

Shakespeare's Anticipation of Hobbes and Hume

It is no great insight, I think, to note that Lear's search for his inner self - "essential man" - is one of the central elements of the play, "King Lear". One way of conceptualizing this essential man is to consider man in the state of nature, free from the artifice of civilization and society. It is no coincidence that Lear's epiphanies about essential man (and the closest he comes to reverting to essential man) occur far from civilization, hiding from a storm in a wretched hovel far out on the moor. Lear has literally entered a state of nature to find his own nature. But the truly interesting related questions are these: What *is* his inner self, his essential man? Does he succeed?

Complicating matters is the fact that the story's chief villain, Edmund, also reverts to a state of nature. In fact, while Lear's early comments about finding himself are vague and suggestive ("tis our fast intent to shake all cares and business from our age. . .while we unburdened crawl towards death" 1.1.38-41, "Since we now will divest us both of rule/ Interest of territory, cares of state" loc. cit. 49-50), Edmund is quite explicit in his first major lines. He rejects the law of civilization and pledges himself to nature, revealing his true self. He will take by treachery and invention what is *legitimately* his brother's. Edmund's true self is amoral and ruthless; what is Lear's? And which of these versions of essential man is really essential man? Which is the accurate view of human nature?

I have no answer to the latter two questions. But my view is that Shakespeare has anticipated the great 17th and 18th century debates about the state of nature and human nature. On the one hand, Edmund embodies the Hobbesian view that the state of nature is a "war of all against all", and human nature is selfish and brutal. On the other, Lear (might) embody the Smith / Hume view that human nature is essentially sympathetic. (I say "might", because it is unclear whether Lear eventually accepts this view, or shows any sympathy at all; but that's a separate issue). Shakespeare beat the philosophers,

particularly Hobbes, to the punch by a good forty years.

Let us look at Edmund first. It may seem odd to take the spotlight off Lear himself, but as I pointed out, Edmund is the first to explicitly reveal his essential nature and invoke the state of nature. While Lear's opening speeches contain some imagery dealing with shedding his outer self¹, his subsequent actions seem to belie this. More importantly, Lear hints and suggests here, but Edmund is bluntly overt: "Thou, Nature, are my goddess; to thy law/ my services are bound. Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom and permit / the curiosity of nations to deprive me. . ." (1:2 1-4).

Edmund, recall, chafes at being not only the second son, but a bastard, and the fact that due to law and convention, he stands to inherit nothing. In binding himself to the law of nature, and abjuring custom and the law of nations, Edmund explicitly places himself in the state of nature. And what does one do in the state of nature? One seizes any advantage for oneself through strength and cunning, not through law or politics: "Well then / Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land. / Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund / As to the legitimate. Fine word, "legitimate?"!" (1:2 15-18) With that, Edmund puts in motion a treacherous stratagem that will lead to his brother's death or exile, and his own ascension to the Earldom. Notice especially the disavowal of the very concept of "legitimacy" - Edmund pays it no respect and considers it his active enemy.

It seems impossible to read this without thinking of Hobbes' war of all against all in Leviathan.

Consider Hobbes' remarks on the natural condition of mankind. First, competition:

From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delectation only) endeavour to destroy or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass that *where an invader hath no more to fear than another man's single power*, if one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united to dispossess and deprive him² (Italics mine)

I draw attention to the italicized passage, because that drives home that we are talking about man's

¹cf. 1:1 49-50, 135-136,

²Leviathan 1 ch 13

proclivities when there is no state; i.e., man in the state of nature. In the state of nature, the struggle for scarce resources creates enemies who kill and dominate to seize those resources. What is more, man in the state of nature is inclined to pre-emptively slay or control any potential threats:

And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself so reasonable as anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him. . .³

Admittedly, neither of these points explain Edmund's actions towards the end of the play, killing Cordelia and the Fool. But it is a shockingly accurate description of Edmund's nature as Shakespeare presents it.

One last point: The move from Edmund's pledging himself to the state of nature, to an account of human nature in general, may seem suspect. But the device of the state of nature really is an attempt to understand what man is “really” like when freed of the artificial constrictions of civilization, hence, to tell us what “real” human nature is.

Now for the trickier part: Lear himself. Lear hints at his quest to find his “essential man” in his opening speech, but it is not really until Act III that he gets explicit about it. This is to be expected: Lear is hardly introspective (“Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself”, 1:1 296-297), and at least at the outset, it is pretty clear that he has no idea how to go about shedding himself of outward appearances. But what is most confusing is that Lear says some things about man's nature that do not seem to cohere.

The first explicit mention by Lear of man in the state of nature comes at 2:4 266-273:

“Oh, reason not the need! our basest beggars / Are in the poorest things superfluous. Allow not nature more than nature needs / Man's life is cheap as a beast's . . . But for true need - / You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need.”

If you do not allow man any more than what he needs to survive, his life is as cheap as a beast's. In

³Hobbes, Ibid

other words, if man is placed in the state of nature, his life is cheap as a beast's. Now, perhaps the consequent here means that life is really not worth living in the state of nature. But I rather think that it means that in the state of nature, life is cheap because man reverts to the war of all against all. This perspective seems to be reinforced when Lear meets Tom o' Bedlam / Edgar in the hovel on the moor:

“Is man / no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st / the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool / the cat no perfume. . . Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated / man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal/ as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton / here.” (III-4 101-108)

This is our first explicit mention of essential man, and it is perplexing. On the one hand, he is a poor, bare, forked animal (a snake?), which sounds like a miserable existence. But on the other hand, after saying all this, Lear starts to tear off his clothes so that he too can be unaccommodated man. Why would he want that?

So far, Lear's essential man looks pretty much the same as Edmund's – trapped in a nightmare world where life is cheap. And he and Edmund both embrace this. But the picture with Lear is more complicated. Consider this scene in between the previous two citations, just before Lear enjoins his Fool and Kent to enter the hovel:

“Prithee, go in thyself, and seek thine own ease. / This tempest will not give me leave to ponder / On things would hurt me more / [To the Fool] In, boy, go first. You houseless poverty - / Nay, get thee in. I'll pray, and then I'll sleep. / Poor naked wretches, whereso-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! Take physic, pomp; / Expose thyself to what wretches feel, / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them / And show the heavens more just.” (III-4 23-36)

Lear does not here invoke the state of nature, or even human nature or his own nature. Nonetheless, Lear has just left civilization and is freezing on the moor – the entire act places Lear literally in the state of nature. And what is notable about Lear's revelation? He must expose himself to what wretches feel – he must exercise empathy. And to an extent the experience changes him. Lear wishes to sit in the storm and think, but realizes his comrades are miserable, and entreats them to seek shelter in the hovel. This does not strike us as something the old Lear would have done – if Lear is miserable, everyone is

going to be miserable.

Now, it is unclear to me how long this change of heart lasts. Lear is so fascinated by Tom's "wisdom" and Tom's similar situation – done in by ungrateful daughters – that he repeatedly ignores Tom's "Poor Tom's a-cold" and continues interrogating Tom in the storm, forcing Tom to sit through his ridiculous mock trial of Regan and Goneril. Nonetheless, a different view of human nature is on the table now. Perhaps men in the state of nature do not war with each other out of competition, diffidence, and a need for glory, as Hobbes would have it, but instead are bound to each other by empathy. This view is exemplified by the philosophers Adam Smith and David Hume in the mid-eighteenth century, although this flavor of sentimentalism had been in the air for some time. Consider the very opening of Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments:

"How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it. Of this kind is pity or compassion, the emotion which we feel for the misery of others, when we either see it, or are made to conceive it in a very lively manner. That we often derive sorrow from the sorrow of others, is a matter of fact too obvious to require any instances to prove it; for this sentiment, like all the other original passions of human nature, is by no means confined to the virtuous and humane. . ."⁴

Notice also Hume's interesting choice of example when he argues for the existence of a moral sentiment common to all mankind:

"Of all crimes that human creatures are capable of committing, the most horrid and unnatural is ingratitude, especially when it is committed against parents, and appears in the more flagrant instances of wounds and death. This is acknowledged by all mankind, philosophers as well as the people"⁵

So. Which view of human nature is Shakespeare's? I'm not going to take a hard stand on this issue. In my view, much hinges on how the very final scene is interpreted. How much credence can be given to Edmund's recanting? A sincere recanting would count in favor of the Smithian view of human

⁴Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, P 2

⁵Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, III.1

nature. Is Lear hopeful at the end, when Cordelia dies and he thinks he sees her breath? Does he believe he sees her ghost ascend to heaven? That too, I think would count in favor of the Smithian view. Is Lear simply insane, not hopeful but delusional? Perhaps Lear stripped down to essential man, and found there simply was no essential man, just emptiness.