

Was Shakespeare an Epicurean?

Post by "Cyrano" of January 10, 2024 at 7:59 PM

Lear Put His Finger On It

4471-1e915bd2-a280-4063-8674-172f0c367978-1-201-a-jpeg

"Tell me, my daughters, which one of you loves me most?"

Has any father ever asked such a question of his children? Especially in a public assembly? No, only in a fairytale. "King Lear" opens as such, but quickly becomes the most terrible tragedy in world literature.

The tragedy begins with that foolish question. But it hinges on the word "nothing." That is the answer the youngest daughter, Cordelia, gives to her father when he asks what she can say "to draw a third more opulent than your sisters'?" A third more land, he means. For Lear, disposing of his kingdom, means to give the largest portion to the most "loving" daughter.

The two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, beguile their father with grandiose hypocritical professions of love. Cordelia, honest and sincere, cannot play that game. Her reply is "Nothing, my lord."

"Nothing will come of nothing," responds King Lear. He thinks he is saying "Because you say 'nothing,' I will give you nothing" - no land.

And he is saying that. But Lear - unbeknownst to himself - is uttering words so profound that they reverberate throughout the universe!

For if 'nothing can come from nothing,' then something can only come from something. And that something from another something from another in an infinite regression. Makes sense. Almost too simple. But in childlike simplicity can be found the deepest profundity. No one understood this better than Shakespeare, genius of paradox and irony. But it does not take a genius of Shakespearean proportions to comprehend a universe infinite in space and time. It was figured out in Greece almost 3,000 years ago, and long before that in China and India.

Can we doubt that Shakespeare figured it out as well? He was very well aware of Epicurus, the foremost Greek materialist philosopher. Through the ages the philosophy of Epicurus influenced poets, statesmen and scientists from Lucretius, Omar Khayyam, Isaac Newton, Thomas Jefferson to Stephen Greenblatt, exceptional Shakespeare scholar.

Great Epicureans living in Shakespeare's time were Montaigne, the French essayist whom Shakespeare read assiduously. Also Giordano Bruno, lover of the infinite material universe who lectured in London and was later burned at the stake by the Catholic Inquisition in 1600. At this time Shakespeare embarked on his series of incredible tragedies - "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth," "Antony and Cleopatra"... Another contemporary Epicurean was Cyrano de Bergerac, greatest atheist of his time - perhaps of all time!

But for an Epicurean, Shakespeare needed only walk down the street. There lived Thomas Digges, mathematician and astronomer. He was the first to promulgate the Copernican system in English. Copernicus had "turned the universe upside down," but Digges went further than Copernicus by proposing that the universe goes on forever with an infinite number of stars.

Son of Thomas Digges was Leonard, a friend and ardent admirer of Shakespeare. He wrote a laudatory poem for the First Folio, the collection of 36 Shakespeare plays published in 1623. When Leonard's father Thomas died in 1595, his mother married Thomas Russell. Shakespeare named Russell as overseer of his will.

Given all the foregoing, may we not ask whether Shakespeare was an Epicurean? It's possible, perhaps probable. We know from his plays that Shakespeare was not a believer. And it would be just like him to give King Lear words that surreptitiously expressed the poet's position on the most foundational question of philosophy: something from something or something from nothing?

Too much philosophy? Well, we do want to know Shakespeare better. And here I feel we are entering the mind - the very heart - of "our world's greatest genius."