EVIDENCE OF MARXISM IN KING LEAR:
FALLACY IN THE 17TH CENTURY TRAGEDY

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Fallacy in the 17th Century Tragedy

In the beginning of the play King Lear represents monarchy at its truest sense of absolute power. Throughout the tragedy audiences can watch the Lear kingdom slowly collapse due to the inequalities of the feudal system. Totality is essential to this Marxist interpretation of King Lear because it is necessary to analyze the tragedy as a whole before making accusations. This report will analysis how King Lear, Edmund, and numerous other characters slowly transition into the mindset of a Marxist with textual evidence and a breakdown to disprove the accusations of critics.

Determining if King Lear fits into a Marxist agenda is not a new idea considering numerous Marxists and their critics are drawn to this Shakespearean play. The first modern interpretation of this tragedy was John Danby’s “A Study of ‘King Lear,” which held Marxist interest because of the chronicle of modernization and the universal vision of social totality. The line, “The weight of this sad time we must obey; speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.322-323), is a prime representation of totality where a deeper expression of the truth is shown. Totality is essential to Marxist thought because the whole of a social movement, as opposed to a specific aspect, is what causes Marxism to discover the point of a historical event. According to Peter Holbrook, writer of “The Left And King Lear,” this means if applying Marxist thought the individual views both
major and insignificant details before placing their interpretation on the desire of that movement. Desire is evident throughout King Lear but truly surfaces in Edmund’s opposition to the social structure that refuses him prominence in his father’s castle because he was born a bastard son. It is this desire for acceptance that drives him to become power-hungry and divide the households of Goneril and Regan.

Marxism pushes an individual to accomplish the unthinkable, form both supportive and critical beliefs, and remain future oriented (Holbrook). The line, “O you mighty gods! This world I do renounce” (4.6.34-35), where Gloucester attempts suicide in itself does not represent accomplishment of the unthinkable. However, Edgar convinces Gloucester that he fell from a cliff and survived because the gods were not ready for him to perish. This is evident in the line, “Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors of men’s impossibilities, have preserved thee” (4.6.73-74), which means Gloucester is still alive because he gained honor for himself by performing deeds impossible to men.

Gloucester’s survival in the quote above suggests the world can be made better by human effort, which can be used to disprove a Marxism interpretation and support Meliorism. This is problematic because the two philosophies do not fit easily together, and using Meliorism would lead to an interpretation of Lear from the viewpoint of a distressed Christian (Holbrook). A prime example of a Meliorism can be found in A.C. Bradley’s “Shakespearean Tragedy: King Lear” interpretation of Lear’s words over Cordelia’s body in the line, “This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so, it is a chance which does redeem all sorrows that ever I have felt.” (5.3.264-6). Bradley discovered through his optimistic interpretation, “In Lear’s last accents and gestures look an unbearable joy,”
which means the play is not wretched, but instead contains a tasteful amount of misery. Holbrook believes a possible Meliorism or Christianized interpretation of Lear, “Should not discourage Marxist criticism from attempting to find traces of social hope in it.” These concepts can coexist because, “Marxist reality means: reality plus the future within it,” as Ernst Bloch wrote in “The Artistic Illusion,” “Marxism is future related on a level equal to Christianity.”

Ernst Bloch states, “Truth is the portrayal of processes to the not yet lived possibility,” which ties in nicely with Theodor Adorno’s demystification of ethics and Marxist politics in “Reflections from Damaged Life.” Adorno explains the Lear world needs truth because from the start of the tragedy one sees a world consumed by lies. An excellent example of this is the line, “Truth’s a dog must to kennel; he must be whipped out, when Lady the branch may stand by the fire and stink” (1.4.95). An additional type of demystification found within Lear is an implement of violence and oppression, which seem to oppose a Marxist interpretation. A prime example of oppression is Cordelia’s line, “For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down; myself could else out-frown false fortune’s frown. Shall we not see these sisters?” (5.3.5-7). However, oppression of a king is would be considered an oxymoron under the interpretation that the Lear world is moving towards a classless Marxist society. Regan’s statement, “What need one” (2.4.258), where the sisters attempt to strip their father of his 100 knights first seems as an attempt to oppress their father and quickly gain control of his kingdom, but it is also a strong push towards Marxism and equality.

Neither the sisters nor Lear himself leads the kingdom toward Marxism because Edmund is the primary catalyst of Marxist thought, Arnold Kettle argues in his essay
“The Humanity of King Lear.” However, a textual analysis shows this to be false because Lear is represented as the main conductor of Marxism. Kettle states, “Once Lear gives up his land, he loses all power. That, in a nutshell, is the thesis of Marxist thought; ownership equals power and power allows for exploitation.” This comment supports his thesis of conflicting values amongst the feudal lords and the bourgeois, as well as a Marxist interpret of Lear, but disproves his focus that Edmund is the catalyst for Marxist thought. For the purposes of this work it can be stated that Marxism aspects are found throughout the epic amongst wide array of characters. However, Kettle’s essay does make multiple points that must be included to support a Marxist interpretation of the play.

Edmund’s opening speech portrays the revolutionary idea that the underclass in the world of Lear seeks equality (Kettle). The first foreshadowing to the descent into Marxism is evident in Edmund’s line, “I stand in the plague of custom, and permit the curiosity of nations to deprive me. Why bastard? When my dimensions are as well compact, my mind as generous and my shape as true” (1.2.3-8). This soliloquy is not only evidence of desire as discussed earlier, but it begins Kettle’s analysis that the future of society’s only hope is to embrace humanism. A Marxist interpretation may seem to be weakened by the aspect of humanism since Marxism traditionally dignifies itself on tough-mindedness and realism (Holbrook). Although, it can be argued that the lacking human rights record of Marxism encourages one to analyze the virtue Marxism has made of tough-mindedness. Gloucester’s line responding to living conditions of the poor: “I see it feelingly (4.6.145),” shows that humanist sympathy is not a key point as the play moves closer to the concepts of Marxism. Assuming this to be true, “a growth of kindness is precisely what Lear shows us as the beginning of hope for its society”
Thus, Marxism and humanism can be linked because among other similarities they are both future oriented.

Arnold Kettle suggests the only optimistic future of the Lear world is one that incorporates humanism during his analysis of King Lear’s opening speech. In this opening Lear states, “Which of you shall we say doth love us most that we our largest bounty may extend where nature doth with merit challenge” (1.1.50-53). Humanism is necessary because nothing is more barbaric than placing a tangible value of money, power, and land on the intangible value of love. Timothy Sexton states in his publication “King Lear: When Freud Met Mark,” “The Feudal system’s lack of humanism by demanding love in exchange for a commodity is all the evidence required to support of Edmund's contention that all is not right in the kingdom.” True, Edmund’s assertion does lead a humanist drive throughout the tragedy, but more importantly it is inhumanity of King Lear’s opening speech that drives his decent into Marxism. This is because when Lear forces his daughters to contest their love in exchange for land he influences them to become power-hungry. Once Lear surrenders his power, the bourgeois of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund try to illegitimatize him; just at Edmund was illegitimatized due to his birth as a bastard son. The claim that Lear is senile and should be striped from his knights is witnessed in the line, “Allow not nature more than nature needs, man’s life’s as cheap as a beast’s” (2.4.264-265). Once King Lear enters the storm, Kettle argues his transformation to a Marxism system of belief has begun and is visible throughout the rest of the play.

Timothy Sexton’s publication “When Freud Met Mark” introduces several assertions that could damage a Marxism interpretation of Lear if one does not, as a
Marxist would say, “Direct their attention to the things which might otherwise be held too insignificant to require consideration” (Holbrook). Sexton’s essay suggests Lear’s choice to divide his kingdom among his daughters did not occur as an act of inhumanity that stood as a driving factor to Marxism, as is suggested above. On the contrary, King Lear’s division of his kingdom occurred as a method of fulfilling the psychological desire of daughter and mother that Lear was lacking in his life. This belief is on par with Coppelia Kahn’s essay “The Absent Mother in King Lear,” since she suggests if each daughter has only a section of the kingdom they will rely on Lear for leadership while he is also codependent on them throughout his retirement. In application this would mean Lear is subconsciously pulling from Sigmund Freud's Oedipal theories of infant development to place his daughters in the status of both mother and child, caring for him while he remains authoritative over their actions (Kahn).

Oedipal theory is problematic to the argument of Marxism in King Lear because it implies tragedy fell over the kingdom because Lear lacked a strong maternal influence. If this were true it would destroy the interpretation that the kingdom collapsed due to the inequalities of the feudal system, thus eliminating a milestone for Marxist interpretation. However, there are numerous gaps in Kahn’s argument and her essay does not contain the excessive amount of textual evidence that can be found within opposing Marxist interpretations. A major gap in Kahn’s analysis is that Edmund is only mentioned once in her essay because his existence weakens her claims and as Sexton states, “Kahn's devotion to shunting characters that serve to undermine her thesis is ultimately what makes her argument less persuasive.”
A Marxism viewpoint would undoubtedly remain valid even if Kahn’s Freudian interpretation were more persuasive. This is true because regardless of Lear’s purpose for dividing the kingdom, the end result is destruction of feudalism and the establishment of a developing Marxist society. This is evident in the line where King Lear states, “Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, how shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, your looped and windowed raggedness defend you from seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en too little care of this!” (3.4.29-33). This speech is essential to the Marxist interpretation because it is here that Lear realizes the failures of his domination and he comes to term with the fact that as a ruler he was alienated from the economic realities of his citizens (Sexton).

As witnessed in King Lear’s speech above, monarchy leads to absolute power and this type to total control either leads to abuse of individuals on the bottom of the social scale or total collapse. When analyzed from a totality viewpoint the tragic ending of King Lear contains both an inhumane abuse of the poor and a total social collapse. As the tragedy comes to a close the transition to Marxism is incomplete, but the building blocks are in place.


