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The Emotive Use of Animal Imagery in *King Lear*

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It has been said that we must accept the passionate, irrational *King Lear*, with his plan for dividing his kingdom, and the devoted yet strangely reticent Cordelia as data not to be inquired into but taken on poetic faith. Yet Lear’s “retirement” is a sensible thing in itself. What makes it fraught with tragedy is his misreading of human nature. Had all his children been like Cordelia, things might have turned out well. And here is the irony—that what is sensible in itself is made a foolish, senseless thing to do by the characters of those involved. Or to put it another way, imperfect, selfish human nature again wrecks ideals.

Consider that Lear is a king who loves his daughters and out of his egoism expects love in return, a king who believes simply that generosity begets gratitude, that children revere and honor their parents, that obedience is of the nature of the filial relation. A king who “hath ever but slenderly known himself”; he has not known his courtiers either, for example, Kent. A king who is curiously naive in the ways of human nature, who has no subtlety in human relations, who does not even suspect that power may corrupt and that old age rendered helpless is a thing for contempt. A king who is not wise enough to protect himself but of his own volition throws himself upon the tender mercies of the evil, whom he does not even recognize as evil.

Yet Lear embodies the idealism of fatherly love as Cordelia and Edgar are emblems of filial devotion, Kent of loyal service, the Fool of conscience, and France of true love. But Lear’s idealism is tainted by evil, by the moral corruption of self-deluding egoism, while the idealism of the others is not, and the proper end for Lear is, therefore, tragic disaster.

In the chaotic and hostile world into which Lear is precipitated by his acts of misjudgment, self-will, and wrath, the tragic disaster toward which he proceeds and which culminates in madness and death in a world against which he cannot contend, a world wild and ferocious, a world of negated values, moral blindness, and unnaturalness, is expressed to a remarkable degree by images from the padding, stalking, creeping, crawling, slithering world of animals, insects, and the more repulsive denizens of the waters, and the images are evoked to express or to intensify his anger, rejection, indignation, wrath, and vengeance.

The imagery of the lower animals, which suggests the moral derangement of the world in which Lear has hitherto thought himself secure, begins with the cooling of his reception in Goneril’s home, when her servant Oswald neglects to
answer Lear’s question as to the whereabouts of his daughter. This breach of
decorum and respect and reverence for authority stirs a mild resentment in
Lear, the first stage of the emotional turmoil which brings him at length to
madness. His resentment and, perhaps, a touch of proper contempt, the genesis
of which is Lear’s instinctive awareness of the social disparity between his kingly
state and the lowly status of a servant, are expressed in his epithet “mongrel”, an
image general, colorless, and uncommitted, since the offence is not at the mo-
moment identifiable with the attitude of the daughters or the moral problem of the
play. When Oswald describes Lear as not the king but “My lady’s father”, Lear’s
indignation is spurred, and the imagery becomes more intense and particularized
in its connotative derogation as “whoreson dog” and “cur”. It is significant that
Lear thinks in terms of such lowly, though commonplace images, since he has
himself already entered upon his own descent, with the result that eventually his
state is reduced as low, in the storm scene on the heath particularly, as that of
the animal world in terms of the imagery of which his mind constitutionally
reacts.

From the evocation of mere resentment and indignation the imagery be-
comes grimmer, more serious, and more vividly suggestive of Lear’s destitute
moral condition and the frightful eventualities of the future. The Fool’s bitter
statement,

For you know, nuncle,
The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
That it had it head bit off by it young. (I. iv. 234-236)

is not only a sharp and crude image of ingratitude, but it is also an image of
Lear’s own foolishness, his misjudgment, his improvident Helplessness, and his
egoistic blindness. The imagery implied in the verb “bit off” is by transference
an image of human decapitation and a darkly prophetic forerunning of what
Lear is to experience from his children. In the image is implicit the lack of
gratitude and love and even common humanity which already are Lear’s destiny.
The image is so proper and so apt in its context that though Lear seems to ignore
it, it succeeds immediately in condensing the whole moral problem which
enmeshes Lear in its inevitable consequences.

As Lear enters the incipienti of his rage, irritated by Oswald and shocked by
the callousness of Goneril, who desiring to teach him what is properly conven-
tional to age refers to his actions as pranks, thus suggesting his senility, and
demands that he be shorn of his knights, the imagery changes to correspond
with his emotional state—his indignation and his anger at the filial ingratitude
of Goneril, this “degenerate bastard”. Since the natural order of things is here
disturbed, the expression of this state of affairs, which is quite monstrous, re-
ceives its correspondency in its figurative presentation of ingratitude as a
“hideous seamonster”. This is reinforced by an appropriate shift in the imagery,
though the correspondence of destructive intent and power is maintained, to
“detested kite”. For a kite is a falcon-like bird which preys on small quarry,
such as is Lear without his kingship, without his power, moving down the
scale from greatness.

Shifting from the image of the kite, Lear intensifies his emotion of frustra-
tion and rage, which seethes in him against his unnatural daughter Goneril,
whom he has just cursed unnaturally, praying nature to make her sterile, by objectifying his rising obsession of ingratitude in the figure of a serpent's tooth. In thus juxtaposing images from the sky and from the crawling earth he suggests, perhaps, his subconscious awareness that both heaven and earth are against him. Having employed the images of sea-monster, kite, and serpent to vivify his referent, he gives further extension to the notion of Goneril's cruelty and sly, cunning nature by additional images from the animal world, "wolvish visage" and "fox", and these images for the first time blend with anger the passion of vengeance, for Lear wrathfully states that when Regan hears of this she will "slay" Goneril's wolvish visage and the Fool states that had one caught a fox like this daughter it would soon to the slaughter.

Now the imagery sinks below the animal stratum to the mollusk, thus intensifying the sense of the moral depths in which Lear, not yet pessimistically, helplessly wanders. The imagery of the snail and the oyster carries to the lowest pitch of figurative expression the blindness of Lear, his lack of judgment, the low order of the ratiocination from which proceeded his initial error. Then the image of the foolishness of Lear is carried upward to the animal stratum once again by "asses". If in this connection it is recalled that the animal stratum is often referred to as "the animal kingdom", the irony of Lear's position is painfully apparent.

Just as Goneril has been reduced in the area of imagery to a correspondence with animals that sting, bite, and destroy, organisms which are feral and inhuman, so her servant Oswald is dehumanized as a rat, a dog, a goose, the latter image being peculiarly appropriate to Oswald, who is remarkably consistent in the traits implicit in this figure.

With the momentary resurgence of Lear's old imperious attitude in his indignation at the stocking of his messenger Kent, the scale of the animal imagery rises from the stupid and compliant goose to horses, dogs, bears, and monkeys, thus suggesting the greater degree of the culpability of Cornwall and Regan by creating imagery belonging to animals on a higher ratiocinative plane and thereby rendering their guilt less excusable. Now again irony is blended explicitly with the imagery which sets forth Lear's moral problem. His imperious indignation, in terms of the imagery, is as cogent as learning secured from an ant. His intensified anger becomes adulterated with helplessness, and his orders to Regan and Cornwall to come forth are as ineffective as the cockney crying to the eels when she put them alive in the pastry. While anger is often imaged forth in feral terms, blindness, stupidity, weakness, and helplessness are presented in images from the still lower stratum of animate things, that of the snail, the oyster, and the eel, and in the appropriateness of the imagery is apparent once again its integral relation to the total structure of the play.

When Lear, having fled to his "Beloved Regan", reflects upon his love and generosity to his daughters which proceeded from his heart and upon the unnatural ingratitude paid him by Goneril in return, the image which externalizes his emotional state of outraged paternal affection mingled with surprise and shock appears in the form of sharp-toothed unkindness, like a vulture, tearing at his heart, and in his rising anger at Regan's rejection of his claims and her injunction to ask Goneril's forgiveness and return to her, this image is reinforced in the collateral one of being struck with a serpent's tongue upon the very heart.
In the psychological application of the imagery as expressive of Lear's emotive states at various stages of his mounting tragedy, the images of the wounding of his heart by vultures and serpents mark a crisis in the rising action, for after this there occurs, eventually in the storm scene, the loss of his wits, in other words, an ironic reduction of Lear himself to that unnatural state which is so essential a theme of the entire tragedy. His estrangement from normal human relations, consonant with the above, is further marked, in passionate reaction to Regan's rejection of him, by his refusal of her demand to dismiss fifty of his knights and by his determination, instead, to abjure all roofs and be a comrade with the wolf and the owl. Throughout the imagery runs an intensification of the theme of unnaturalness, the basis of which is, of course, filial ingratitude. Even the Gentleman discussing with Kent the storm on the heath uses imagery similar to Lear's as an atmospheric reinforcement of the psychological mood into which Lear has been precipitated; the stormy night into which Lear has emerged from the previous rejection scene is one from which the cub-drawn bear, the lion, and the belly-pinched wolf flee. Contending with the frightful elements, tearing his hair, striving to outscorn the wind, rain, and night, Lear is pursued by his heart-struck injuries. Also the unnatural cruelty of his pitiful state and the savagery of the night are figured forth, to some degree, in the aforementioned famished bear, fierce lion, and hunger-driven wolf.

The lowly imagery of the louse employed by the Fool, that of a small, wingless, blood-sucking insect, is an ironic image presenting a vivid, concrete manifestation of the contrast between Lear's impotent state and his rather imperial, though helpless, arrainment of the elements which have with his two pernicious daughters joined their battles against so old and white a head as his. The image of the louse is indicative of a descent from elevation, a contrast with the soaring evil of the vulture, and a descent from size, the massive evil of the sea-serpent; considered in its context it is also, in contrast with "head", indicative of a lack of intelligence and is, therefore, a further indictment of Lear's original irrationality. The imagery of the louse is both a presentment of Lear's impotency, the louse being on a lower level than that of the feral animals, a small wingless thing, almost insignificant though painful, and also a prefiguring of the pelican image which soon intensifies it, the image of a blood-sucking animal thing, implicit in the figure of the louse, having for its referent the daughters who have taken all and, draining his blood from him, seek his death. And in an extension of this idea and a logical transmutation of it, that of flesh feeding on the flesh that begot it, Lear's emotions express themselves in the metaphor of the pelican daughters. So admirable a consistency is there in the images and so vivid a reflection of Lear's psyche that it is evident that the imagery is of the very texture of Lear's psyche itself. Habitually and spontaneously his mind expresses itself in imagery, and when his mind is in a disturbed state the imagery is that of the animal world, or at least the world of animate, sub-human things.

The notion of descent, which inheres in the animal figures, is made explicit by Lear in his assertion that in Edgar's case nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters. Expressive of this and showing the partial correspondency of Edgar's state with that of Lear on the stormy heath are the images employed by Edgar:
...hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey (III. iv. 96-98)

With Lear’s climactic statement:

"Ha! here’s three on’s us are sophisticated! Thou are the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings!" (III. iv. 110-14)

the descent is accomplished, and the correspondency of Lear to the animal stratum toward which his psychic tragedy has been tending and in terms of images from which he has characteristically expressed himself is complete. Bereft of reason, mad, tearing off his clothes, Lear is now little better than the beasts. He has reached the bottom of the scale which his imagery has prefigured. The climax of descent in terms of animal imagery, if this is not too paradoxical a statement, coincides with the climax of the play.

When Lear appears at Dover mad, fantastically dressed with wild flowers, some of his imagery corresponds to his state of mind: crow-keeper, mouse, bird, gilded butterflies; this is the innocent, naive imagery of childhood or senility, a harmless, neutral, non-evocative imagery proper to one whose wits are gone. Yet in the subsequent imagery begins his reascent into partial rationality, his progress upward from the animal state with which in the climax he had identified himself. His memory, in the area of his emotions, reasserts itself and with it a reminiscent indignation and anger which bring into prominence once again his obsession of filial ingratitude: “They flattered me like a dog” (IV. iv. 98). Blended with it, too, is a critical bitterness which is an image of his renascent awareness of his fallen state. The wren and the gilded fly, the fitchew and the soiled horse become images of copulation and adultery, and in the extension of causes into a relative complexity is suggested not only the advance of Lear’s mind in a tentative way toward humanity once again but the substitution of cynicism for the violated and outraged affection which throughout the play had so obsessed him.

Lear’s reascent to reason and, therefore, to humanity is arrested by a resurgence of tragedy—the death of Cordelia. The irony of his apparent moral victory in self-recognition, in his awareness of good and evil, and in at least a rudimentary sense of equity and of the real victory of the malevolence of his enemies, carries the essential tensions of the play through to the very end. Lear’s reaction against the injustice of Cordelia’s death, the needless waste of goodness in the world, his questioning of the why of things, are expressed through his characteristic imagery which presents his skepticism in regard to the moral system of the cosmos, an act of ratiocination which is, of course, on a human rather than an animal level:

"Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
And thou no breath at all?" (V. iii. 306-07)

And on the curve of his partial reascent toward reason and humanity, presented in terms of animal imagery to the last, Lear dies.

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