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A Linguistic and Thematic Analysis of *King Lear*: Around the Line 17 in Act V, Scene iii[1)]

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1. INTRODUCTION:PRESENTATION OF THE PROBLEM

The texts of Shakespearean plays have presented a number of difficult and complicated problems for the proof-readers and the editors long through the years, and the text of *King Lear* is not an exception, either. On the contrary, to say the least of it, *King Lear* had been one of the most complicated plays concerning the text until Dr. Johnson edited the play in 1773. From that time on, the editors have, more or less, followed the pattern, and we have the text of *King Lear* as it is presented to us now.[2)]

However, there is one *apparently* minor textual problem concerning the text of *King Lear* which has been escaped, consciously or unconsciously, from the eyes of the editors. It is the line 17 in Act V, scene iii. Nowhere else in the play can we find the direct address to the Christian Almighty God, but it appears in this particular line as:

> As if we were God's spies,

and a lot of Shakespearean editors and critics interpret the line and the play as a whole in the Christian context: they see the transition here from the heathen deities to the Christian God, and, as a result, the salvation of Lear in the Christian context. One representative interpretation is given by G.W. Knight:

> He [Lear] and Cordelia will be as 'God's spies' — here not 'the gods', but 'God's'. Slowly, painfully, emergent from the *Lear* naturalism we see a religion born of disillusionment, suffering, and sympathy:a purely spontaneous, natural growth of the human spirit, developing from nature magic to 'God'.[3)]

There is no doubt that all the critics admit that *King Lear* is basically a play set in the pre-Christian Great Britain. Why, then, does this Christian interpretation of the play occur? Is it because the line under discussion refers to the one Christian God? It seems so. Is it, however, what Shakespeare really meant when he wrote the play? It is true that the line seems to support that interpretation. However, the point is whether we can rely entirely on the one and only reference to God when we try to

interpret the whole play, and the point is also whether Shakespeare's true intention is reflected on the line, even though it might be possible to discern the Christian morality from the play (of which I have some doubts on the whole).

If we turn our eyes to a Shakespeare concordance, we will find the word "gods" is used twenty-five times in *King Lear*, but that the word "God" appears only once in the one *apparent* instance.[4] Moreover, Shakespeare has Lear refer to "the gods" right after the line 17, in the line 21. Why does this shift appear? Was Shakespeare intentional in doing so? And the problem is, how we should solve this *apparent* inconsistency.

Therefore, it is crucial to re-examine and determine the line, i.e., to decide whether it is the singular, genitive case with the capital "G", or the plural, genitive case with the small "g" which was truly meant by Shakespeare. Whether we discern the Christian God in this line or not greatly changes the interpretation of the whole play.

This paper is, therefore, an attempt to examine the line and to clarify the true intention of Shakespeare through the textual and contextual analysis of the line, through the examination of the dramatic meaning of "the gods" in the play in comparison with *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles which represents the classical notion of the gods, and through the thematic analysis of the play, *King Lear*, particularly focusing on the meaning of the play's final Act.

2. TEXTUAL & CONTEXTUAL STUDY OF THE PASSAGE

T.M. Parrott in his enlightening article on this particular line argues that the word under discussion ("God's") should be modernized as "gods'", examining the passage textually and contextually. First, he concentrates on the word itself and discusses the capitalization of "g" in the word. He says:

> In every case where the word appears it is printed in the First Folio with a capital G. Shakespeare allows the heathen deities a capital letter;most modern editors degrade them to lower case.[5]

Therefore, he says that the discrimination between the heathen deities and the Christian God happened in the succeeding editions. He says that the decapitalization "seems to have started with the compositor or proof-reader of the Second Folio."[6] In the Second Folio, he says, the proof-reader retained "capital G in 'Gods spies,' line 17, but dropped it to lower case g in 'the gods,' line 21, thus making a distinct difference of meaning between the words."[7] He also draws our attention to the fact that "none of them [the old editions] use the apostrophe to mark the genitive case in V.iii.17."[8]

Next, he talks about a constant variation of capitals and lower case letters in the concerning two lines, 17 and 21, in subsequent editions in the seventeenth and the

eighteenth centuries until when Dr. Johnson, together with Steevens, edited the play and established the text by printing "God's"(1. 17) and "gods"(1. 21). Since then the pattern has been followed up till now more or less in this fashion. Therefore, almost all the contemporary critics have interpreted the play, using the text based on this Johnson edition.

The point which is as important as the capitalization or decapitalization of the word, and even more decisive, is the use of the apostrophe between "d" and "s" in the word. Examining the First Act of *Hamlet* presented in the Second Quarto, which was presumably printed from Shakespeare's manuscript, Parrott says that he has counted 20 cases of the genitive singular, ending in "s" without an apostrophe. Therefore, he concludes that "it was not until the second half of the seventeenth century that the apostrophe to mark the genitive singular came gradually into use."[9] And he also says that "it may be noted that the Fourth does not use it in this particular line, but prints 'Gods'."[10] Therefore, the argumentation that Shakespeare meant "God's" loses most of its grounds: Shakespeare never had discrimination between the heathen deities and the Christian God in putting down the lines and used the capital "G" in every case, and he never used the apostrophe to mark the genitive case.

Some people might say, however, that Shakespeare would or should have put "the" if he had intended the heathen deities in the line 17. This argument seems plausible, but, as Parrott says, is not quite convincing. According to Abbott's *Shakespearian Grammar*, it is stated that "*The* was frequently omitted before a noun already defined by another noun."[11] Parrott says "Consideration of meter, and probably of haste, dictated the terse 'Gods spies,' which drops the article before both words."[12] Moreover, if we think of *King Lear* as a play seen and heard in the theatre, it would be quite difficult, or risky and foolish even, on the part of the playwright, to ask the audience to catch the crucial meaning by this one and only reference to God.

Secondly, in order to resolve the ambiguity of the text, Parrott goes on to the contextual analysis of the line 17. The situation in which the line is spoken is as follows:

> No, no, no, no! 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 God's spies: and we'll wear out,
> In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones

That ebb and flow by th' moon. (V. iii. 8-18)

In this scene, Lear and Cordelia are captured and become prisoners in the hands of the British army led by the wicked sisters and Edmund. Lear and Cordelia are about to be sent into prison. Lear has been with Cordelia for the first time since the recognition scene and he is now happy to have the company of his beloved daughter, once lost and now regained. Parrott says:

> He [Lear] seems, in fact, to look forward to a sort of captivity like that enjoyed by favored prisoners of state in Shakespeare's day, one in which they could receive friends and get news of the world's affairs. He expects to be happy in prison; he and Cordelia will pray and sing together, talk over the past, and gossip with visitors about present doings at Court. It is upon this sort of talk that lines 16-17 turns.[13]

And then, Parrott asserts that the key point about the line 17 rests upon the correct interpretation of the phrase "the mystery of things" and the word "spies." To make a long discussion short, Parrott asserts that Shakespeare used the word "mystery" to mean "a political or diplomatic secret;a secret of state."[14] O.E.D. gives an example from Raleigh's *Maxims of State*(1618): "Mysteries or Sophismes of State, are certaine secret practizes, either for the avoiding of danger;or averting such effects as tend to the preservation of the present State, as it is set or founded."[15] As for the word "things," Parrott says as follows:

> Lear is not looking forward to a serious talk with Cordelia about God's mysterious ways, rather to a quiet laugh at the 'gilded butterflies,' i.e. the gayly dressed courtiers, who have been visiting them. They will, Lear fancies, talk with their visitors about court news—'who's in, who's out'—and pretend to understand, 'take upon's'—What? The answer surely must be what Raleigh called 'mysteries of state—certain secret practices.'[16]

And he gives a parallel passage in *Troilus*, III. iii., 190ff.

The word "spies" is usually interpreted in various ways. *A New Variorum Edition* gives several of these interpretations:

> 17. spies] WARBURTON interprets this as 'spies placed over God Almighty, to watch his motions.' HEATH [and everybody else] understands it as 'spies commissioned and enabled by God to pry into most hidden secrets.' JOHNSON: As if we were angels commissioned to survey and report the lives of men, and were consequently endowed with the power of prying into the original motives of action and the mysteries of conduct.[17]

Warburton's interpretation could be possible if it meant for the heathen deities. The Christian God, however, need not be watched his motions by spies. The other interpretations are also concerned with the Christian God. However, it is strange to think that the omniscient God of Christianity needs spies (or angels as Dr. Johnson so interprets). On the contrary, it is quite natural to associate the heathen deities with spies or informers as so happens in the Greek classics like Homer's *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*.

Taking all the preceding discussions into consideration, Parrott concludes his article as follows:

> A thoughtful reading of the passage in which the 'apparent singular' occurs, in comparison with parallels elsewhere in Shakespeare, along with an understanding of the true meaning of 'mystery' and of 'spies,' seems to lead to the inevitable conclusion that the original 'Gods' of line 17 should be modernized 'gods'' [18]

3. DRAMATIC MEANING OF "the gods" IN *LEAR*:IN COMPARISON WITH *OEDIPUS THE KING*

There are certain similarities between the Greek drama and *King Lear*:Both are heathen dramas;there are constant references to the deities, etc. However, *King Lear* is not a religious drama in the sense that the Greek drama is, despite the reference to the gods. Therefore, it might be a good way to examine the gods and their meaning in a typical Greek play, *Oedipus the King* in order to shed light on the nature of the gods in *King Lear*.

Oedipus, king of Thebes, unaware though he is, kills his father and marries his own mother. Because of this unnatural, immoral act, Thebes becomes sick: "the whole city drowns / And cannot lift its hand from the storm of death / In which it sinks," etc.[19] Therefore, Oedipus is asked to set this right. He is told by Creon that he has to search for the murderer of the late king, Laius. He starts the inquiry into the matter, and gradually comes to realize that the cause of Thebes' sickness is himself. When he fully realizes that he has killed Laius, he blinds himself and has to abandon his throne.

Now, what is the cause of Oedipus' tragedy? Why did he have to suffer the end as he did? One possible answer to the question would be that Oedipus' tragedy was caused by his own presumptuous insolence and pride; *hubris*: He became really arrogant toward Creon and Teiresias and acted almost like the gods. However, this theory is not strong enough to convince us that insolence and pride are the prime causes of this tragedy.

Another possibility would be Aristotle's, that Oedipus falls through a mistake.

This seems plausible enough when we consider Oedipus' mistake in killing Laius. But this theory still lacks in one important point. It is the role which the gods play in the rise and fall of Oedipus. C.M. Bowra writes about this point as follows:

> For though Oedipus' mistake in killing his father leads to other disasters, it is itself foreordained by the gods. The tragic career of Oedipus does not begin with it. His doom is fixed before his birth.
>
> The activity of the gods is an essential part of *King Oedipus*. Oedipus is their victim. They have ordained a life of horror for him, and they see that he gets it. He is even the instrument by which their plans are fulfilled. The prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother leaves him no escape. He fulfils it in ignorance of what he is doing, but he must fulfil it.[20]

What is "their plans" which Bowra mentions? They are the means of gods' justice. That gods' justice should be carried out is Oedipus' fate. Bowra again says:

> So far as the gods are concerned, it makes no difference whether he has acted in ignorance or not. Incest and parricide pollute him.... Offences against the gods had always to be atoned, and until they were, the offender was an abominable being who carried plague and destruction with him.[21]

Oedipus comes to the point of self-discovery through the series of tragic events: what he has done, and who he is. R.W. Corrigan states on this point:

> The action of *Oedipus the King* is a quest—either by discovery or deeds—for identity. Usually the success of this achievement is the cause for joy and celebration, but in *Oedipus the King* the focus is on the disaster of identity. Oedipus succeeds: He finds and he is found.[22]

Therefore, in *Oedipus the King* the justice of the gods works for keeping the balance of life or the order of things. The gods are always there to regulate man's actions when he tries to break that balance no matter what the cause is.

On the contrary, although there are many references to the gods in *King Lear*, they do not act in exactly the same way as they do in *Oedipus the King*. If we pick up a couple of typical references to the gods in *King Lear*, they are as follows:

> You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need.
> You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
> As full of grief as age, wretched in both.
> If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts

> Against their father, fool me not so much
> To bear it tamely;...(II. iv. 269-275)
>
> As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods,
> They kill us for their sport. (IV. i. 36-37)

What, then, is the nature of "the gods" in *King Lear*? Let us listen to what G.W. Knight says about this:

> The 'gods' so often apostrophized are, however, slightly vitalized: one feels them to be figments of the human mind rather than omnipotent ruling powers.... And exactly this doubt, this questioning, as to the reality and nature of the directing powers, so evident in the god-references, is one of the primary motives through the play. The gods here are more natural than supernatural.... These gods are, in fact, man-made. They are natural figments of the human mind, not in any other sense transcendent: *King Lear* is, as a whole, preeminently naturalistic. The 'gods' are equivalent in point of reality with 'the stars' that 'govern our conditions'(IV. iii. 34); or the 'late eclipses of the sun'(I. ii. 115) and the prophecies mentioned by Gloucester...The evil forces behind nature are here always purely things of popular superstition, endowed with no such transcendent dramatic sanction as the Ghost in *Hamlet* or the Weird Sisters.[23]

Similar view is given by Theodore Spencer:

> Yet though the sympathetic figures in the play, unlike Edmund, call frequently upon the gods, and see human affairs in relation to divine control, the gods are highly ambiguous figures. and their rule is not necessarily beneficient.[24]

As is clearly seen from these, therefore, the gods in *King Lear* are not at all supernatural deities but the construct of the human mind derived from the primitive nature worship. Since the gods are impersonal, unlike the Greek gods, they are not felt present in the scene, and so they execute no justice on man. Geoffrey Bush states on this point:

> Lear asks for vengence from the world, and demands that nature itself be natural. Lear and the nature of things are the mighty opposites; they address each other, and the reply that world makes is painfully clear.[25]

Now, having this notion of the gods in its background, the play, *King Lear*, runs its tragic course till the last minute.

4. THEMATIC STUDY OF *LEAR*: AN "EXISTENTIAL" DESCRIPTION OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Then, what is the meaning of Lear's tragedy? What is the justice in *King Lear* and who is the initiator of it, if any? I believe that *King Lear* presents us an *existential* human condition.

There are two opposing opinions about the last scene of Lear's death. A.C. Bradley, the representative of one of these opinions, says: "though he is killed by an agony of pain, the agony in which he actually dies is one not of pain but of ecstasy."[26] However, there are others who think of the ending in the entirely different way. Geoffrey Bush is one of them. He says:

> Lear dies in happiness, if Bradley is right, thinking that Cordelia lives: his last words are, 'Look! her lips!' But it is not so: he is deceived; Cordelia is dead as earth.[27]

J. Stampfer supports Bush's point and says that there is no mitigation in Lear's death. He also says:

> It is only by giving Lear's death a fleeting, ecstatic joy that Bradley can read some sort of reconciliation into the ending, some renewed synthesis of cosmic goodness, to follow an antithesis of pure evil. Without it, this is simply, as Lear recognized, a universe where dogs, horses, and rats live, and Cordelias are butchered. There may be mitigations in man himself, but none in the world which surrounds him. Indeed, unless Lear's death is a thoroughly anomalous postscript to his pilgrimage of life, the most organic view of the plot would make almost a test case of Lear, depicting, through his life and death, a universe in which even those who have fully repented, done penance, and risen to the tender regard of sainthood can be hunted down, driven insane, and killed by the most agonizing extremes of passion.[28]

Now, a tragic hero need not always die in happiness or in joy. Hamlet dies in his contentment, but it is difficult to say that Lear dies in the same way as Hamlet does. However, the fact that Lear dies in agony and sorrow does not necessarily cancel out the significance of Lear's suffering and endurance at all. In the play Edgar says to his blinded father, Gloucester, "Ripeness is all."(V. iii. 11) And this can be said about Lear, too. As Rosalie L. Colie says, it is true that "all men come to the same end: what distinguishes them is how they come to it."[29] Lear makes a mistake in the beginning and because of it he suffers the subsequent tragic course of events, but he gradually begins to recognize the truth and the significance of man. Although he becomes mad in the heath, he learns immensely as the play advances. Lear's suffering is all men's sufferings. We see in *King Lear* humanity suffering: Lear

suffers as if to say "to live is to suffer," as Everyman. G.W. Knight says:

> Mankind are here continually being ennobled by suffering. They bear it with an ever deeper insight into their own nature and the hidden purposes of existence. 'Nothing almost sees miracles but misery'(II. ii. 172)[30]

However, some critics liks Bradley try to see in this end "the redemption of Lear."[31] And this word *redemption* reminds us of something beyond human if it is used in this context. Therefore, some people claim that we should see the Christian notion present here. However, is it truly so? Ivor Morris warns us of this tendency, saying:

> The innate unlikeness between the dramatist's creation and formal precept must therefore bring under suspicion of unwarranted emphasis all attempts to interpret Shakespeare's tragedies in terms of religious concepts. Such attempts can be of value in their ability to distinguish and emphasize the moral tone pervading a play; but the inevitable danger that the rigidly Christian interpretation 'forces a tragedy to fit ideas which Shakespeare doubtless held but did not dramatize' is well pointed out.[32]

Then, what should we learn from *King Lear*? According to Rosalie L. Colie, what we should learn from it is that:

> Man has no choice but to endure his life with such strengths as he can muster, and in his endurance lies his value as a man. Each man makes his choice between moral dignity and moral dishonour... The rewards of the good are simply their comfortless virtues.[33]

This is what I call the *existential* human condition. Here exists the authentic, noble and *existential* human being in the world without any supernatural intervention or justice.

5. CONCLUSION

Therefore, the significance of the play is that the meaning of Lear's tragedy really begins to live in ourselves after the play ends. As long as Lear and Cordelia die at the end, there is no more chance for Lear himself to redeem all sorrows he has ever felt. But the fact that Lear could at least purify his *self* after recognizing man's worth and the meaning of love will spring up within us and show us "a consciousness of greatness in pain, and solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom."[34]

Therefore, it is not *gods'* business of leading Lear "to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and aim of life,"[35] but *human* goodness triumphing over the evils of the world at a tragic cost that we come to realize, as the final theme, what this play tries to convey us. Final recognition springs up and grows within us.

Through this recognition we can accept Lear as Everyman, and, therefore, *King Lear* can be aptly called the *allegory of Man.*

To sum up the whole discussion in this paper, therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that Shakespeare did not have the Christian God in mind when he wrote *King Lear* as a play, and that the line 17, consequently, should be modernized as "As if we were gods' spies."

NOTES

All the references to *King Lear* as quotes are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Houton Mifflin Company, 1974).

1. This paper was originally written for a graduate course, English 590, as the partial fulfilment of it at Seattle University. Seattle, Washington, in 1978.
2. For further details see T.M. Parrott, "'God's' or 'gods'' in *King Lear*, V. iii. 17," in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4 (1953), pp. 427-432.
3. G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*(Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 190-191.
4. John Bartlett, ed., *A Complete Concordance to Shakespeare*(Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1966), pp.632-634.
5. Parrott, p. 427.
6. *Ibid.*, p.428.
7. *Ibid.*, p.428.
8. *Ibid.*, p.428.
9. *Ibid.*, p.429.
10. *Ibid.*, p.429.
11. E.A. Abbott, *A Shakesperian Grammar*(Macmillan and Co., 1886), p.64.
12. Parrott, p.429.
13. *Ibid.*, p.430.
14. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1971, I, 1889.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Parrott, p.431.
17. H.H. Furness, ed., *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: King Lear*(Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), p.317 fn.
18. Parrott, p.432.
19. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, trans. R.W. Corrigan(Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), p.70.
20. C.M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*(The Clarendon Press, 1944), p.167.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
22. Corrigan, "Introduction" to *Oedipus the King*, p.20.
23. Knight, pp. 187-188.
24. Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (The Macmillan Company, 1949), p.147.
25. Geoffrey Bush, *Shakespeare and the Natural Condition*(Harvard Univ. Press, 1956), p.93.
26. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*(The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1905), p.291.
27. Bush, p.128.
28. J. Stampfer, "The Catharsis of *King Lear*" in *King Lear: Text, Source, Criticism* (Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), p.178.

29. Rosalie L. Colie, "The Energies of Endurance: Biblical Echo in *King Lear*" in *Some Facets of King Lear*(Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974), p.139.
30. Knight, p.196.
31. Bradley, p.285.
32. Ivor Morris, *Shakespeare's God*(George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1972), p.36.
33. Colie, p.136.
34. Bradley, p.279.
35. *Ibid.*, p.285.

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