

R. A. FRASER: Shakespeare's Poetics  
In relation to King Lear  
 Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961

In his book Fraser adopts Erwin Panofsky's principles. He enumerates those pure forms in a work of art which carry primary meanings and subjects that work of art to pre-iconographical description. Thus he finds in King Lear configurations like: pelicans, vipers, blind men, mad men, etc... "It is the iconographer's task to see in those images the manifestation of underlying principles". The iconologist will muster many documents, poems, sermons, proverbs, ballads and pictures, in order to reveal the intrinsic meaning of the work of art and to reconstruct the mental landscape of the author.

The age of Shakespeare pursued its way to truth by indirections, through analogies, images, and metaphors. As early as 1531 Andrea Alciati published his Emblematum Libellus. By 1586 there were more than seven hundred volumes of emblem literature in print in Shakespeare's lifetime. In 1586 appeared Whitney's Choice of Emblems. Though Shakespeare may have looked into Whitney and certainly read Holinshed, Fraser has no interest in establishing whether he ever saw one of the emblems cited. Shakespeare's imagery is rooted in his time, and he levies most on what is traditional.

In the first chapter Fraser deals with the serious portents; as symbols they are the most wonted conventions, not only in Shakespeare but in the whole of Renaissance literature as well. The Renaissance mind, when not perverted or beclouded, was full of God's proximity. In King Lear the villainous characters entertain no belief in Providence. Edmund is impious and

self-sufficiently scoffs at the stars. Gloucester, who is alone superstitious, concedes a universe from which the gods on whom he calls have all departed. His belief in portents rests on the acceptance of a principle of order and causality.

According to the cosmology of the Renaissance, God watches over and admonishes, His interaction being either a personal, mysterious power or a threatening, judging and punishing power.

The title page of Sir Walter Raleigh's The History of the World depicts those allegorical pictures whose interaction makes up the story he would tell: Good Report, Notoriety, Experience, Truth - and above them all, the ever watchful eye of Providence.

In the third chapter Fraser introduces a term "Kind" around which he collects the main motifs of the dramas. For the gods are more than mere wanders. They have given to man a fixed nature, the Elizabethans call it Kind. If a man violates that nature, if he trespasses against kind, he is destroyed, not directly by the deity, but rather from within man himself. The sin of Lear destroys his frame of nature, and leaves him prey to madness. The emblem writer discovers that evil "eats up" himself.

The image of Kind is central both to Lear and other plays of Shakespeare. Its function is to assert an organic relation between conduct and the consequences of conduct. It defines nature, not a tissues of precepts but a fund of possibilities of testing. Therefore Shakespeare's plays are such testings. Like a tree cut away from its roots unable to survive, neither can a man survive who repudiates his condition. Plate XVI. illustrates the moral: the virtuous man plants his roots in the house of the Lord. He shall stand and grow whatever storms come against him. Truth to the

Renaissance is Time's daughter and heir. "Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides". In the course of events Cordelia is justified. Fraser suggests that Shakespeare's imagery owes much to the countryside, and he depicts human beings most in terms of plants and trees. Juliet likens her love and Romeo's to a bud, in the hope of a beautiful flower. Desdemona, when Othello mistakes her for the destroyer of their love, is altered in his eyes from a flower to a weed.

In iconography the Goddess Fortuna stands uneasily upon the sea, one of her feet seeking to steady itself on a plunging dolphin. The other is fixed upon a spherical stone, which continuously rolls this way and that. She is painted with a blindfold and beside her is a wheel which she turns inconstantly. She is, indeed, a right whore. /R, III, 5. 4. 9.//3H. VI, 4. 3. 46.//2H, IV, 5. 3. 136./ Fortune's fools /Oswald, Edmund, Antony, Cleopatra/ are blind, suffering themselves to be guided and led by her. A contrary emblem is the halcyon, in iconography the emblem of peace, which smooths the commotion of the waves. Shakespeare's halcyon is typified as the opportunist, the idolater of fortune, whose wisdom is no wisdom at all. The way of Oswald is the way of the halcyon's. /Plate XIX./ Fortune's dominion is not absolute, for patience, wisdom, and virtue all triumphs/ over Fortune in the end. /Plate XVIII./ The wise man turns his back on Fortune, since, he knows that her power is conditional. After all Fortune is a minor goddess, ruling over the rim of the wheel, while God sits at the centre. In the Rape of Lucrece, it is Time who turns the giddy round of fortune's wheel. In the earliest Spanish engravings on metal, Time controlling Fortune

is himself controlled by rains, held in the hands of God. To Boethius and to Dante, to Chaucer and Lydgate and Shakespeare, Fortune and Chance is a handmaiden similar to Providence. So Fortune is a metaphor describing what happens after the important decisions have been made. Chaos on the other hand is the abrogation of life and the result of Kind's destruction. King Lear dramatizes what happens after the ideal is destroyed. While Providence is the emblem of order in the universe, Fortune as disorder is the deposer of all temporal business. In Plate XXVIII. Niobe despising divine privilege and bereft of her children, turns into stone. According to the Ptolemaic universe there is a wonderful symmetry and a definite relation of harmony in the notion and magnitude of the orbs. The forces in the dramas range from ordered unity to a chaotic, distorted estate. Evil culminates in absolute confusion, as conceived in man, who mistakes his relationship to the greater world of which he is part. For Man is flawed and will always tend to fall. When justice lies hidden all earthly things collapse in confusion. The emblem of that confusion is Doomsday, the promised end. /Plate XVIII./ /Lear, 5. 3. 263./ /2H, VI, 5. 2. 40-42./ The Doomsday pictures occur in the Shakespearean corpus regularly.

Cesare Ripa's emblem, the Pelican, appears in King Lear as the emblem of charity. She never stirs from her young and when nourishment fails, she feeds them with her own blood. Like Christ and the good King who is Christ's vicar, the Pelican is kind. "Lear's daughters are doghearted" full of - envious - desires, and are contemptible in nature. They share his slyness with the fox, his ferocity with the boar and his incruitable cruelty with the tiger. "Like the Pelican they tap out and drunkenly carouse the blood of their father." Lear feeds them with his blood, but they offer death

for life. Likewise, in the art of the Renaissance as in the art of the Middle Ages, the same image depicts the quelling of man's latent bestiality. The image of an ape or monkey in chains represents the state of man before the New Revelation. The ape who resembles man is taken as the symbol of everything sub-human in man. In Renaissance sculpture this metaphor is used to dramatize the debased condition of the soul "enslaved by matter". In the plays it turns out that men are seen to be worse than beasts. In King Lear Shakespeare offers 133 distinct allusions to 64 different animals. The image of man as microcosm, in which passion tries to lead the way, is Shakespeare's chief occupation. The often tragic struggle between the rebel and the ruler is contained within man himself.

In the sixth chapter /Reason and Will/ Fraser discusses two main contrary motifs as two fundamental features of human nature. Reason is sovereign, Will is a liegeman. Reason's office is to "hedge round the will". Still the light of Reason can be beguiled by the facade of things, for it confuses Show with Substance whereas Man is a creature who necessarily mistakes Substance for Show. /All's Well, 2. I. 153./ /Pericles 4. 4. 23./ /2H, VI, 3. I. 226-230/ /K.Lear I. 4. 14./

In the last chapter of his book Fraser points out that after the opening scene in King Lear we can speak of a dénouement occurring. Though the structure of the drama is seemingly identical with that of the comedies, in the latter the heroes are moved by circumstance. In the play the hero moves, acts and dies. Therefore King Lear is the drama of Choice. Lear's purification through suffering and miseries leads to a glorious end. /K. Lear 2. 2. 172./ Finally there is an inspiring, though not tragic, redemption. At this

deepest point, the drama reaches its highest level and the solution is provided by mercy, as a kind of poetic judgment.

Lear, through his patient and tragic repentance sees the truth as revealed by Cordelia's death. Thus Lear is saved and reborn in a sacrificial love. This ending is a kind of reconciliation, and a new beginning and Fraser lays great stress on this redemptive scene in the play. /Plates XLV. XLVIII. XLIX. LIII./ /As You Like It 2. 7. 137-139/ /2H, IV, I. I. 155./ /King John 2. I. 3/5./ He quotes Nashe's Summer's Last Will and Testament: as if he was quoting Shakespeare:

"Heaven is our heritage  
Earth but a player's stage"

In his final summary Fraser accounts for all the motifs each section contains and repeats his general principles concerning the deep structure of the plays. He finds that in the Comedies and in the Tragedies the same poetics is at work. The metaphors of Providence and order infer a relationship that is to obtain between man and society as far as man and the higher realities. The struggle of Reason and Will, the fierce dispute in Keat's phrase, "betwixt damnation and impassioned day, dramatizes the fragility of that relation and tension to which it is subjected". Kind, as we are informed, is a denotation of the internal sanctions that enforce it. "To meddle with Anarchy of Fortuna is to inquire what happens when those sanctions are ignored and the relation is disputed. The ignorant man invokes his own destruction if he repudiates Substance for Show.

As Fraser points out, the underlying principles sustaining the dramas remain constant. Following his

differentiation between tragedy and comedy he states that Shakespeare's tragic actors seem to be human and free, the comic characters however, are the slaves of nature.

On the whole Fraser can be characterized by constant wisdom and artistic tension. The author's unique approach and argumentation reveals secrets to the simple that had been hidden from the learned and the wise. It seemed therefore more proper to make the author speak than to provide a "constructive" criticism of his book.

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