

The Nature of Redemption and the Limits of Pessimism in *King Lear*

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King Lear distinguishes itself as Shakespeare's bleakest tragedy, for it combines a level of brutality and a moral nihilism that are unparalleled in the rest of his works. The question of cosmic justice is the central theme in the play, and yet the dramatist's perspective on the subject seems to be couched in ambiguity—especially with regard to the significance of the apparently senseless deaths of Lear and Cordelia in the final scene. This ambiguity is highlighted in the contrasting opinions of A. C. Bradley and J. Stampfer. In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Bradley contends that Lear attains redemption through his previous suffering, a fact that allows him to die joyfully after casting off the vanities of worldly existence. However, as Stampfer points out in "The Catharsis of *King Lear*," this interpretation is untenable because Bradley misjudges the depth to which Shakespeare's pessimism extends. In the first place, Bradley possesses a weak understanding of pessimism itself, made evident by his presumption that *King Lear* is "too beautiful" to be pessimistic. This "aesthetic" reaction against pessimism causes him to take a narrow view of cosmic justice, a fact that leads him to conflate the moral with the metaphysical. As Stampfer demonstrates, the ultimate consequence of this twofold error is that Bradley's claim is not supported by the text of the play. Instead of achieving a final state of happiness and reprieve from torment, the death of Cordelia brings home to Lear a much bleaker truth—namely, that redemption itself is futile.

In asserting that Bradley's view of pessimism is inaccurate, I would seem to contradict a common intuition. However "pessimism" might be defined, it is generally seen as a distorted

viewpoint that overemphasizes the negative and cheerless aspects of existence. Indeed, the word itself usually has a pejorative ring to it, for it brings to most minds a rather repellent blend of feeble-mindedness and moral failure. Pessimism is seen as a sort of slander of existence, for the gloomy world the pessimist claims to inhabit is nothing more than the projection of her own weaknesses and shortcomings. This being the case, it is then assumed that pessimism can have nothing to do with aesthetic value. Bradley appears to subscribe to this notion, for he believes that if *King Lear* were to be viewed as “only” pessimistic, it would therefore be “composed almost wholly of painful feelings...and that would surely be strange” (Signet ed., 203). Bradley is certainly not alone in thinking that “painful feelings” are an obstacle to aesthetic worth, and so I imagine that the majority of readers would identify strongly with his interpretation of the play.

Widespread as this conviction is, however, it cannot claim any substantive measure of justification. In the first place, we have no reason to presume that a work of art must be congenial or agreeable in some way in order for it to possess worth. Aristotle’s famous definition of tragedy actually *requires* the “pessimistic” emotions of fear and pity to be forcefully conveyed to the audience. Considering that *King Lear* provides numerous instances of these “painful feelings,” it almost seems nonsensical for Bradley to simply reject their value out of hand. This becomes evident if we extend Bradley’s argument to other areas of aesthetics. For instance, following Bradley’s reasoning, we would have to conclude that the representations of the Crucifixion by Raphael and El Greco are utterly hideous, for the torment and death of the Savior are surely too “unpleasant” to possess positive aesthetic value—a conclusion that, at least to me, seems clearly absurd. In addition, one should remember that the very idea of the sublime posits that aesthetic value may be found in terrifying and overwhelming experiences. Of course, it is true that the classical understanding of sublimity refers to natural beauty rather than (human)

artworks, but all the same, there is no *prima facie* reason to think that every appellation of beauty must be strictly segregated according to some artificial categorization of experience. The point is that “negative” (i.e., unpleasant, disagreeable) attributes do not automatically preclude positive aesthetic value. Consequently, Bradley is not justified in presuming that the beautiful is limited wholly to the agreeable, the pleasant, and the happy.

More broadly, however, Bradley’s quick dismissal of pessimism is unjustified because he addresses only a partial aspect of the concept that is not representative of pessimism as a whole. In my view, there are a variety of perspectives that might be termed pessimistic, and so Bradley and many others are incorrect to associate this concept *exclusively* with the caricatured view that was mentioned above. Though a detailed exposition of each particular perspective would take us too far afield to be profitable, it is sufficient to remark that pessimism can also provide an honest appraisal of the world in which one lives. In fact, I argue that such a viewpoint *must* be adopted in order to accurately understand *King Lear*. Far from being a distorted perspective, it seems undeniable that the universe of *King Lear* consists almost entirely in cruelty, suffering, and desolation. The action of the play is mostly a progression from one misery to another, whether it is Lear’s madness or Gloucester’s blinding. In addition, the actions of most characters are motivated by unmitigated spite and malice, whether it is Edmund’s betrayal of his brother, Cornwall’s treatment of Kent, or the patricidal scheming of Goneril and Regan. Moreover, beyond the characters themselves, the England of *King Lear* is a miserable country full of “poor naked wretches,” wracked by poverty and warfare (3.4.28). Solely on the basis of these facts, one is therefore tempted to agree with Dr. Johnson’s remark that *King Lear* is “a play in which the wicked prosper” (Signet ed., 206).

Rather surprisingly, Bradley explicitly denies this. He argues instead that “[g]ood, in the widest sense, seems thus to be the principle of life and health in the world; evil...to be a poison” (Signet ed., 206). Bradley insists that the world actively seeks to expel evil, which is demonstrated by the fact that all evil is self-defeating. He seems to have a point here, seeing that all of the evil characters in the play have died by the conclusion of the work. This applies not only to major characters who are evil—Goneril, Regan, and Edmund—but also to more minor figures like Cornwall and Oswald. Moreover, the characters who possess ambiguous moral characteristics—namely, Lear and Gloucester—seem to be purged of their evil inclinations through the intense suffering each endures. Because there has been such a thorough and meticulous extermination of evil by the end of the play, Bradley is convinced that the world is metaphysically inclined towards goodness. He therefore serves as the evangelist of Leibniz’s happy sophism regarding the “best of all possible worlds,” and is confident that evil is only a momentary aberration that will be expunged by the firm but benevolent hand of divine retribution.

However, such confidence is not warranted. Though understandable, Bradley’s infusion of morality into the metaphysical constitution of Shakespeare’s universe is wholly unjustified. If we dissociate the play from any external context, the self-defeating nature of evil hardly seems to be sufficient evidence that the world of *King Lear* is inherently good. On the contrary, the fact that one beast devours another serves as more proof that the world of the play is a Hobbesian war of all against all. For instance, Regan’s murder and Goneril’s suicide in the final act are hardly cheerful news, for they merely serve as manifestations of yet another layer of the older sisters’ already immense cruelty. It is by no means obvious that their deaths resulted from any universal moral principle unless one presupposes the existence of such. This being the case, in contrast to

the belief that the world is constantly seeking to expel evil from itself, the universe of *King Lear* seems far better captured by William Blake's description of nature:

A murderous Providence! A Creation that groans, living on Death.

Where Fish & Bird & Beast & Man & Tree & Metal & Stone

Live by Devouring, going into Eternal Death continually! (475)

If evil is self-defeating, it is only because nature is self-devouring. By ignoring this, Bradley sounds almost like a Scholastic theologian, readily equating goodness with being. But unlike the Scholastics, he does not offer any proof of this claim, and merely assumes it from the beginning of his analysis. Murder, madness, torture, duplicity, and warfare are the *status quo* in the play, and moral meaning cannot be extracted from, but only imported to, the world of *King Lear*.

At this point, we must ask why Bradley is so eager to provide a theodicy of *King Lear* in the first place. This becomes apparent only later on in his essay when Bradley contends that “[t]he play could have been called *The Redemption of King Lear*” (205). Redemption is a concept that can be interpreted in multiple ways, however, and so it is necessary to understand what Bradley's understanding of the term is. Such a definition is offered at the very end of *Shakespearean Tragedy*:

Let us renounce the world, hate it, and lose it gladly. The only real thing in it is the soul, with its courage, patience, devotion. And nothing outward can touch that.

This, if we like to use the word, is Shakespeare's 'pessimism' in *King Lear*... (207)

Redemption for Bradley therefore consists in turning away from the world, for truth, beauty, and even reality itself cannot be found here. This is a remarkable shift in focus, for Bradley's

“courage, patience, [and] devotion” might as well be replaced with “faith, hope and charity,” the key Christian virtues that are mentioned in the Bible (1 Corinthians 13:13). This is significant because such a “Christian” interpretation of the play seems to be directly opposed to Bradley’s previous rejection of a pessimistic view of the world. As we have seen, Bradley had argued that beauty cannot emerge from suffering by itself, and therefore concluded the world of *King Lear* is essentially good. However, with the introduction of the thesis of redemption, Bradley radically qualifies these previous two claims. He now admits that Shakespeare’s universe is full of suffering (and therefore devoid of “beauty”) and that the only thing capable of attaining goodness is the immaterial soul. While this might not constitute an outright contradiction, it is highly misleading. This new idea of redemption asserts that all positive values—whether aesthetic or moral—must be “otherworldly” in some sense. Beauty and goodness have no earthly origin, but must instead derive their existence from some apparently transcendental source.

A crucial aspect of this perspective is Bradley’s conviction that “moral perception arises out of suffering” (205). In light of his understanding of redemption, Bradley holds that the struggle to endure our earthly existence is the means whereby we see through its illusions. Consequently, he sees the world as a sort of Purgatory where one is cleansed through suffering, ultimately earning one’s salvation through atonement. As the greatest proof of this, he asserts that the *denouement* of the play describes Lear’s final salvation. He states that the final scene where Lear is hunched over Cordelia’s lifeless body does not present us with despair and meaninglessness, but instead argues that the absurdity of his daughter’s death has finally liberated Lear, allowing him to see through the vanities of earthly existence. His sight is “purged by scalding tears,” and he “sees at last how power and place and all things in the world are vanity except love” (205). This elegant sentiment is an admirable step above Bradley’s previous efforts,

almost serving to vindicate his disingenuous combination of divergent concepts. His idea of redemption casts the significance of *King Lear* in new light, for he now offers us the hope that the recognition of the horror of existence is the means by which we can transcend it.

Enticing as it is, however, Stampfer demonstrates that Bradley's interpretation of the *denouement* of the play is not supported by the text. In addition to his idea of an essentially benevolent universe, Bradley's concept of redemption is essentially foreign to *King Lear*. Indeed, it takes a leap of faith to imagine that Lear's final moments consist in some sort of ecstatic joy, sublime and anguished as it may be. It seems much more defensible to think, as Stampfer argues, that the final scene presents us with Lear's relapse into madness and despair. Where Bradley imagines evidence of overcoming and transcendence, Stampfer sees only the last acts of a desperate and doomed man. Lear's frantic search for a mirror or a feather to "prove" that Cordelia is still alive—despite his own admission that "[s]he's gone forever" (5.3.261)—does not describe a man who has overcome his earthly burdens, but rather one who has succumbed to them. Moreover, Stampfer correctly sees that the "repeated cries of 'Never!' [5.3.310] are the steady hammering of truth on a mind unable to endure it" (Stampfer, 150). Unable to bear the weight of the world any longer, Lear is finally euthanized by his own despair, not redeemed by it.

The fundamental error that lies at the root of all of this is Bradley's conviction that salvation can be bought with suffering—a conviction that, though admissible in other contexts, cannot be located within the text of the play. The related themes of atonement and redemption cannot be discovered within the world of *King Lear*, and so these concepts remain inherently foreign to the ultimate meaning of the work. Between Edmund's atheistic faith in fortune or Gloucester's lamentation of the indifferent gods, there is no point in *King Lear* in which

Bradley's vision of a transcendent moral authority emerges. Or at least, whenever it does, the events of the play quickly refute the belief in such an otherworldly force. This idea is the foundation for the concept of redemption, and without the former, the latter cannot exist.

For this reason, Stampfer points out that the cruelest aspect of the play's ending is the fact that Lear actually does seem to be redeemed for a moment—namely, as he joyfully enters prison with Cordelia, seemingly invincible in his contempt for the world. But as soon as Cordelia is killed, his salvation is revoked, and as he holds the broken corpse of his daughter in his arms, only then does Lear realize that his final deceit is that of deliverance. Cordelia's survival was the necessary condition for Lear's redemption, the "chance which does redeem all sorrows," and thus the pivot upon which the issue of salvation turns (5.3.268). This gamble fails, however, and so it is made clear that Lear's hopes of redemption are utterly crushed. Cordelia's death has nullified her forgiveness, and has therefore deprived Lear's process of would-be atonement of any redemptive significance. Consequently, Stampfer is correct when he notes that there is "no mitigation in Lear's death, hence no mitigation in the ending of the play" (152). The savage absurdity of Cordelia's execution, when combined with the sudden realization that her death has no broader significance, is the final fracture that breaks Lear's heart, and he dies torn between the "extremes of illusion and truth" (151).

The true significance of the play, which Bradley has forbidden himself from understanding, is the unmitigated terror that it arouses in the spectator. In Stampfer's words, one leaves a performance of *King Lear* haunted with "the fear that penance is impossible [...] the fear that we inhabit an imbecile universe" (160). Far from providing us with a means of metaphysical escape, the final scene of the play reveals that there is no significance to suffering beyond the reality of pain itself. Contrary to Bradley's interpretation, Lear's death proves that

suffering is not the currency in which one purchases salvation, but the only truth in an otherwise meaningless existence. This is knowledge that exceeds endurance, and it is only through tragedy that we can see that the necessity of self-deception is the vital principle of an empty world. Thus Kent warns Edgar:

Vex not his ghost: O let him pass! he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer. (5.3.315-7)

In no other work is the stark antinomy of truth and vitality brought to bear with such merciless focus. The *denouement* of *King Lear* is thus the final refutation of all the rationalized, moralized interpretations of human suffering, for it demonstrates that redemption itself is contingent upon illusion.

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[Contents](#)

[Occasions Home](#)

[PWR Home](#)