
A Taoist Reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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The compositional date of the ancient Chinese book of wisdom called the *Tao Te Ching* has been fixed at anywhere from 600 to 300 B.C. Like ancient texts, it may be a compilation of works by many authors or the work of a single man, in this case a man is sometimes called Lao Tzu (the old master). Various translations as *The Way, The Book of the Way and its Virtue, The Canon of Reason and Virtue*, Ellen M. Chen calls it "*The Canon of Tao and Te*" (4).

Tao signifies "the Way or Path.... the everlasting rhythm of life, the unity of the polarity of non-being and being" (Chen 52). *Te* is nature, "the manifestation of Tao in the world, as well as the condition when humans are at one with nature (Chen 45). Elsewhere, Chen describes the progression from "Tao (the creative ground), to Te (the created world)" (148) in a manner that makes it clear that Tao is the matrix out of which *Te* flows. She also points out that most of the eighty-one short chapters of the *Tao Te Ching* concern "how to be a sage ruler"(22).

This last fact provoked a series of desultory musings on the part of the present writer regarding the very un-Tao-like behaviour of Shakespeare's tragic character, *King Lear*. Surprisingly enough, upon closer examination it seemed that the play itself was a compendium of characters and situations which superbly illustrated some of the most fundamental Taoist principles.

The plot hinges on ideas such as the overdoing of rulers, the use of the useless, and telling the truth without indulging in exaggeration or flattery. All of these ideas are treated at length in early Taoist literature and are, in fact, at the heart of its teaching.

The characters displaying conduct both pivotal to the play and essential to Taoist thought can, for the purposes of this discussion, best be viewed in pairs: Lear and Gloucester; Edgar and the Fool; and Kent and Cordelia.

Lear and Gloucester indulge in behavior the Tao consistently criticizes. They court disaster by acting when it is not necessary; they do not accept their lot in life; and Lear, at least, lacks modesty and exhibits a tendency to show off.

Edgar and the Fool, on the other hand (in their quests for physical and economic survival, respectively), employ tactics highly praised by the Tao. Edgar makes use of the useless by assuming a low position in the social hierarchy--that

of a mad beggar. Thus he renders himself useless to others, but insures his own survival. And the Fool demonstrates a similar capacity in his ability to make something out of nothing through his verbal dexterity.

Kent and Cordelia, in their refusal to flatter, lie, or act insincerely for personal gain, represent a straightforward, homespun bluntness and honesty unstintingly admired in the Taoist tradition.

Politically, the *Tao Te Ching* promotes a laissez-faire attitude. It cautions the ruler not to interfere in the lives of his people any more than is necessary:

Therefore the sage gets rid of over-doing,
Gets rid of extravagances,
Gets rid of excesses. (Chap. 29)

Lear, in his preoccupation to "shake all cares and business from our age" (I, i, 39) gives away his kingdom needlessly. He acts when he does not have to, not permitting things to take their natural course (his daughters would have naturally inherited his kingdom upon his death).

The Taoist sage ruler avoids "superfluous actions" (Chap. 24). Instead he practices *wu-wei* (non-action). Non-action does not necessarily mean doing nothing. It is, rather, an action or non-action that "allows events to unfold according to their inner rhythms... acting with, not against, the inner rhythm of things (Chen 41).

Lear's gratuitous abdication is an action that interrupts the natural flow of things and throws himself, his family, and finally his nation into chaos.

Gloucester, too, overdoes things when he hastily condemns his faithful son Edgar to death solely on the false testimony of his treacherous illegitimate son, Edmund. Gloucester issues this decree without any hard evidence. He would have done better not to have acted at that time; instead, he should have gathered more information before coming to such a deplorable decision.

Both Lear's extravagant gesture and Gloucester's preceipitant judgement would be eschewed by a Taoist sage as actions that "impose an order on things alien to their inner rhythm" (Chen 127). And Lear's ostentatious display of generosity is indicative of another personality trait censured by the Tao : showing-off. Chapter 30 of the *Tao Te Ching* admonishes the "good person" to "Be resolute yet do not show off."

The *Chuang Tzu* is named after the author who is believed to have composed its original seven chapters (the "inner chapters") sometime in the fourth century B.C. It was completed in the form we know today by Kuo Hsiang (died 312 A.D.) and is generally considered to be Taoism's second great book.

The *Chuang Tzu* asserts that the great man "makes no show of benevolence" (178) and that he "goes along with what has been allotted to him" (179). We

have already seen how Lear does make a great show of his benevolence and how he shirks his duty as a ruler, thus acting contrary to his allotted role in life, and it may be added here that Gloucester also runs counter to the *Chauang Tzu's* teaching when he attempts to kill himself after he has been blinded.

By not accepting their appointed destinies, both Lear and Gloucester are guilty of another form of over-doing: instead of acting in accordance with the natural flow of things, they strive to circumvent their allotted fates.

Two exchanges in the play, one between Lear and Cordelia and one between Lear and the Fool, highlight Lear's blindness to another important Taoist idea : making something out of nothing. Lear betrays his Western pragmatism in the following :

Lear :what can you say to draw third more opulent than your sisters?
Speak.

Cordelia :.....Nothing, my lord.

Lear : Nothing ?

Cordelia : Nothing.

Lear : Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again. (I, i, 85-90)

And later, after the Fool recites what is to Kent and Lear a nonsense poem, Lear reacts similarly, pronouncing the verse to be nothing. The Fool responds asking : "Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle ?" (I, iv, 124-5). Lear flatly declares that "nothing can be made out of nothing" (I, iv, 126).

Lear cannot see that the "nothing" that is Cordelia's answer to his request for a eulogy indicates a positive "something" about her that he should respect. That something is the downright refusal to flatter or lie to him to get a part of his kingdom. Similarly, Lear doesn't understand the value of the Fool's ability to generate something (whether it be new meanings, verbal abuse or low comedy) out of the nothing that is nonsense verse or the casual, innocuous comments of others.

The Taoist tradition, however, exhorts us to make something out of nothing and points out how useful nothing can be :

Cut out doors and windows to make a house.

Through its non-being (wu),

There is (yu) the use (yung) of the house.

Therefore in the being (yu-chih) of a thing,

There lies the benefit (li).

In the non-being (wu-chih) of a thing

There lies its use (yun). (*Tao Te Ching* Chap. 11)

The empty space included in a door or a window is the nothing that makes it useful. The *Tao Te Ching* goes so far as to maintain that everything

that is ultimately came from nothing : "Ten thousand things under heaven are born of being (yu). / Being is born of non-being (we)" (Chap. 40).

Tao itself, this unutterable essence that is the matrix out of which all nature springs, is nothing except in its interaction with the things of this world:

Tao, when it is uttered by the mouth,

Is so bland it has no flavour.

When looked at, it is not enough to be heard,

When used (yung), it is inexhaustible.

(*Tao Te Ching*) Chap. 35)

Akin to the creativity the Fool exhibits in making verbal witticisms out of prosaic remarks (the linguistic equivalent of making something out of nothing) is Edgar's capacity to make the useless useful. He disguises himself as "poor Tom," a mad beggar and, consequently, a man of no prestige, power, or wealth. He is, therefore, a man useless to other men.

In this disguise, however, Edgar can both safeguard his own life and serve his blinded father. His new identity is, indeed, useful for himself. Edgar says "Edgar I nothing am" (II, iii, 21) as he assumes his disguise, thus placing him in fellowship with the Fool who also utilizes his position at the bottom of the social hierarchy to preserve himself (in his case, economically, if not physically).

The *Chuang Tzu* frequently emphasizes the use of the useless and tell many stories that are variations on this theme. In one of them, a critic of Chuang Tzu's philosophy likens it to a big, useless tree :

I have a big tree of the kind men call *shu*. Its trunk is too gnarled and bumpy to apply a measuring line to, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass or square. You could stand it by the road and no carpenter would look at it twice. Your words, too, are big and useless, and so everyone alike spurns them. (35)

Chuang Tzu answers :

Now you have this big tree and you're distressed because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it ? Axes will never shorten its life, nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it ever come to grief or pain ? (35)

In another variation a carpenter tells his apprentice that a certain tree is worthless: Make boats out of it and they'd rot in no time; make vessels and they'd break at once. Use it for doors and it would sweet sap like pine; use

it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It's not a timber tree—there's nothing it can be used for. That's how it got to be that old. (63-4)

Finally, Chuang Tzu, who often lets madmen and cripples speak for him, has a madman proclaim : "All men know the use of the useful, but nobody knows the use of the useless !" (67).

Edgar and the Fool know the use of the useless and Lear playfully acknowledges Edgar's wisdom. In Act III, scene iv, he bestows upon Edgar such appellations as "Noble philosopher," "learned Theban," and "good Athenian." Lear's sarcasm masks Shakespear's irony. Edgar is wiser than Lear (because he is not the madman Lear thinks he is)and his wisdom, in voluntarily assuming a social position inferior to his real one, is in sharp contrast to Lear's, calamitous fatuity in relinquishing his preeminent social rank.

The third pair of characters, Kent and Cordelia, illustrate behavior that is also central to the Tao. They rate themselves fairly, do not brag or boast, see things clearly and act in an honest, forthright manner.

Like Edgar, kent is in disguise. He does this not to preserve himself from harm, however, but in order to continue serving the King, who has banished him. Although disguised, when queried by Lear, Kent enumerates character traits that are indelibly his own and which form the very core of his being :

Lear : what doest thou profess ? What wouldst thou with us ?

Kent : I do profess to be no less that I seem, to serve him truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is honest, to converse with him that is wise; and says little; to fear judgment, to fight when I cannot choose; and to eat no fish. (I, iv, 11-16)

(Incidentally, the Tao agrees with Kent that a wise man says little. Chapter 56 of the *Tao Te Ching*, opens with : "One who knows does not speak / one who speaks does not know.")

Cordelia, too, continues to serve her father's cause from exile. When approached by Lear in the play's opening scene, Cordelia renders her attributes and emotions accurately, as did Kent. she tells her astonished father that she loves him "according to my bond, no more no less" (I, i, 93). Thus, she describes her feelings honestly and without the hyperbole indulged in by her sisters. By avoiding excess, extravagance, and overdoing, Cordelia personifies the Taoist qualities her father and sisters so pointedly lack :

Cordelia : Good my lord, you have begot me, bred me, loved me. I Return those duties back as are right and fit. Obey you, love you, and most honor you. Why have my sisters husbands if they say they love you all ? Haply, when I shall wed. That lord whose hand must take

my plight shall carry Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters. [To love my father all.] I, i,
95-104)

Cordelia and Kent remain loyal to Lear, and their conduct reflects Chuang Tzu's opinion respecting filial and ministerial fidelity : "When a filial son does not fawn on his parents, when a loyal minister does not flatter his lord, they are the finest of sons and ministers" (138)

King Lear was certainly not intended as a Taoist parable. Nevertheless, reading it as such reveals its preoccupation with the same notions that are at the heart of the Tao. This kind of reading highlights the play's ethical dimension and conveys the didactic messages surely implicit in its contents. These tidings have been advanced not only by the Tao but by hundreds of other religious and ethical texts throughout the ages : be humble and honest; do not impose yourself on others or on the natural order of things; be creative enough to make something out of nothing and to find a use for the useless (in other words, look beyond the "something" that is the material world towards the "nothing" that exists only on the spiritual, or moral plane, and find value in that which the worldly find valueless); do not flatter others nor boast about yourself.

The Tao sets itself over against the compromises constantly demanded of us by the external, civilized world. It exhorts us to heed our own inner promptings, although they sometimes seem to counsel us to act against our own self-interest. The Tao would advise us to do what we think is right, not what is expedient. It would concur with Edgar when, in the play's last speech, he cautions Kent and Albany not to resist the way things are and to remain true to themselves : "The weight of this said time we must obey, speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (V, iii, 324- 5).

Works Cited

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