

Mario Paduano

Thomas Jefferson: Personality, Character and Public Life

July 27, 2006

Seminar Essay

Et tu' Jefferson?: Thomas Jefferson and Life Lessons in *King Lear*

When one considers examples from popular culture that showcase positive and respectful familial relations “Leave it to Beaver,” “Father Knows Best” and perhaps “the Cosby Show” come to mind. The sons and daughters in each of these television shows, while not perfect, ultimately respect and value their elders. In fact, one can safely claim that these shows even foreground the importance of this value in a didactic fashion. If asked to expand this list, one would be hard-pressed to include Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, yet this is just what Thomas Jefferson interestingly does in a letter to an in-law.

In an August 1771 epistle to Robert Skipwith, Thomas Jefferson answers an earlier request from Skipwith for a list of recommended books. Much like contemporary English teachers, yours truly included, Jefferson believed in the didactic value of literature, “The field of imagination is thus laid open to our use and lessons may be formed to illustrate and carry home to the heart every moral rule of life” (742). This belief that fiction, while “not true,” could provide insights and lessons to guide human action leads him to argue in the next sentence, “Thus a lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading *King Lear*, than by all the dry volumes of ethics, and divinity that ever were written” (742). Given the strength of the qualifier Jefferson ends his sentence with, it’s clear Jefferson sees an unambiguous and powerful moral in this classic drama. Yet, Shakespeare and his plays are notoriously difficult to boil down to

simple didactic messages, and it's intriguing that Jefferson discerns a simple, straight-forward filial lesson in this tragedy, arguably, the most tragic of all of Shakespeare's tragedy. That lesson, however, is fairly mute. In fact, that lesson is hardly the focus of the play at all. Jefferson, however, might have taken more from this play – lessons that might have had a greater bearing on his life; namely, the demand for attention from one's offspring often begets false flattery, allowing unfettered visitation (albeit the custom) strains one's finances and the accumulation of possessions does not make the man especially one in debt.<sup>1</sup>

To summarize (albeit inadequately), *King Lear* begins with Lear's decision to retire and, hence, divide his kingdom amongst his three daughters, Regan, Goneril and Cordelia. He asks each to prove their loyalty to him. The first two flatter him in a wildly exaggerated fashion. Cordelia, however, refuses too. Unhappy and unsatisfied with Cordelia's response, Lear divides his kingdom between Goneril and Regan and banishes Cordelia.

Lear, however, soon learns the true nature of those two daughters. He initially plans to take turns leaving with each, but the daughters find their father more of a hassle than he's worth. Eventually, Lear is thrown out of both houses and goes insane as a result. He realizes that both daughters are little more than sycophants.

Unlike her sisters, Cordelia stays true to her father and rescues him from the English countryside where he has apparently gone mad. She nurses him back to relative health and, with her new husband, plans to take back the throne of England from her sisters by force. Her plans are thwarted, however, and she is hanged. Lear discovers her dead body and then dies himself.

If Jefferson sees a version of filial piety worthy of imitation in this play, it's difficult to determine why. Admittedly, Cordelia stays true to her father and does not succumb to his desire for

---

<sup>1</sup> Again, boiling down Shakespeare's works to moralistic lessons runs the risk of over-simplifying what were first-and-foremost performances written for a popular audience not keen to being preached to from the stage. Those in the Globe valued blood, action, comedy, tragedy and catharsis, not moralistic lessons. This essay, hence, is not meant to be an attempt at a similar simplification. Yet, since Jefferson sees didactic value in *King Lear*, it might be instructive to consider the lesson he saw within the play and the other lessons he might have/should have learned.

inflated flattery, yet she dies at the end of the play. What might we learn from her death? What might we learn from Lear's? Perhaps it's better to remain loyal to one's parents even if it brings about your death? Perhaps it's better to die than mistreat one's parent? Perhaps it's best for parent and sibling to die together in loyalty than have the latter engage in false flattery? The lesson of piety that Jefferson discerns in this play is by no means transparent or unproblematic and while other didactic possibilities may exist, the filial lesson of *King Lear* is by no means obvious nor does such a lesson seem to be Shakespeare's focus.

Other morals, however, might be gleaned from the play and, ironically, these morals might have a greater relevance to Jefferson's life. Many of Lear's actions and their ultimate effects might stand as lessons to Jefferson. Perhaps he might have benefited as much as a son or daughter from digesting the consequences of Lear's actions and the play as a whole?

First, Lear's propensity to demand acknowledgement and flattery from his daughters seems analogous to Jefferson's epistolary instructions to his. While Jefferson by no means demands that his daughters sing his praises, he certainly has expectations concerning their attention to him. Jefferson misses the correspondences from his daughters and wishes them to write more often. Nonetheless, the tone of this demand and the letter-writing schedule he creates might remind us of Lear's demands. Both, instead of allowing their daughters to act independently, demand their attentions specifically on their (Lear/Jefferson's) own timelines. But if we can glean a lesson from *King Lear*, it's that this type of demand often elicits less-than-honest or less-than-forthright responses. It's easy to understand the desire to hear from one's son or daughter on a frequent basis but to demand so might encourage disingenuous or insincere replies as it does in the play.

Second, after Lear's retirement, he assumes that Regan and Goneril will not only take care of him but also his entire royal entourage. However, both daughters see how expensive this obligation is and each soon balks. Before Lear knows it, his entourage of 100 is whittled down to

50, then 25, then 2. While the daughters admittedly act out of spite, they both understand the cost to themselves if they were to house Lear's entire train of followers.

Jefferson, unlike Goneril or Regan, is beholden to the values and expectations of aristocratic Virginian culture. When visitors arrive at Monticello, custom dictates that Jefferson take them in. However, this expectation soon wears of both Jefferson and his finances. He eventually even builds a retreat, Poplar Forest, to escape from the many visitors who come and stay as long as they wish. His finances also suffer as a result. While Goneril/Regan and Jefferson's situations are entirely different, the former nonetheless understand the financial burden an open-ended open-door policy will have on their finances and as a result, rightly or wrongly, force their visiting father to downsize. Perhaps Jefferson might have found respite, both personal and financial, had he been able to escape custom and do similarly.

Third, Lear is incredibly stubborn when it comes to giving up his personal possessions to save money. He believes possessions are, in fact, what separates humans from animals and the more possessions one has, the better. When Regan questions the size and amount of his possessions and the number in his entourage, he responds, "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 beast's" (2.4) Jefferson too seems in love with his possessions. Even though his financial situation is dire and he's land-rich yet cash-poor, Jefferson seems never to hesitate to import fine goods from Europe including expensive wines. Again, the situations here are utterly different, yet both men's attachment to possessions contributes to their less-than-optimal state of financial affairs at the end of their lives.

Viewed in isolation, *King Lear* hardly lends itself to life-lessons and morals. Still, since Jefferson saw such a lesson, it's illuminating to ascertain just what he saw in the play (namely, the value of filial piety even if it requires the ultimate sacrifice) and what he might/should have seen in

the play (namely, the dangers of forced devotion, un-ending and expensive visitations and an unhealthy attachment to possessions). Since these latter lessons too are admittedly a bit of a stretch themselves, this project further begs an intriguing question: what Shakespearian play might Jefferson have learned the most from? Perhaps *Othella* on the issue of racism? Perhaps *Julius Caesar* on the dangers of unchecked power? *Taming of the Shrew* on the dangers of an unchecked woman? Or *Merchant of Venice* on the value of writing to love? More importantly however, Jefferson clearly saw an important value in reading of literature, a value that existed before him and still exists now: even though fiction is just that, fiction, it still offers its readers life-lessons from which they might benefit.

The lessons Jefferson needed to learn from Lear.

Lear and Jefferson.

Connection #1: Jefferson's requests of his daughters in his letters seem a bit Lear-like. He demands actions in return for his love. He demands attention, rotating letters. Etc.

- Is Jefferson at all concerned that he will be forsaken like Lear? Is that behind his insistent demands for attention?

Connection #2: Lear's plan after dividing the kingdom is to split his time with his 100+ servants between his daughters (i.e. freeload off them). This is similar to what people do to Jefferson.

Would he not see that this is problematic?

Connection #3: Lear is loathe to give up his possessions and suggests that a man is judged by what he has. Jefferson seems to over-spend on possessions even though he is deeply in debt.

Lear: "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 beast's."

QUOTES:

[on his daughter's bullshit]

Act IV, Scene VI

**KING LEAR:** Ha! Goneril, with a white beard! They flattered

me like a dog; and told me I had white hairs in my

beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and

'no' to every thing that I said!--'Ay' and 'no' too

was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet

[100]

me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the

thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found

'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o'

their words: they told me I was every thing; 'tis a lie,

I am not ague-proof.

[105]

[Cordelia's love]

Act IV, Scene VII

[25]

**CORDELIA:** O my dear father! Restoration hang

Thy medicine on my lips; and let this kiss

Repair those violent harms that my two sisters

Have in thy reverence made!