71)

References to lust and adultery are also emphatic elsewhere in the play. Most important is Edgar's speech to Lear on the stormy heath. Half-naked in

his role of Tom o' Bedlam and playing a religious madman, Edgar answers Lear's question, "What hast thou been ?" by saying,

> A servingman, proud in heart and mind, that curled my hair, wore gloves in my cap, served the lust of my mistress' heart and did the act of darkness with her, swore as many oaths as I spake words and broke them in the sweet face of heaven; one that slept in the contriving of lust and waked to do it. Wine loved I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramoured the Turk--false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey.
>
> (III. iv. 82-90)

This is a catalogue by name or description of the deadly sins. First and foremost is pride. We should note that in six of his speeches in this scene, Edgar refers to the "foul fiend"--the devil. The sin of the devils in heaven, in their rebellion against god, was pride. Lust is next emphasized in the catalogue. Envy is implied in swearing oaths falsely, and in being "false of heart" and "light of ear," for falsehood, slanders, and whisperings were some of the ways envy, satisfaction in another's misfortune, expressed itself. Love of wine is gluttony. Sloth goes as hog and avarice as a wolf. Anger to the degree of killing is found in "lion in prey" and "bloody of hand." Cunning stealthiness, as of a fox, is a quality several of the sins would have, as they would strive to hide their true nature.

As pride is the primal fault of Lear, so it is of the evil characters. But while in Lear pride shows itself through vanity of a childish nature, in the villains it comes through as a cold and hard disobedience and disrespectfulness of children to parents. For even Cornwall, as son-in-law, owes filial homage to Lear. "Ingratitude!" is Lear's repeated charge against Goneril, and he names the fault in vivid imagery:

> Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,

More hideous when thou showest thee in a child
Than the sea-monster. (I. iv. 256-8)

Again, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child." (I. iv. 285-6) Goneril's visage is "wolvish." (I. iv. 305) Her offense is "Monster ingratitude!" (I. v. 37) She "hath tied / Sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture" on his heart, and has struck him "with her tongue, / Most serpent-like, upon the very heart." (II. iv. 129-30, 155-6) Lear shouts in the storm, "Filial ingratitude! / Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand / For lifting food to't ?" (III. iv. 14-6) He calls Goneril and Regan "pelican daughters" (III. iv. 72) and "she-foxes." (III. vi. 22) And he asks in a frenzy of grief, "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III. vi. 76-7)

But what question would Lear have asked had he been present in the next scene, heard Goneril say of Gloucester, "Pluck out his eyes!" and watched Edmund leave his father to that fate and beheld the doing of it by Cornwall and Regan? Or could there be more than dumb horror at the spectacle of hard hearts running wild in cruelty ? Hearts hardened in pride, filled with envy, treachery, avarice, lust and wrath, here act with an inhumanity which we cannot understand by any references to the animal kingdom. After such a deed, all of Lear's animal metaphors are weak. We feel in fact that all animals are dear to us compared with such as Goneril, Cornwall, Regan, and Edmund. If any epithets for the evildoers can satisfy us, it is those which Albany hurls at Goneril : "devil" and "fiend." (IV. ii. 59, 66) These names remind us of the "foul fiend" that Edgar seemed to see everywhere. The evil characters strike us as possessed not by animal natures but by demonic spirits which express themselves in those human vices that are also known as the deadly sins. To say this is not to imply that the animal imagery in *King Lear* is not highly important. Clearly it lends great vigor and vividness to our

experience of the tragedy, and also it is the means by which we can identify evil in the play as something more than natural, certainly something more than merely sub-human passion and instinct.

King Lear is not about "Darkness and devils!" (a phrase of Lear's in I. iv. 248), nor is it about a humanity that Albany says "must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep." (IV. ii. 49-50) It is about these things and much more. We should remember, for instance, that it is about the more-than-natural goodness and the virtue of forgiveness of Cordelia, whose presence does much to lighten an otherwise perhaps too-heavy and too-dark world that Shakespeare shows us.

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Notes:

1. All quotations from the play are from the New Penguin Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1972, ed. G. K. Hunter.
2. See especially I. iv. 275-80, Lear's curse of sterility on Goneril, whom he had called "degenerate bastard" in I. iv. 250; II. iv. 125-7, in which he tells Regan that if she is not glad to see him her mother must have been an "adult'ress"; II. iv. 172-4, his reminder to Regan of the "bond of childhood"; and IV. vi. 109-16, his ironic defense of adultery.
3. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth,* New York, St. Martin's Press, 1967, p.271 (first publ. London, MacMillan, 1904).
4. *Ibid.*, p.273.
5. Brian Whitlow, *Hurdles to Heaven*, New York, Harper and Row, 1963, p.22.
6. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p.265.

7. *The New English Bible With the Apocrypha*, Penguin Books, Oxford University Press, 1974. *Ecclesiasticus*, 21. 2; *1 Peter*, 5. 8.
8. See especially Bradley, pp.266-7, and Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1935, pp.341-2.
9. It is interesting that a century later Jonathan Swift depicts non-human creatures as superior to man. His enlightened giant Brobdingnagian king, after listening to Gulliver's naive account of European history, declares that most of Gulliver's kind (that is, humans) must be "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." Also, in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels* the creatures in human shape are portrayed as bestial (the Yahoos) while their equine masters (the Houyhnhnms) are good and reasonable beings. After centuries of derogatory references to animals by man, perhaps Swift is attempting to restore a balance in the tradition through his vision of humanity as bestial and beasts as rational. (The quotation is from *Gulliver's Travels*, New York, The New American Library Signet Classics, 1960, p.148.)