

SUBTLE PERSUASION IN ‘KING LEAR’ AND ‘OF TRUTH’

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Abstract : Francis Bacon, ‘the father of English Essay’ was an influential writer of the Elizabethan Age. His essays which usually employ the literary devices such as Paradox and Aphorism are composed of short sentences that carry with them a ton of meaning. Bacon’s ‘Of Truth’ is no different in this respect and it occupies a prominent position amongst his writings. In this essay, Bacon takes a pithy dig at the people of the Elizabethan Society for being immersed in deceit and lies. With remarkable ease and flow he cuts through the fallacies of the erstwhile British society. Bacon’s mini-treatise on truth can be compared with William Shakespeare’s King Lear which within the structure of the drama portrays a really similar theme about how truth and lies are perceived by people. Shakespeare like Bacon criticizes the Elizabethan society for its complex nature. Bacon the Renaissance Man exposes the lack of intellectual progress coupled with the resistance to change among his countrymen while Shakespeare on the other hand lays bare the human nature in the Elizabethan age. Both the literary giants are in a way persuading their fellow countrymen to change the way of life in their society. Both these works are calls made to a frivolous society to gain knowledge and live a better life with Bacon’s essay showcasing the importance of truth and Shakespeare’s tragedy purifying the emotion. Hence through instances from the drama and tragedy, this paper explores the subtlety of persuasion through identification is what the two works comprises of in a rhetorical analysis.

Keywords: Francis Bacon, William Shakespeare, persuasion, Elizabethan society, Rhetoric

I. INTRODUCTION

Bacon’s ‘Of Truth’ is structured in a manner in which the ideas are coming one after the other throughout the discourse. They are not well organized but the matter of discussion remains the same. This style called Dispersed Meditation is employed in most of Bacon’s essays. Various ideas regarding the concept of truth are put forward but not often are they interrelated or connected. The questions such as what truth is, why people don’t care for truth, why people take pleasure in lying just to name a few are some aspects that have been dealt with though they are in a dispersed fashion across the essay. Bacon takes pithy digs at the Elizabethan culture which he considered to be an immoral way of living.

King Lear on the other hand is a mix of verse and prose when it comes to the writing style. It depicts the gradual descent into madness of the title character, after he disposes off his kingdom by giving bequests to two of his three daughters egged on by their continual flattery, while disregarding the third one who was honest enough to speak before him the truth. The king’s fall before flattery soon brings forth tragic consequences for all. The play portrays before us some of the worst facets of human nature namely hypocrisy and how we refuse to look beyond the surface. The more we look closely, the better we see and understand the world around us.

II. PERSUASIVE INSTANCES FROM ‘OF TRUTH’

1. “Certainly there be that delight in giddiness, and count it a bondage to fix a belief; affecting free-will in thinking, as well as in acting.” (Of Truth, Francis Bacon)
2. “But it is not only the difficulty and labor which men take in finding out of truth, nor again that when it is found it imposeth upon men’s thoughts, that doth bring lies in favor; but a natural though corrupt love of the lie itself.” (Of Truth, Francis Bacon)
3. “One of the fathers, in great severity, called poesy vinum dæmonum [devils’-wine], because it filleth the imagination; and yet it is but with the shadow of a lie. But it is not the lie that passeth through the mind, but the lie that sinketh in and settleth in it, that doth the hurt; such as we spake of before.” (Of Truth, Francis Bacon)
4. “But howsoever these things are thus in men’s depraved judgments and affections, yet truth, which only doth judge itself, teacheth that the inquiry of truth, which is the love-making or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature.” (Of Truth, Francis Bacon)

The most easily evident fact that a proper analysis of the essay can give us is the vast amount of reading done by Francis Bacon and the observations of the last 2500 years among the nations of western Europe. It is this legacy of these nations that the writer seeks to modify. “Bacon’s works draw their life from his profound desire to effect a radical change in the

pattern of mankind's history. He analyses the history of learning in order to expose the lack of intellectual progress and to convince men of the need for his new program that will make the advancement of knowledge possible." (Achsah Guibbory 1975) The modes of persuasion, Ethos and Logos work perfectly as Bacon's style blends into it with ease and thus achieves to convey without the least bit of distortion what the writer wishes to get across. The excerpts from the essay that have been quoted above assert how people do not attempt to seek truth and resort to lies and falsehood as they like the ambiguity and inaccuracy which would please them much better than the truth. Bacon says that people make serious attempts to discover the truth but when they find the truth to be demanding and unbearable, they knowingly go towards lies and develop a fascination for lies at the expense of truth. Bacon with his aphoristic style urges his countrymen to change their ways while at the same time asserting in his work the attitude of a 'resistance to change' that plagued the society in which he lived.

Poetry has received a fair share of criticism over the centuries including from the likes of Plato who was a man of great wisdom. Some have also supported the statement that poetry is based upon lies. According to them the fiction, allusion and exaggeration just to name a few tools that are used by poets are nothing but sheer lies. Bacon says that though the so called 'lies' that great men claim may not stay permanently in the mind of the reader, a part of such falsehood does impair the sense of the reader's mind and this in his opinion is one of the sad consequences of reading poetry.

"Poets utter great and wise things which they do not themselves understand" (Plato in his Republic). Plato says that poets are divinely inspired and that poetry is a copy of a copy or mimetic in nature as it takes us further away from the truth. Poetry for Plato is immoral and based on falsehood and has no use but to delight. He wants poets to be banned from the ideal state. According to Plato, philosophy is better than poetry as it deals with an idea or truth and thus has to do with the ultimate reality rather than the illusions of a poet that are deceptive. The fact is that our mind is depraved by lies which can have different interpretations whereas the truth is absolute and has only one interpretation. Truth symbolizes the ultimate good of human nature.

The ironic fact is that Francis Bacon was no different from the people he was referring to in his essay. He was known for allowing corruption to run rife when he was Lord Chancellor under James I. On 17 April 1621 Bacon was served with twenty-three charges related to the receiving of bribes and, after some resistance, he made a spectacular admission. Applying Kenneth Burke's Identification Theory in this context:

"Burke suggests that whenever someone attempts to persuade someone else, identification occurs, because for persuasion to occur, one party must "identify" with another. That is, the one who becomes persuaded sees that one party is like another in some way. A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so."

We get to see the deeper meaning of the aphoristic writing style of Bacon consisting of logical reasoning and facts (Logos) which indicates that he was trying to identify himself with the people and if the identification was complete then he would have a better chance of persuading his countrymen to change for the better. Hence, what makes Bacon's essay truly great is that he exposes the frail nature of his countrymen as well as suggests the ways through which they can strive to become better. The entire essay that is built on persuasion with an unconventional style of exposing the nature of the people he wants to persuade only adds to the unbeatable genius of Francis Bacon.

III. PERSUASIVE INSTANCES FROM 'KING LEAR'

1. "Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter; Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty; Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare; No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor: As much as child e'er loved, or father found; A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable; Beyond all manner of so much I love you." (Goneril, King Lear Act 1 Scene 1)
2. "Sir, I am made of the self-same metal that my sister is, And prize me at her worth. In my true heart I find she names my very deed of love; Only she comes too short: that I profess Myself an enemy to all other joys, Which the most precious square of sense possesses; And find I am alone felicitate In your dear highness' love." (Regan, King Lear Act 1 Scene 1)
3. "I love your majesty. According to my bond; nor more nor less" (Cordelia, King Lear Act 1 Scene 1)
4. "I beseech you, sir, pardon me. It is a letter from my brother that I have not all o'er-read; and for so much as I have perus'd, I find it not fit for your o'erlooking." (Edmund, King Lear Act 1 Scene 2)
5. "I do not well know, my lord. If it shall please you to suspend your indignation against my brother till you can derive from him better testimony of his intent, you should run a certain course; where, if you violently proceed against him, mistaking his purpose, it would make a great gap in your own honour and shake in pieces the heart of his obedience. I dare pawn down my life for him that he hath writ this to feel my affection to your honour, and to no other pretence of danger." (Edmund, King Lear Act 1 Scene 2)

The play of words happens in the First Act of the tragedy and going forward it consists mostly about the betrayals, fights, madness and misfortune of Lear. Cordelia's response was without a doubt the most honest answer to the famous question but since it lacked the rhetoric that was unabashedly incorporated by Goneril and Regan in their speeches, it was considered to be inferior. Goneril and Regan did not have to flatter their father and could have just spoken the truth. But instead the greed of acquiring one-third of their father's kingdom took over them. Hence, they could not give an honest answer like Cordelia and instead they flattered Lear to get their reward. Their dialogues are heavily ornamented (Florid Style) in order to appeal to their father's emotions (Pathos) and in the end prove to be effective in flattering him. Cordelia on the other hand does not embellish her speech and conveys what she truly feels

in the simplest manner (Simple Style). However, Lear hoping for something similar or better than what he has heard from his other daughters is left disappointed. Cordelia's answer to the King was absolute and has only one interpretation. Unfortunately, Cordelia's usage of Logos over Pathos and Ethos did not convince Lear of her love for him. Whereas the overuse of Pathos by Goneril and Regan not only convinced Lear but it also exposed his true nature as well. Shakespeare through Lear shows us the pitiful and ignorant nature of those who are not able to see what is really happening and how important it is to look beyond the surface which is something that many never seem to do. Cordelia along with the Earl of Kent symbolizes the sovereign good of human nature. The Earl happens to be the only one who supports Cordelia as he is loyal to the king and wants what is best for his kingdom. He respectfully asks the King to reconsider his order but Lear refuses and banishes Kent. On a personal note, Kent was a brave man and did what he thought was right. If the Earl had to praise Lear's decision then he might have gotten one-third of the Kingdom. He was banished because he spoke the truth. This is yet another instance where Lear refused to look beyond the surface. If he did have an open mind then he would have understood things better. This is Shakespeare's dig at the Elizabethan society for being swayed by flattering comments and frowning upon truthful ones. This also points out the 'resistance to change' attitude of the age. While Bacon provides explicitly in his essay the solution to strive for a change, Shakespeare in his tragedy does the same though in an implicit manner. He speaks to the reader's and imprints in their minds the essence of what he seeks to achieve – to rid the Elizabethan society of its obsession with lies and flattery. Applying Burke's Theory of Identification here, Shakespeare's development of the characters in the tragedy ensures that the people can easily identify with them and this is how he seeks to persuade them to change their ways for the better. The persuasive messages are conveyed through the pity and fear aroused by the tragedy.

IV. CONCLUSION

These two important works by the two giants of English Literature in their essence confront the same problem – the flattery that plagued the society in which they lived. The writers respond to the ailment of their society through their respective genres – essay and drama. Their works which are ultimately aimed at educating the masses are backed by ardent persuasion of varying form. While Bacon is able to state explicitly the intention of his writing and the aspirations that he harbors through his essay, Shakespeare is able to achieve this indoctrination in a subtler manner. The soulful characterization lays bare even to the layman the dangers of flattery. Both the works contain a deeper meaning to look beyond the surface and change the way of life and it is done via persuasion in a subtle manner.

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