

Abstract

The essay reads William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Lear* in the light of bio-ethical debates, and the conceptual centrality of Kantian ideas of human dignity, *Menschenwürde*. *King Lear* compels the contemporary audience-reader to re-view European Humanist traditions from a critical vantage where things fall apart, and the very significations of the 'human' cannot hold. The post-World War II world recognises more acutely, that the human as dignity, as non-exchangeable *würde* is perhaps true only in its violation. An awareness of the emergent dignity debates (that are often defined as posthumanist) helps recognise the astonishingly modern quality of Shakespeare's tragedy.

The great humanist speculations of 15th-16th century Europe that engage with human-animal signification slippages, with signification-slippages between *dignitas* as a socio-political rank, and dignity as an essential ethical worth shapes Shakespeare's play. Such criticality is set in motion as soon as Lear, the king/ father/elder person (already imbued with dignity-as-outside rank, in the Elizabethan world order) sells his 'dignity as love' for a price. His daughters Goneril and Regan snatch this opportunity to divest the 'old fool' of both kinds of dignity. Cordelia and Kent stand aside in silence and disbelief as this horrible travesty of humanity-dignity is played out in the court. The rest of the play is about dignity- erasure rituals, spectacular humiliations, and increasing slippages between the human-animal, the animal as human; the human as rational, and the human-animal in *déraison* and senility.

The action of the play is about transpositions, refractions, resonances as the humiliations of one (say Kent) are redoubled in another (say Gloucester); the animality of one (say the Fool) as resonating in an Other (say, Lear). The *Tragedy of King Lear* is after all about the perilous condition of the human.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, *Menschenwürde*, dignity, Renaissance Humanism, Immanuel Kant, humiliations, ethics, bio-politics, the human-animal, madness-*déraison*, women in Shakespeare's world.