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Gazing upon the metaphysical aspect of ‘invariability on Shakespeare’s deathbed’ with reference to *King Lear* and Dante’s *Inferno*

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Abstract: The conception of mortality as conceived by Shakespeare upon his deathbed as he drafted his last will to his bequeathed is closely contrasted with the eventual madness of King Lear, as he bears witness to the loss of his own daughter in the corporeal world. This leads on to the audience imagining the stage as an imitation of the transient chronic living-dying phase, whereupon there is further emphasis on Lear’s failure in fulfilling his mortal role by systematically denouncing the world. While the rational sentimentalities of the ailing Shakespeare have come to terms with his mortality, the characterization of Lear seems to have gone even further in denial of the mortal coil, by equating his dethroning as king to some sort of cosmic injustice. And in the aftermath of the passing of the aforementioned figures, the legacy of the ailing Shakespeare figure and Lear’s kingdom in the aftermath is seemingly directed toward an uncertain fate, wherein amidst the eulogizing verses, the rest seem to have dispersed into silence.

Keywords: deathbed, mortality, ailing Shakespeare, King Lear, contrapasso, temporal visage, rational, madness, cosmic injustice, last will, silence.

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“Good friend for Jesus sake forbear

To digg the dust enclosed here.

Blest be ye man yt spares thes stones,

And curst be he yt moves my bones.”

(Shakespeare’s tombstone inscription, Holy Trinity Church in Stratford)

Robert Hertz is quoted in ‘*Death and the Concept of Person*’, wherein amidst multiple cultures, “death is not something which is believed to occur in an instant nor is it seen, as with us, as the passage of a line without thickness. Rather death is visualized as part of a long transformative process” (Terpsra 2). In such times when the early modern Reformation period in 16th century England was undergoing a *mortality crisis*, the Reformation seemed to have interjected the masses’ numerous attempts to achieve their own salvation, such that it resulted in the *complete denial of death*. William Shakespeare’s conception of death in his early Renaissance Era tragedies is seemingly portrayed as a necessitated blending of dignity and defeat interwoven to the deeply paradoxical condition of our own mortality. That it acts as a contextual reminder of how nearly impossible it is by nature, until we are forced against our will, so as to confront life, thus, foregrounding itself as the most unavoidable form of reality. In King Lear, there seems to be an apparent subversion of *Ars Moriendi*¹ with certain amount of dignity and courage, which has in fact led to a cruel undercutting of hope. The material facet of death as being contained in its uncertainty can be paralleled to the conception of limbo in Dante’s Inferno. The supposed material projection of the advance toward death as a shrouded passage leading nowhere is referenced to those excluded from the pre-destined Elect, who are not granted salvation even though they have not sinned. This is in dire contrast to Shakespeare’s awareness of his approaching mortality as he “hurriedly reconstructs the inter-lineated clauses of his Will” on his deathbed (Mabillard). In this essay, I intend to show in reference to Dante’s Inferno and King Lear, the initiation of the transient chronic living-dying phase embellished on Shakespeare’s deathbed and the relative deaths of Lear and Cordelia, being treated with static expressions of the audience, which is conjoined with further pathos from Lear’s failure in fulfilling his mortal role of a systematic denouncement of the corporeal realm. Furthermore, amidst the characterizations of Shakespeare and Lear, the latter’s equating his dethroning to some form of cosmic injustice and being able to confront the reality of death only in madness while the former settling on his

approaching death, seems to substantiate the moral notion of the willingness to do good even if one is reduced to the form of a *temporal visage*, rather than being governed by contrapasso². This leads to the fact that maybe in the entirety of the temporal world, the legacy of the ailing Shakespeare figure and Lear's kingdom in the aftermath is directed toward oblivion, headed towards an uncertain future.

The almost methodical transition to the afterlife in Act 5, Scene 3 of King Lear, presents itself as an extended statement about the coming of death, which is seemingly portrayed as a transitional journey towards the other side of the ethereal plane, rather than *a form of timelessness or a time-transcending moment* in the theatre. This is contrasted by *the time-bound audience* who are fixated on the synthesized and almost temporally coordinated passing of both the characters of Lear and Cordelia. This scenario initiates a transient chronic living-dying phase following the fear of the unknown, which seems to be recapitulated by the blank expression of the audience and the actors, thus, creating some sort of a faux limbo atmosphere onstage, which is furthered by a fear of sorrow and corporeal tangibility as Lear gradually loses his sense of earthly self-control. He is finally forced to confront the final reality of his end that can't be dismissed at all. This can be supported by Elisabeth Kubler Ross' schemata of five stages of dying; highlighting a general sense of disbelief with imminent death, following a rebellion against the seeming arbitrariness of justice, in the lines of the Calvinist ideology of the Elects. It ranges from *denial, isolation of anger, bargaining, depression to acceptance* (Snyder 451). This can also be paralleled to E. Mansel Pattison's bipartite scheme of acute, chronic and terminal phases, which are consequential to "the emotional turmoil brought forth upon learning the bad news, immobilisation, and the overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, bewilderment, confusion, anxiety (Bevington 407)." With the arrival of the terminal phase, wherein he is faced with the stark realization that he won't get better by any chance, there ought to have been an eventual acceptance of one's own finality in the void. That he is poised to embrace a complete disavowal of the external world, such that his consciousness is the only one thing that comes into existence. In Pattison's terms, it can be seen as some form of 'acceptable regression'. This seems as a much more *appropriate exchange of unrealistic hopes for a toned down desirability of hope* (Bevington 407). However, his folly of his unwillingness to come to terms with the reality of old

age and declining parenthood is emphasized even more, thus, foregrounding his downward course in the void, as observed in Dante's Inferno,

“In the void/ Glancing, his tail upturn'd its venomous fork/ With sting like scorpion's arm'd.
Then thus my guide/ Now need our way must turn few steps apart/ Far as to that ill beast who
couches there/ Thereat, toward the right of our downward course” (Inferno. Canto XVII, 24-29).

Furthermore, this is contrasted with the onset of age presented in Sonnet LXXIII by Shakespeare, as indicated in,

“In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereupon it must expire.” (Mabillard)

This implies a strange dichotomy between the apparent personification of the poet-narrator to the glowing ember of his youth and the ailing Shakespeare upon his deathbed, as both of them tend to resign their respective fates toward their mortal ends.

Whilst the whole narrative of the play can be structured on the basis of an escalating denouncement of the material world, thus being akin to a morality play, we can observe the fact that Lear's bereavement while holding Cordelia's corpse is further intensified by himself not being aware that he is dying. Even though Lear's characterization ideally should have centered on the denouncement of the material world that ranges from rejection to suffering, we can fairly assume that Lear assumes the role of a protagonist in a morality play. In between the characterizations of Shakespeare and Lear as the *royal everyman*, the former seems to have crawled *unburdened* towards his end, and yet the other attempts in every way possible to retain his sense of entitlement as the king. What he hasn't apparently realized is that his expectation of veneration is bound to lead to apparent disillusionment. This is evidenced by Lear's rebuking reply to Regan and Goneril, “I gave you all”/ “And in good time you gave it” (King Lear. 2.4.252). His anger is counteracted by his baseless impotence in the face of his own mortality. His inability to imagine himself crossing the threshold of the living, results in his creation of a fantasy, which acts as a sort of defense mechanism. He even goes to the extent of identifying himself with divinity over and over again, as seen in his high-sounding claims to undo the life which he has brought forth; as seen in,

“Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend/ to make this creator fruitful”

(King Lear. 1.4.274-6)

Moreover, we can observe that there is an underlying fear of the afterlife in Lear that he is not godlike at all. While the audience might entertain the notions of the gods not listening to him, one may end up in a harrowing conclusion that the gods might not exist at all, which is similar to the disenchantment of religious faith since Enlightenment, grounded by Nietzsche’s declaration that *God is dead*.

On account of his deposition from the throne, Lear attempts to ally with the gods as his counterparts; in the absence of any kind of response, “he fears a metaphysical conspiracy by the cosmos against his kingly might” (Bevington 411). While his conclusion that his dethroning is relative to some sort of cosmic injustice might seem absurd, it is only with the rejection of his current reality in his sanity, with which he lands in a progressive faceted emotions of “denial, outrage, protest, self-pity and evasion” (Bevington 411). This can be noticed in the Fool’s comment to Lear that he is nothing without his crown, as seen in “now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I’m a fool, thou art nothing” (King Lear. 1.4.17). The deposed king being termed as no better than a *shelled peascod*³, seems to be reducing Lear to the vestiges of his own shadow, in relation to his former self of grandeur. Here, we can see that Lear, being stripped of his kingly title and power, seems to be subjected to a state of oblivion, without any hope of resurgence or redemption. Herein, there is a complete deconstruction of the illusive folly of believing that one could possibly give up power and in the process, attain real happiness, and not expect real loss in kind. Contrary to that, it can be noticed that only in his madness, can he confront the reality of death. Here, it seems as though the madness provides him with a sense of detachment from his previously misguided rational self. In contrast to that, the ailing figure of Shakespeare as presented in The Shakespeare Circle, gives the reader the assumption that Shakespeare ought to have been in control of his rational mind, as he frailly signed his last will and testament to the bequeathed. Furthermore, Albany’s assurance that “All friends shall taste/ The wages of their virtue, and all foes/ the cup of their deservings (King Lear. 5.3.307-9), is consequentially invalidated by Lear’s awareness of Cordelia’s death and his hopeless

pronouncement, “Never, never, never, never, never” (King Lear. 5.3.16) is performed as a sentence upon his own life. This is closely mirrored in the dying Shakespeare’s entailing the majority of his property to his daughter, Susanna, as is indicated in his will and testament,

“All the Rest of my Goods, Chattels, Leases, Plate, Jewels and Household stuff
Whatsoever after my debts and Legacies paid and my funeral expenses discarded”
(Alchin)

Towards the end, no one is actually really sure that Lear actually learned what it was he had to learn from his *mortal coils*, which serves up to some form of a metaphysical conceit, thus, invoking Brecht's theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*⁴ in kind, wherein the audience was hindered from identifying themselves with the tragic fate of the titular character. In another instance,

“Look on her, look, her lips/ Look these, look these.”

(King Lear. 5.3. 316-17)

Here, he dies in the attempt to cope with the death of the one person who had kept him alive till now. While it seems to strictly adhere to the notion of a morality play rendering itself upon the fact that one must completely disavow the notion that life owes us anything by right, and at least serve others with uncorrupted genuine honesty, in the likes of Cordelia, Kent and Edgar; therein lies an underlying fact that even though our existence stands as *a temporal visage in the time of trial*, one ought to willingly make the choice in accordance to one’s own existence, rather than being subjected to a fear of the *contrapasso* mentioned in Dante’s Inferno.

Conclusively, Shakespeare’s tragedies usually offer a slight glimmer of hope in light of the harrowing conclusion of the play, yet King Lear comes up as an exception to it, such that there is no such redeeming deed towards the end. There is no such proclamation of a successive ascendant to the throne, neither in terms of the former’s literary prowess nor the latter’s kingly demeanor; rather Albany proposes to Kent and Edgar to rule what’s left of the kingdom together. Kent’s denial due to “his master calling him out on a journey” (King Lear. 5.3.11) and Edgar’s realization that “we that are young/ shall never see so much, nor live so long as the previous generation” (King Lear. 5.3.17), leads up to the fact that maybe Shakespeare’s legacy and Lear’s kingdom had in fact, ended up in a state of oblivion, which parallels the Last Judgment in

Dante's *Inferno*, such that "there will no longer be a future when the world ends and the souls of the damned will have no external awareness to distract them from their eternal suffering" (*Inferno*. Circle VI, Canto X). Thus, in the aftermath of the passing of the aforementioned figures, "the rest is silence" (*Hamlet*. 5.2.17).

End Notes

Ars Moriendi- art of dying

Contrapasso- a process regarding the punishment of souls that contrasts with the sin itself.

Shelled Peascod- empty peapod.

Verfremdungseffekt- distancing effect.

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