

King Lear and King Solomon



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Besides being a drama of self-discovery, King Lear is a dramatic experience. This is not precisely what Aristotle meant by *anagnorisis* (Shakespeare may not have been well acquainted with the *Poetics*) when he described one of the immutable laws of a great tragedy, treating recognition or discovery as one of its *essentials*. By *anagnorisis* Aristotle did not imply the psychological experience of King Lear: this term is related to Oedipus who discovered that his wife was his mother. To Shakespeare *self-knowledge* connoted self-control or temperance in all things, patience and humility. Self-knowledge, which presupposes that wisdom is essential in right conduct, is the ability to distinguish, as Socrates says,

'between what one can do and what one cannot do, and hence 'obtain what is good and guard against what is evil'. Lear's plan of selling his rest on the 'kind nursery' of his joy, Cordelia, was not unwise. If Lear lived with Cordelia the rest of his life, he would receive all the honour, love and veneration desirable for an aged king. But he would never acquire self-knowledge.

While self-knowledge is the context of what *man* attains, self-discovery is the intellectual and dramatic process whereby he attains it. Criticizing her father's irrational behaviour, Lear's daughter Regan remarks: *'yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself'* (I, 1, 296-297). In answer to this Lear asks his unanswerable question:

'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' 'I would learn that' (I, IV, 250). Lear learns much about himself. His knowledge falls into three categories: 1. a need for reassurance of love and the true meaning of love; 2. an attempt to be recognized by others; 3. information about human nature - a lesson, largely unsought, taught by his Fool. The 'love-contest' staged by Lear seems too ridiculous and his explanation appears to be unsatisfactory:

*Who is it that can tell me who I am?
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge?* (I, 1, 52-54)

To find out how and why one is loved is to learn some basic, complicated, and sometimes unpleasant truths about oneself. Love – the deepest and most certain evidence that one is wanted and needed. No matter how secure a man's position may be, he cannot do without some basic emotional needs. When Lear hears flattering words in the first two arias of his daughters' love avowals he does not question the motives for glorification because he wants to believe the truth of imaginative praise. Hence, Cordelia's answer seems to be elicited by a stranger and she becomes 'a stranger to my

heart and me' (I, i, 117). Much later, when Lear achieves perfection of love, he says to Cordelia: You must hear me. / Pray you now, forget and forgive; I am old and foolish (IV, vii, 84-85). Lear's true understanding of love means that he has understood himself thoroughly. Taking advantage of his status, Lear's Fool points to his master's foolishness and preaches his own philosophy: human nature is mean and humble. As we see in the following statements, step by step Lear makes progress, discovering his own self: I am a man more sinn'd against than sinning (III, 2, 59-60). I am very foolish fond old man (IV, VII, 60). I am old and foolish (IV, VII, 85).

The naked body is sophisticated: though latter'd clothes great vices do appear; / Robes and furr'd gowns bide all (IV, 6, 168-169). Lear learns about unaccommodated man - his unwarranted pride and his frailty - through inquiring into man's necessities, which are in turn closely and humiliatingly related to his body.

King Lear demonstrates the beginning and the end of human nature and destiny just like the biblical King Solomon. Having lost his glory at the end of his reign in Kings, Chronicles, and in the Song of Songs, King Solomon, the aged monarch, came to support preacher of Ecclesiastes and of the wisdom of Solomon in the Apocrypha and in the Proverbs. Shakespeare likened King Lear to one of the servants of King James I - a king having the reputation of the wisest fool in Christendom. Perhaps Shakespeare's conception of Lear was influenced by James' particular admiration for Solomon, the wisest of all kings. Lear alludes to the following great passage in the Wisdom of Solomon (7:1-6).

I Myself am also mortal and a man like all other, and am come of him that was first made of the earth.

And in my mothers womb was I facioned to be flesh in ten moneths: I was brought together into blood of the sede of man, and by the pleasure that cometh with slepe.

And when I was borne, I received the comune aire, and fel upon the earth, which is of like nature, crying and weping at the first as all other do.

I was nourished in swadling clothes, and with cares.

For there is no king that had anie other beginning of birth.

All men then have one entrance into life, and a like going out. (Geneva Bible)

This is echoed in Lear's sermon to Gloucester:

*Lear: If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes;
I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester;
Thou must be patient; we come crying hither:*

Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air

We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee: mark.

When we are born, we cry, that we are come

To this great stage of fools. (IV, VI, 174-181)

As we see, Lear is father, king, and a kind of mortal God simultaneously: he

acquires the image of male authority. Solomon who reigned for fifty years was James I's wished-for archetype: glorious, wise, wealthy (although James did not share Solomon's passion for women). Anyhow, Lear is in no way a portrait of James. Lear's greatness would have mattered to James: a king in every inch, human - needing and desiring love, worthy of love, God's very creation.

King Lear was translated into Armenian two times. The first translation was done by Stepanos Malkhasian, who was a linguist and one of the outstanding representatives of Tiflis School of Translation. He translated both 'King Lear' (1888, St. Petersburg) and 'Macbeth' (1887, Tiflis, Magazine Arax, St. Petersburg). The second translation was done by the classic translator and Shakespearean scholar Hovhannes Masehian in 1888.

The fairy-tale 'King Lear', with its everlasting problem of sharing one's property, has always been in the centre of attention. Here the representatives of the Fauna embody different characters, the appearance and the inner world of man, his sense and sensibility, his joys and sorrows. The tragedy starts when the youngest daughter says:

Cor. *Good my lord.
You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit.
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands if they say
They love you all? (I, 1)*

Cordelia thinks if she marries, her duties 'half my love, half my care and half my duty' will go to her husband. Hence the king, once rich and powerful, becomes a beggar - a blind pauper whose eye is directed to his inner world and he sees everything.

Stepanos Malkhasian translated the play from German and it is the first attempt to introduce it to the Armenian reader. This translation is of a great historical value in the Armenian Shakespearean Studies, since it introduced a number of linguistic innovations.

Hovhannes Masehian's translation of King Lear is as successful as all his twelve translations of Shakespeare; having studied the former foreign translations and Shakespearean Studies carefully, he combined three important principles of translation: exactness, reliability and faithfulness.

And the play comes to remind us again and again '*Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation: and a house divided against a house falleth*'. (St. Luke, 11:17)

References:

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Լիր Արքան և Սողոմոն արքան

Այստեղ զուգահեռ է անցկացվում իմաստուններից իմաստուն Սողոմոն իմաստունի և տառապանք ճաշակած և իմաստնացած Լիր արքայի միջև: Շեքսպիրը գրել է իր ողբերգությունը որպես King James I ծառա և նրան ոգևորել է իր թագավորի, որը համարվում էր քրիստոնյա աշխարհի ամենաիմաստուն հիմարը, Սողոմոն իմաստունի հանդեպ տածած հիացմունքն ու սերը: