King Lear

by William Shakespeare

eNotes: Table of Contents

King Lear: Introduction

King Lear is widely regarded as Shakespeare's crowning artistic achievement. The scenes in which a mad Lear rages naked on a stormy heath against his deceitful daughters and nature itself are considered by many scholars to be the finest example of tragic lyricism in the English language. Shakespeare took his main plot line of an aged monarch abused by his children from a folk tale that appeared first in written form in the 12th century and was based on spoken stories that originated much further into the Middle Ages. In several written versions of "Lear," the king does not go mad, his "good" daughter does not die, and the tale has a happy ending.

This is not the case with Shakespeare's *Lear*, a tragedy of such consuming force that audiences and readers are left to wonder whether there is any meaning to the physical and moral carnage with which *King Lear* concludes. Like the noble Kent, seeing a mad, pathetic Lear with the murdered Cordelia in his arms, the profound brutality of the tale compels us to wonder, "Is this the promised end?" (V.iii.264). That very question stands at the divide between traditional critics of *King Lear* who find a heroic pattern in the story and modern readers who see no redeeming or purgative dimension to the play at all, the message being the bare

futility of the human condition with Lear as Everyman.

King Lear: William Shakespeare Biography

Details about William Shakespeare's life are sketchy, mostly mere surmise based upon court or other clerical records. His parents, John and Mary (Arden), were married about 1557; she was of the landed gentry, and he a yeoman—a glover and commodities merchant. By 1568, John had risen through the ranks of town government and held the position of high bailiff, similar to mayor. William, the eldest son and the third of eight children, was born in 1564, probably on April 23, several days before his baptism on April 26 in Stratford-upon-Avon. Shakespeare is also believed to have died on the same date—April 23—in 1611.

It is believed William attended the local grammar school in Stratford where his parents lived, and studied primarily Latin rhetoric, logic, and literature. Shakespeare probably left school at age 15, which was the norm, to take a job, especially since this was the period of his father's financial difficulty. At age 18 (1582), William married Anne Hathaway, a local farmer's daughter who was eight years his senior. Their first daughter (Susanna) was born six months later (1583), and twins Judith and Hamnet were born in 1585. Shakespeare's life can be divided into three periods: the first 20 years in Stratford, which include his schooling, early marriage, and fatherhood; the next 25 years as an actor and playwright in London; and the last five in retirement back in Stratford where he enjoyed moderate wealth gained from his theatrical successes. The years linking the first two periods are marked by a lack of information about Shakespeare, and are often referred to as the "dark years."

At some point during the "dark years," Shakespeare began his career with a London theatrical company, perhaps in 1589, for he was already an actor and playwright of some note by 1592. Shakespeare apparently wrote and acted for numerous theatrical companies, including Pembroke's Men, and Strange's Men, which later became the Chamberlain's Men, with whom he remained for the rest of his career.

In 1592, the Plague closed the theaters for about two years, and Shakespeare turned to writing book length narrative poetry. Most notable were "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece," both of which were dedicated to the Earl of Southampton, whom scholars accept as Shakespeare's friend and benefactor despite a lack of documentation. During this same period, Shakespeare was writing his sonnets, which are more likely signs of the time's fashion rather than actual love poems detailing any particular relationship. He returned to playwriting when theaters reopened in 1594, and did not continue to write poetry. His sonnets were published without his consent in 1609, shortly before his retirement.

Amid all of his success, Shakespeare suffered the loss of his only son, Hamnet, who died in 1596 at the age of 11. But Shakespeare's career continued unabated, and in London in 1599, he became one of the partners in the new Globe Theater, which was built by the Chamberlain's Men.

Shakespeare wrote very little after 1612, which was the year he completed *Henry VIII*. It was during a performance of this play in 1613 that the Globe caught fire and burned to the ground. Sometime between 1610 and 1613, Shakespeare returned to Stratford, where he owned a large house and property, to spend his remaining years with his family.

William Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, and was buried two days later in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church where he had been baptized exactly 52 years earlier. His literary legacy included 37 plays, 154 sonnets and five major poems.

Incredibly, most of Shakespeare's plays had never been published in anything except pamphlet form, and were simply extant as acting scripts stored at the Globe. Theater scripts were not regarded as literary works of

art, but only the basis for the performance. Plays were simply a popular form of entertainment for all layers of society in Shakespeare's time. Only the efforts of two of Shakespeare's company, John Heminges and Henry Condell, preserved his 36 plays (minus *Pericles*, the thirty-seventh).

King Lear: Summary

From the legendary story of *King Lear*, Shakespeare presents a dramatic version of the relationships between parents and their children. Lear, king of ancient Britain, decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters: Goneril and Regan, the wives of the Duke of Albany and the Duke of Cornwall, and Cordelia, his youngest and favorite. In an attempt to give the "largest bounty" to the one who loves him most, the king asks for his daughters' expressions of affection. He receives embellished speeches of endearment from the older two, but Cordelia modestly speaks the truth, angering her father who disinherits her and banishes her forever. Trying to intercede on Cordelia's behalf, the Earl of Kent also is banished. The King of France marries Lear's dowerless daughter. Meanwhile, the Earl of Gloucester is deceived by his illegitimate son, Edmund, who leads him to believe that Edgar, the earl's legitimate son, is plotting to murder his father.

Lear's plans to live with his two older daughters are immediately thwarted when Goneril turns on him, reducing his train of followers by half. In shock from her ingratitude, Lear decides to seek refuge with Regan. Instead of admonishing her sister for her actions as Lear expects, Regan is harsh with him, suggesting that he apologize to Goneril. Heartbroken and rejected, Lear totters out into the storm with only his Fool and Kent to keep him company. Kent, who is now in disguise, finds refuge in a hovel for the king, who has been driven mad by his suffering. There they meet Edgar, disguised as Tom o'Bedlam, hiding in fear for his life. Gloucester soon arrives and hurries Lear off to Dover, where Cordelia is waiting with a French army ready to restore her father's kingdom. Cordelia cares for her father in the camp, and their severed relationship is restored.

In the meantime, Cornwall gouges out Gloucester's eyes, calling him a traitor. Still in disguise, Edgar leads his blind father to Dover. Edmund, in command of the English army, defeats the French, taking Cordelia and Lear as prisoners. As Gloucester is dying, Edgar reveals his true identity to his father. Edgar kills Edmund, but cannot save Cordelia whom Edmund has ordered to be hanged. Lear dies, grief-stricken over Cordelia's death. Rivalry over their love for Edmund leads Goneril to poison Regan and then stab herself. Albany, Kent, and Edgar are left to restore some semblance of order to the kingdom.

Estimated Reading Time
Shakespeare's poetic drama, written to be viewed by an audience, usually takes approximately three hours to perform on the stage. It would be possible to read it almost as fast the first time around to get the plot of the story. An auditory tape of *King Lear*, available at most university or county libraries, is an excellent device that can be used to follow along with the text, making the drama more interesting by bringing the characters alive. After the initial reading, however, it should be read more carefully, taking special note of the difficult words and phrases that are glossed at the bottom of most Shakespeare texts. This reading would probably take about six hours for the entire play, allowing a little more than an hour for each of the five acts. Since the acts of *King Lear* vary from three to seven scenes each, the length of reading time for each act will, of course, vary.

King Lear: Reading Shakespeare

In this section:

- Shakespeare's Words
- Shakespeare's Wordplay
- Shakespeare's Dramatic Verse
- Implied Stage Action

Shakespeare's Language
Shakespeare's language can create a strong pang of intimidation, even fear, in a large number of modern-day readers. Fortunately, however, this need not be the case. All that is needed to master the art of reading Shakespeare is to practice the techniques of unraveling uncommonly-structured sentences and to become familiar with the poetic use of uncommon words. We must realize that during the 400-year span between Shakespeare's time and our own, both the way we live and speak has changed. Although most of his vocabulary is in use today, some of it is obsolete, and what may be most confusing is that some of his words are used today, but with slightly different or totally different meanings. On the stage, actors readily dissolve these language stumbling blocks. They study Shakespeare's dialogue and express it dramatically in word and in action so that its meaning is graphically enacted. If the reader studies Shakespeare's lines as an actor does, looking up and reflecting upon the meaning of unfamiliar words until real voice is discovered, he or she will suddenly experience the excitement, the depth and the sheer poetry of what these characters say.

Shakespeare's Sentences
In English, or any other language, the meaning of a sentence greatly depends upon where each word is placed in that sentence. "The child hurt the mother" and "The mother hurt the child" have opposite meanings, even though the words are the same, simply because the words are arranged differently. Because word position is so integral to English, the reader will find unfamiliar word arrangements confusing, even difficult to understand. Since Shakespeare's plays are poetic dramas, he often shifts from average word arrangements to the strikingly unusual so that the line will conform to the desired poetic rhythm. Often, too, Shakespeare employs unusual word order to afford a character his own specific style of speaking.

Today, English sentence structure follows a sequence of subject first, verb second, and an optional object third. Shakespeare, however, often places the verb before the subject, which reads, "Speaks he" rather than "He speaks." Solanio speaks with this inverted structure in *The Merchant of Venice* stating, "I should be still/Plucking the grass to know where sits the wind" (Bevington edition, I, i, ll.17-19), while today's standard English word order would have the clause at the end of this line read, "where the wind sits." "Wind" is the subject of this clause, and "sits" is the verb. Bassanio's words in Act Two also exemplify this inversion: "And in such eyes as ours appear not faults" (II, ii, l. 184). In our normal word order, we would say, "Faults do not appear in eyes such as ours," with "faults" as the subject in both Shakespeare's word order and ours.

Inversions like these are not troublesome, but when Shakes–peare positions the predicate adjective or the object before the subject and verb, we are sometimes surprised. For example, rather than "I saw him," Shakespeare may use a structure such as "Him I saw." Similarly, "Cold the morning is" would be used for our "The morning is cold." Lady Macbeth demonstrates this inversion as she speaks of her husband: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be/What thou art promised" (Macbeth, I, v, ll. 14-15). In current English word order, this quote would begin, "Thou art Glamis, and Cawdor."

In addition to inversions, Shakespeare purposefully keeps words apart that we generally keep together. To illustrate, consider Bassanio's humble admission in *The Merchant of Venice*: "I owe you much, and, like a wilful youth,/That which I owe is lost" (I, i, ll. 146-147). The phrase, "like a wilful youth," separates the regular sequence of "I owe you much" and "That which I owe is lost." To understand more clearly this type of passage, the reader could rearrange these word groups into our conventional order: I owe you much and I wasted what you gave me because I was young and impulsive. While these rearranged clauses will sound like normal English, and will be simpler to understand, they will no longer have the desired poetic rhythm, and the

emphasis will now be on the wrong words.

As we read Shakespeare, we will find words that are separated by long, interruptive statements. Often subjects are separated from verbs, and verbs are separated from objects. These long interruptions can be used to give a character dimension or to add an element of suspense. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet* Benvolio describes both Romeo's moodiness and his own sensitive and thoughtful nature:

> I, measuring his affections by my own,
> Which then most sought, where most might not be found,
> Being one too many by my weary self,
> Pursu'd my humour, not pursuing his,
> And gladly shunn'd who gladly fled from me. (I, i, ll. 126-130)

In this passage, the subject "I" is distanced from its verb "Pursu'd." The long interruption serves to provide information which is integral to the plot. Another example, taken from *Hamlet*, is the ghost, Hamlet's father, who describes Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, as

> …that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
> With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts—
> O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
> So to seduce—won to his shameful lust
> The will of my most seeming virtuous queen. (I, v, ll. 43-47)

From this we learn that Prince Hamlet's mother is the victim of an evil seduction and deception. The delay between the subject, "beast," and the verb, "won," creates a moment of tension filled with the image of a cunning predator waiting for the right moment to spring into attack. This interruptive passage allows the play to unfold crucial information and thus to build the tension necessary to produce a riveting drama.

While at times these long delays are merely for decorative purposes, they are often used to narrate a particular situation or to enhance character development. As *Antony and Cleopatra* opens, an interruptive passage occurs in the first few lines. Although the delay is not lengthy, Philo's words vividly portray Antony's military prowess while they also reveal the immediate concern of the drama. Antony is distracted from his career, and is now focused on Cleopatra:

> …those goodly eyes,
> That o'er the files and musters of the war
> Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
> The office and devotion of their view
> Upon a tawny front…. (I, i, ll. 2-6)

Whereas Shakespeare sometimes heaps detail upon detail, his sentences are often elliptical, that is, they omit words we expect in written English sentences. In fact, we often do this in our spoken conversations. For instance, we say, "You see that?" when we really mean, "Did you see that?" Reading poetry or listening to lyrics in music conditions us to supply the omitted words and it makes us more comfortable reading this type of dialogue. Consider one passage in *The Merchant of Venice* where Antonio's friends ask him why he seems so sad and Solanio tells Antonio, "Why, then you are in love" (I, i, l. 46). When Antonio denies this, Solanio responds, "Not in love neither?" (I, i, l. 47). The word "you" is omitted but understood despite the confusing double negative.

In addition to leaving out words, Shakespeare often uses intentionally vague language, a strategy which taxes the reader's attentiveness. In Antony and Cleopatra, Cleopatra, upset that Antony is leaving for Rome after

learning that his wife died in battle, convinces him to stay in Egypt:

> Sir, you and I must part, but that's not it:
> Sir you and I have lov'd, but there's not it;
> That you know well, something it is I would—
> O, my oblivion is a very Antony,
> And I am all forgotten. (I, iii, ll. 87-91)

In line 89, "…something it is I would" suggests that there is something that she would want to say, do, or have done. The intentional vagueness leaves us, and certainly Antony, to wonder. Though this sort of writing may appear lackadaisical for all that it leaves out, here the vagueness functions to portray Cleopatra as rhetorically sophisticated. Similarly, when asked what thing a crocodile is (meaning Antony himself who is being compared to a crocodile), Antony slyly evades the question by giving a vague reply:

> It is shap'd, sir, like itself, and it is as broad as it hath breadth.
> It is just so high as it is, and moves with it own organs.
> It lives by that which nourisheth it, and, the elements once out of it, it transmigrates. (II, vii, ll. 43-46)

This kind of evasiveness, or doubletalk, occurs often in Shakespeare's writing and requires extra patience on the part of the reader.

Shakespeare's Words

As we read Shakespeare's plays, we will encounter uncommon words. Many of these words are not in use today. As *Romeo and Juliet* opens, we notice words like "shrift" (confession) and "holidame" (a holy relic). Words like these should be explained in notes to the text. Shakespeare also employs words which we still use, though with different meaning. For example, in *The Merchant of Venice* "caskets" refer to small, decorative chests for holding jewels. However, modern readers may think of a large cask instead of the smaller, diminutive casket.

Another trouble modern readers will have with Shakespeare's English is with words that are still in use today, but which mean something different in Elizabethan use. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare uses the word "straight" (as in "straight away") where we would say "immediately." Here, the modern reader is unlikely to carry away the wrong message, however, since the modern meaning will simply make no sense. In this case, textual notes will clarify a phrase's meaning. To cite another example, in Romeo and Juliet, after Mercutio dies, Romeo states that the "black fate on moe days doth depend" (emphasis added). In this case, "depend" really means "impend."

Shakespeare's Wordplay

All of Shakespeare's works exhibit his mastery of playing with language and with such variety that many people have authored entire books on this subject alone. Shakespeare's most frequently used types of wordplay are common: metaphors, similes, synecdoche and metonymy, personification, allusion, and puns. It is when Shakespeare violates the normal use of these devices, or rhetorical figures, that the language becomes confusing.

A metaphor is a comparison in which an object or idea is replaced by another object or idea with common attributes. For example, in Macbeth a murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo has been murdered, as directed, but that his son, Fleance, escaped, having witnessed his father's murder. Fleance, now a threat to *Macbeth*, is described as a serpent:

There the grown serpent lies, the worm that's fled
Hath nature that in time will venom breed,
No teeth for the present. (III, iv, ll. 29-31)

Similes, on the other hand, compare objects or ideas while using the words "like" or "as." In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo tells Juliet that "Love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books" (II, ii, l. 156). Such similes often give way to more involved comparisons, "extended similes." For example, Juliet tells Romeo:

'Tis almost morning,
I would have thee gone,
And yet no farther than a wonton's bird,
That lets it hop a little from his hand
Like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves,
And with silken thread plucks it back again,
So loving-jealous of his liberty. (II, ii, ll. 176-181)

An epic simile, a device borrowed from heroic poetry, is an extended simile that builds into an even more elaborate comparison. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth describes King Duncan's virtues with an angelic, celestial simile and then drives immediately into another simile that redirects us into a vision of warfare and destruction:

…Besides this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind…. (I, vii, ll. 16-25)

Shakespeare employs other devices, like synecdoche and metonymy, to achieve "verbal economy," or using one or two words to express more than one thought. Synecdoche is a figure of speech using a part for the whole. An example of synecdoche is using the word boards to imply a stage. Boards are only a small part of the materials that make up a stage, however, the term boards has become a colloquial synonym for stage. Metonymy is a figure of speech using the name of one thing for that of another which it is associated. An example of metonymy is using crown to mean the king (as used in the sentence "These lands belong to the crown"). Since a crown is associated with or an attribute of the king, the word crown has become a metonymy for the king. It is important to understand that every metonymy is a synecdoche, but not every synecdoche is a metonymy. This is rule is true because a metonymy must not only be a part of the root word, making a synecdoche, but also be a unique attribute of or associated with the root word.

Synecdoche and metonymy in Shakespeare's works is often very confusing to a new student because he creates uses for words that they usually do not perform. This technique is often complicated and yet very subtle, which makes it difficult of a new student to dissect and understand. An example of these devices in one of Shakespeare's plays can be found in *The Merchant of Venice* . In warning his daughter, Jessica, to ignore the Christian revelries in the streets below, Shylock says:

Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum
And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife,
Clamber not you up to the casements then… (I, v, ll. 30-32)

The phrase of importance in this quote is "the wry-necked fife." When a reader examines this phrase it does not seem to make sense; a fife is a cylinder-shaped instrument, there is no part of it that can be called a neck. The phrase then must be taken to refer to the fife-player, who has to twist his or her neck to play the fife. Fife, therefore, is a synecdoche for fife-player, much as boards is for stage. The trouble with understanding this phrase is that "vile squealing" logically refers to the sound of the fife, not the fife-player, and the reader might be led to take fife as the instrument because of the parallel reference to "drum" in the previous line. The best solution to this quandary is that Shakespeare uses the word fife to refer to both the instrument and the player. Both the player and the instrument are needed to complete the wordplay in this phrase, which, though difficult to understand to new readers, cannot be seen as a flaw since Shakespeare manages to convey two meanings with one word. This remarkable example of synecdoche illuminates Shakespeare's mastery of "verbal economy."

Shakespeare also uses vivid and imagistic wordplay through personification, in which human capacities and behaviors are attributed to inanimate objects. Bassanio, in *The Merchant of Venice*, almost speechless when Portia promises to marry him and share all her worldly wealth, states "my blood speaks to you in my veins…" (III, ii, l. 176). How deeply he must feel since even his blood can speak. Similarly, Portia, learning of the penalty that Antonio must pay for defaulting on his debt, tells Salerio, "There are some shrewd contents in yond same paper/That steals the color from Bassanio's cheek" (III, ii, ll. 243-244).

Another important facet of Shakespeare's rhetorical repertoire is his use of allusion. An allusion is a reference to another author or to an historical figure or event. Very often Shakespeare alludes to the heroes and heroines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For example, in Cymbeline an entire room is decorated with images illustrating the stories from this classical work, and the heroine, Imogen, has been reading from this text. Similarly, in *Titus Andronicus* characters not only read directly from the *Metamorphoses*, but a subplot re-enacts one of the Metamorphoses's most famous stories, the rape and mutilation of Philomel. Another way Shakespeare uses allusion is to drop names of mythological, historical and literary figures. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, Petruchio compares Katharina, the woman whom he is courting, to Diana (II, i, l. 55), the virgin goddess, in order to suggest that Katharina is a man-hater. At times, Shakespeare will allude to well-known figures without so much as mentioning their names. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, though the Duke and Valentine are ostensibly interested in Olivia, a rich countess, Shakespeare asks his audience to compare the Duke's emotional turmoil to the plight of Acteon, whom the goddess Diana transforms into a deer to be hunted and killed by Acteon's own dogs:

> Duke:
> That instant was I turn'd into a hart,
> And my desires, like fell and cruel hounds,
> E'er since pursue me. […]
>
> Valentine:
> But like a cloistress she will veiled walk,
> And water once a day her chamber round…. (I, i, l. 20 ff.)

Shakespeare's use of puns spotlights his exceptional wit. His comedies in particular are loaded with puns, usually of a sexual nature. Puns work through the ambiguity that results when multiple senses of a word are evoked; homophones often cause this sort of ambiguity. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus believes "there is mettle in death" (I, ii, l. 146), meaning that there is "courage" in death; at the same time, mettle suggests the homophone metal, referring to swords made of metal causing death. In early editions of Shakespeare's work there was no distinction made between the two words. Antony puns on the word "earing," (I, ii, ll. 112-114) meaning both plowing (as in rooting out weeds) and hearing: he angrily sends away a messenger, not wishing to hear the message from his wife, Fulvia: "…O then we bring forth weeds,/when our quick minds lie still, and our ills told us/Is as our earing." If ill-natured news is planted in one's "hearing," it will render

an “earing” (harvest) of ill-natured thoughts. A particularly clever pun, also in *Antony and Cleopatra*, stands out after Antony’s troops have fought Octavius’s men in Egypt: “We have beat him to his camp. Run one before,/And let the queen know of our gests” (IV, viii, ll. 1-2). Here “gests” means deeds (in this case, deeds of battle); it is also a pun on “guests,” as though Octavius’ slain soldiers were to be guests when buried in Egypt.

One should note that Elizabethan pronunciation was in several cases different from our own. Thus, modern readers, especially Americans, will miss out on the many puns based on homophones. The textual notes will point up many of these “lost” puns, however.

Shakespeare’s sexual innuendoes can be either clever or tedious depending upon the speaker and situation. The modern reader should recall that sexuality in Shakespeare’s time was far more complex than in ours and that characters may refer to such things as masturbation and homosexual activity. Textual notes in some editions will point out these puns but rarely explain them. An example of a sexual pun or innuendo can be found in *The Merchant of Venice* when Portia and Nerissa are discussing Portia’s past suitors using innuendo to tell of their sexual prowess:

> Portia:
> I pray thee, overname them, and as thou namest them, I will describe them, and according to my description level at my affection.
>
> Nerrisa:
> First, there is the Neapolitan prince.
>
> Portia:
> Ay, that’s a colt indeed, for he doth nothing but talk of his horse, and he makes it a great appropriation to his own good parts that he can shoe him himself. I am much afeard my lady his mother played false with the smith. (I, ii, ll. 35-45)

The “Neapolitan prince” is given a grade of an inexperienced youth when Portia describes him as a “colt.” The prince is thought to be inexperienced because he did nothing but “talk of his horse” (a pun for his penis) and his other great attributes. Portia goes on to say that the prince boasted that he could “shoe him [his horse] himself,” a possible pun meaning that the prince was very proud that he could masturbate. Finally, Portia makes an attack upon the prince’s mother, saying that “my lady his mother played false with the smith,” a pun to say his mother must have committed adultery with a blacksmith to give birth to such a vulgar man having an obsession with “shoeing his horse.”

It is worth mentioning that Shakespeare gives the reader hints when his characters might be using puns and innuendoes. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia’s lines are given in prose when she is joking, or engaged in bawdy conversations. Later on the reader will notice that Portia’s lines are rhymed in poetry, such as when she is talking in court or to Bassanio. This is Shakespeare’s way of letting the reader know when Portia is jesting and when she is serious.

Shakespeare’s Dramatic Verse

Finally, the reader will notice that some lines are actually rhymed verse while others are in verse without rhyme; and much of Shakespeare’s drama is in prose. Shakespeare usually has his lovers speak in the language of love poetry which uses rhymed couplets. The archetypal example of this comes, of course, from *Romeo and Juliet*:

> The grey-ey’d morn smiles on the frowning night,
> Check’ring the eastern clouds with streaks of light,

> And fleckled darkness like a drunkard reels
> From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels.
> (II, iii, ll. 1-4)

Here it is ironic that Friar Lawrence should speak these lines since he is not the one in love. He, therefore, appears buffoonish and out of touch with reality. Shakespeare often has his characters speak in rhymed verse to let the reader know that the character is acting in jest, and vice-versa.

Perhaps the majority of Shakespeare's lines are in blank verse, a form of poetry which does not use rhyme (hence the name blank) but still employs a rhythm native to the English language, iambic pentameter, where every second syllable in a line of ten syllables receives stress. Consider the following verses from *Hamlet*, and note the accents and the lack of end-rhyme:

> The síngle ánd pecúliar lífe is bóund
> With áll the stréngth and ármor óf the mínd (III, iii, ll. 12-13)

The final syllable of these verses receives stress and is said to have a hard, or "strong," ending. A soft ending, also said to be "weak," receives no stress. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare uses a soft ending to shape a verse that demonstrates through both sound (meter) and sense the capacity of the feminine to propagate:

> and thén I lóv'd thee
> And shów'd thee áll the quálitíes o' th' ísle,
> The frésh spríngs, bríne-pits, bárren pláce and fértile. (I, ii, ll. 338-40)

The first and third of these lines here have soft endings.

In general, Shakespeare saves blank verse for his characters of noble birth. Therefore, it is significant when his lofty characters speak in prose. Prose holds a special place in Shakespeare's dialogues; he uses it to represent the speech habits of the common people. Not only do lowly servants and common citizens speak in prose, but important, lower class figures also use this fun, at times ribald variety of speech. Though Shakespeare crafts some very ornate lines in verse, his prose can be equally daunting, for some of his characters may speechify and break into doubletalk in their attempts to show sophistication. A clever instance of this comes when the Third Citizen in Coriolanus refers to the people's paradoxical lack of power when they must elect Coriolanus as their new leader once Coriolanus has orated how he has courageously fought for them in battle:

> We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do; for if he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them; so, if he tell us his noble deeds, we must also tell him our noble acceptance of them. Ingratitude is monstrous, and for the multitude to be ingrateful were to make a monster of the multitude, of the which we, being members, should bring ourselves to be monstrous members. (II, ii, ll. 3-13)

Notice that this passage contains as many metaphors, hideous though they be, as any other passage in Shakespeare's dramatic verse.

When reading Shakespeare, paying attention to characters who suddenly break into rhymed verse, or who slip into prose after speaking in blank verse, will heighten your awareness of a character's mood and personal development. For instance, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, the famous military leader Marcus Antony usually speaks in blank verse, but also speaks in fits of prose (II, iii, ll. 43-46) once his masculinity and authority have been questioned. Similarly, in *Timon of Athens*, after the wealthy lord Timon abandons the city of Athens to

live in a cave, he harangues anyone whom he encounters in prose (IV, iii, l. 331 ff.). In contrast, the reader should wonder why the bestial Caliban in *The Tempest* speaks in blank verse rather than in prose.

Implied Stage Action
When we read a Shakespearean play, we are reading a performance text. Actors interact through dialogue, but at the same time these actors cry, gesticulate, throw tantrums, pick up daggers, and compulsively wash murderous "blood" from their hands. Some of the action that takes place on stage is explicitly stated in stage directions. However, some of the stage activity is couched within the dialogue itself. Attentiveness to these cues is important as one conceives how to visualize the action. When Iago in *Othello* feigns concern for Cassio whom he himself has stabbed, he calls to the surrounding men, "Come, come:/Lend me a light" (V, i, ll. 86-87). It is almost sure that one of the actors involved will bring him a torch or lantern. In the same play, Emilia, Desdemona's maidservant, asks if she should fetch her lady's nightgown and Desdemona replies, "No, unpin me here" (IV, iii, l. 37). In Macbeth, after killing Duncan, Macbeth brings the murder weapon back with him. When he tells his wife that he cannot return to the scene and place the daggers to suggest that the king's guards murdered Duncan, she castigates him: "Infirm of purpose/Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures" (II, ii, ll. 50-52). As she exits, it is easy to visualize Lady Macbeth grabbing the daggers from her husband.

For 400 years, readers have found it greatly satisfying to work with all aspects of Shakespeare's language—the implied stage action, word choice, sentence structure, and wordplay—until all aspects come to life. Just as seeing a fine performance of a Shakespearean play is exciting, staging the play in one's own mind's eye, and revisiting lines to enrich the sense of the action, will enhance one's appreciation of Shakespeare's extraordinary literary and dramatic achievements.

King Lear: List of Characters

Lear, King of Britain—A mythical king of pre-Christian Britain, well-known in the folklore of Shakespeare's day. Lear is a foolish king who intends to divide his kingdom among his three daughters.

Cordelia—Lear's youngest daughter who speaks the truth.

The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy—They are both Cordelia's suitors, but the King of France marries her.

Regan and Goneril—Lear's selfish daughters who flatter him in order to gain his wealth and power.

Duke of Albany—Goneril's husband whose sympathy for Lear turns him against his wife.

Duke of Cornwall—Regan's husband who joins his wife in her devious scheme to destroy King Lear and usurp his power.

Earl of Gloucester—In the subplot, Gloucester's afflictions with his sons parallel those of Lear's with his daughters.

Edgar—The legitimate son of Gloucester.

Edmund—The illegitimate son of Gloucester who stops at nothing to gain power.

Earl of Kent—Kent is banished by King Lear for trying to intervene when Lear disinherits Cordelia.

Fool—The king's professional court jester whose witty and prophetic remarks are a wise commentary on Lear's shortsightedness.

Oswald—Goneril's stewart who attempts to kill Gloucester.

King Lear: Historical Background

Shakespeare's work can be understood more clearly if we follow its development as a reflection of the rapidly-changing world of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in which he lived. After the colorful reign of Henry VIII, which ushered in the Protestant Reformation, England was never the same. John Calvin and Michelangelo both died the year Shakespeare was born, placing his life and work at the peak of the Reformation and the Renaissance in Europe. When Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, the time was right to bring in "the golden age" of English history. The arts flourished during the Elizabethan era. Some of Shakespeare's contemporary dramatists were such notables as Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson.

King James VI of Scotland succeeded Elizabeth to the throne after her death in 1603 uniting the kingdoms of England and Scotland. The monarch's new title was King James I. Fortunately for Shakespeare, the new king was a patron of the arts and agreed to sponsor the King's Men, Shakespeare's theatrical group. According to the *Stationers' Register* recorded on November 26, 1607, *King Lear* was performed for King James I at Whitehall on St. Stephen's night as a Christmas celebration on December 26, 1606.

The legend of King Lear, well-known in Shakespeare's day, was about a mythical British king dating back to the obscurity of ancient times. It was first recorded in 1135 by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Historia Britonum*. In 1574 it appeared in *A Mirror for Magistrates* and later in Holinshed's Chronicles in 1577. The subplot, which concerned Gloucester and his sons, was taken from Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. An older version of the play called *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* first appeared on the stage in 1590. Comments on public response to the play in Shakespeare's day would necessarily be based on conjecture but in 1681, an adaptation of the original play was published by Nahum Tate, a dramatist of the Restoration period. Tate's sentimental adaptation gives the play a happy ending in which Lear and Gloucester are united with their children. Virtue is rewarded and justice reigns in Tate's version. It was not until 1838 that Macready reinstated Shakespeare's original version on the stage.

King Lear: Summary and Analysis

Act I, Scene 1: Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
King Lear: king of pre-Christian Britain; protagonist of the play

Goneril: King Lear's oldest daughter with whom he lives first

Regan: King Lear's middle daughter who refuses to take him in

Cordelia: King Lear's youngest daughter who is banished and disinherited

Duke of Cornwall: husband of Regan who stops at nothing to gain power

Duke of Albany: the mild-mannered husband of Goneril

Earl of Kent: King Lear's devoted courtier who is banished

Earl of Gloucester: protagonist of the subplot whose family situation is analogous to Lear's

Edmund: bastard son of Gloucester

King of France: marries Cordelia without a dowry

Duke of Burgundy: Cordelia's suitor who rejects Lear's dowerless daughter

Summary
Setting the scene for King Lear's rumored intention of dividing his kingdom, Gloucester and Kent discuss the King's preference between his sons-in-law, the Duke of Albany and Cornwall. Kent is introduced to Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, whom his father loves no less than his legitimate son, Edgar.

The trumpet sounds and King Lear and his attendants enter with his two sons-in-law and his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. He immediately orders Gloucester to attend to the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy who are both suitors contending for Cordelia's hand in marriage. Gloucester leaves and without delay Lear clarifies his intended purpose. He plans to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, giving the greatest share to the daughter who publicly professes to love him most.

Goneril, Lear's oldest daughter, is called on first. She flatters her father into believing that she loves him more than "words can wield the matter." Not to be outdone, Regan claims to love the King as much as her sister does, except that Goneril "comes too short." Expecting a grander expression of love from Cordelia, his favorite, the King is surprised and angry when her reply is simply "Nothing, my lord." He implores her to mend her "speech a little" or else she might "mar her fortunes." She tries to explain to the King that she only speaks the truth, but it is to no avail. Lear banishes her without an inheritance or a dowry.

In a futile attempt to change the King's mind, Kent argues on Cordelia's behalf but is also banished. He bids good-bye to the King, commending Cordelia for speaking truthfully and admonishing Goneril and Regan to live up to their "large speeches" of love for their father.

Gloucester ushers in the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy. They are both made aware of Cordelia's banishment and recent loss of fortune and are given a chance to accept her without a dowry. The King of France is confused, wondering what Cordelia, who had always had been Lear's favorite, could have done to deserve such treatment from her father. Cordelia begs her father to understand that she lacks the "glib and oily art" to speak of her love for him, but he only responds with a wish that she had never been born. Burgundy appeals to Lear to change his mind about the inheritance, but the King is unyielding. When Burgundy rejects Cordelia for lack of a dowry, she responds with a refusal to marry him if he is only interested in her "fortune." The King of France who has gained a new admiration and respect for Cordelia, happily accepts King Lear's "dow'rless daughter" and offers to make her the new Queen of France.

Without her father's blessing, Cordelia bids farewell to her sisters with tear-stained eyes, telling them that she wishes she could leave her father in better hands. Goneril and Regan sneer at her request for them to love Lear well. When they are alone together, the older sisters quickly turn on their father, discussing his "poor judgment" and making plans to usurp his power to prevent any more of his rash behavior.

Analysis
The universality of *King Lear* revolves around the theme of appearances versus reality as it relates to the world of filial love and, in Lear's case, ingratitude. In the opening scene we see Lear as a monarch commanding respect and love from his daughters. Lear speaks in the language of the "royal we," which was

language given to the nobility in Shakespeare's plays. "Which of you shall we say doth love us most,/ That we our largest bounty may extend." In his illusory world, he mistakes the flattery of Goneril and Regan as the truth and interprets Cordelia's plain speech as a lack of love for her father. Lear completely misses the point of Cordelia's words, which show her love to be "more ponderous" than her tongue. In his selfish attempt to buy his daughters' love with material possessions, however, he is blind to the fact that one cannot manipulate true affection.

Images of Lear's blindness or lack of insight are revealed when Kent coaxes him to "See better, Lear" or when Goneril claims that she loves her father "dearer than eyesight." Unaware of what he is relinquishing to his older daughters, Lear's illusions carry him even further when he hopes to "retain/ The name (king), and all th' addition to the king." He expects to keep his title and all the honors and official privileges and powers inherent in that title. The folly of that illusion will later haunt him as he is driven out to face the reality of the storm with only his Fool to keep him company.

Some critics have censured Cordelia's unbending attitude toward the King in the first scene as evidence of her pride. In allowing Cordelia the "asides" to express her repulsion for her sisters' flowery speeches, however, Shakespeare characterizes her as a completely honest person who acts as a foil to Goneril and Regan. Cordelia's response, "Nothing," and Lear's subsequent repetition of the word, punctuate Aristotle's idea that "Nothing will come of nothing." Ironically, these words, spoken by Lear himself, foreshadow the move from order to chaos throughout the rest of the drama. In the eyes of the King of France, Cordelia is, paradoxically, "most rich being poor." France extols her virtues and acknowledges her loss by promising to make it up to her as his queen.

Lear, in his ill-considered haste, banishes both Cordelia and Kent for speaking the truth. Kent feels duty-bound to stop Lear's rash behavior. "When Lear is mad./ ...Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak/ When power to flattery bows?" Kent alludes to Lear's "madness," which will dominate the action in subsequent scenes of the play.

Writing in the consciousness of his own age, Shakespeare's view of the natural order of things was still heavily influenced by the recent ideas of the Middle Ages. Lear refuses to accept Cordelia's love when it is given only "According to my bond." He fails to abide by her natural allegiance to her king and father and casts her out, thereby, destroying the natural order based on the hierarchy of all beings and things, animate and inanimate. Although this concept of the "chain of being" had its genesis with Plato and Aristotle, it was central to Medieval thought and did, in fact, stretch far beyond. In the seventeenth century, Leibniz writes about it; and as late as the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope explicitly describes the hierarchy and possible destruction of the natural order.

Vast chain of being! which from God began,
Natures aethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,...
Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroyed...

Shakespeare sets the scene for this disorder in the opening lines of the play. The prose dialogue of Kent and Gloucester discussing the bastardy and illegitimacy of Edmund with a flippant attitude is unnatural for Gloucester's station in life. Kent also joins him with an attitude of acceptance unable to "smell a fault." To make matters worse, Gloucester has a legitimate son whom he loves equally as well. This equality, seeming correct and natural in our modern times, would have been unnatural and shocking in Elizabethan England. It is significant that they both speak in prose rather than verse, since prose is usually set aside for servants and other lowly characters speaking in the colloquial language of the day. Shakespeare often uses prose, however, for humorously coarse or bawdy conversation that does, perhaps, not warrant the use of verse. Later, all three of the characters will speak in blank verse, unrhymed iambic pentameter (10 syllables to a line with the accent

on every second syllable), which is befitting their social rank. Gloucester and his sons, Edmund and Edgar are the main characters involving the subplot of the play, which commences in the next scene.

Act I, Scene 2: Summary and Analysis

Summary
In Edmund's opening soliloquy, we move from King Lear's palace in the previous scene to the castle of the Earl of Gloucester. The subplot of the play is set in motion when Edmund calls upon his goddess, Nature, to whose law he is bound. As the illegitimate son of Gloucester, Edmund challenges his supposed inferiority to his legitimate brother Edgar. He is also aware that Edgar is no dearer to his father than he is and intends to capitalize on the Earl's trust in him. Determined to snatch his half-brother's land and future title as Earl of Gloucester, Edmund forges his brother's name in a letter in which Edgar presumably suggests a plan to murder his father. With the letter in his hand, Edmund confidently invokes the gods to "stand up for bastards" as he prepares to meet his father.

As Gloucester enters, he is preoccupied with the disturbing events of the recent past. Edmund, however, makes sure that his father sees him attempting to hide the letter. Gloucester's curiosity is aroused by Edmund's strange behavior, and he repeatedly questions him about the piece of paper in his hand. Edmund, pretending to spare his father's feelings, cautiously breaks the news. He tells him the letter is from his brother, and "I find it not fit for your o'erlooking." This only increases Gloucester's curiosity, and, after much coaxing, Edmund finally hands it to him. Gloucester, stunned by its contents, questions the handwriting but is easily convinced it is Edgar's. Gloucester's harsh invectives against Edgar, the seeming villain, are promptly checked by Edmund, however. Under the guise of protecting his father's safety, Edmund asks him to leave the matter to him.

In the meantime, Gloucester blames the "late eclipses in the sun and moon" for the recent happenings turning son against father and the king against his child. When his father is out of sight, Edmund ridicules his superstitious beliefs, convinced that people blame the stars as an excuse for their own faults.

When Edgar approaches, Edmund feigns an interest in astrology, much to his brother's surprise. Quickly changing the subject, however, Edmund moves to the matter at hand which is to inform his brother that their father is furiously angry at Edgar for some unknown reason. He advises Edgar to arm himself if he plans to go out in public and gives him a key to his lodgings, where he will be safe until a proper time when Edmund will bring Edgar to his father.

After Edgar leaves, Edmund, realizing he has easily duped his father and brother, revels over their gullibility.

Analysis
Edmund's soliloquy, introducing the subplot of the play, reveals an attitude of free will and equality that is easily understood by people in modern society. Our sympathies are certainly with Edmund in his complaint: "Wherefore should I/ Stand in the plague of custom." He pierces our sensibilities with his satirical repetition of the word "legitimate," and the sensation is heightened further with his alliterative "Why brand they us/ With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?" Today, in all fairness, we would agree that people are not "base" by virtue of their birth. Reference to legitimate and illegitimate children is seldom seen in today's world. But we must be careful not to mistake Edmund's view as an ideal of modern society. The goddess Nature that Edgar invokes has no righteousness. There is, instead, a devil-may-care attitude where "gods stand up for bastards" regardless of what they do. Edmund's actions are brought about by deception, linking him with the evils of Goneril and Regan as the play progresses. He judges his superiority "by the lusty stealth of nature" in which he has "more composition" than the "dull, stale, tired bed" of marriage. Edmund's idea of Nature is based mostly on matter and animal appetites. Instead of harmony and order in the universe, his

law of nature brings chaos and death.

Edmund's response to Gloucester's question concerning the paper he was reading is "Nothing, my lord." It is significant that these same words, spoken by Cordelia, started the action involving Lear's lack of insight which resulted in her banishment. Gloucester also lacks insight to make good choices concerning Edgar. In his hasty judgment of him, he is immediately gulled into seeing him as a "brutish villain." Shakespeare's use of images pertaining to sight has a symbolic significance in this scene. When Gloucester begs "Let's see, let's see," he does, in fact, lack the insight to see the truth, just as he does when he says, "Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles." But spectacles do not give him insight, and, consequently, his poor judgment of Edgar parallels Lear's judgment of Cordelia.

Gloucester's view of life in his speech beginning with "These late eclipses in the sun and moon" is seen by Edmund as superstition or an evasive way of blaming the stars or the heavens for his faults. Again, Edmund presents a rebuttal that appeals to our modern sensibilities. At the heart of the matter, however, lies his view of nature as a morally indifferent world, which is simply a force with which to be reckoned. In contrast, Gloucester's view of nature reflects the hierarchy of all beings. When son turns against father or father against child, that hierarchy is disturbed and "all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves." Some critics believe that Edmund's view of nature was a new concept, just beginning to take hold in the sixteenth century, which was radically opposed to the orthodox traditions. Nevertheless, Lear, Gloucester, and Kent will see the relationship between the heavenly bodies and their effect on the lives of people throughout the drama.

Act I, Scene 3: Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Oswald: Goneril's steward who willingly carries out the evil schemes of his mistress

Summary
This scene is set in the Duke of Albany's palace, the home of Lear's oldest daughter Goneril with whom he has been living since the division of the kingdom. Goneril questions her steward, Oswald, and finds that her father has struck her gentleman for chiding his Fool. She is distraught over the King's behavior, claiming that he "upbraids us/ On every trifle." She says too that his knights "grow riotous." She is, in fact, so angry at her father that she does not want to speak to him and instructs Oswald to tell the King she is sick when he comes back from his hunting trip. In retaliation for her father's behavior, she also gives Oswald a directive to cut back on his usual services to the King. She will answer for it later if he gives Oswald any trouble.

Horns sound as Lear and his entourage return from their hunting trip. Goneril hastily directs Oswald to treat the King with "weary negligence" and instruct the servants under his command to do the same. If her father does not like it, she says, he can go live with her sister Regan. Goneril is well aware that she and Regan are of like mind concerning their father. She calls him foolish for trying to cling to his power and authority after he has officially relinquished it.

Goneril continues to rail bitterly against her father, calling him an old fool who needs to be treated like a baby again. He needs "flatteries" but also "checks" or reprimands. Hastily, she tells Oswald to instruct his knights to greet Lear with cold looks. With that, she hurries off to write to Regan informing her of what has transpired.

Analysis
This short scene acts as an interlude between the introduction of the subplot and Lear's dialogue with the disguised Kent. As background for the subsequent action of the play, the scene gives us our first brief glimpse of the signs of deterioration of the father/daughter relationship. It comes as no surprise, however, since we

have been forewarned of the intentions of Goneril and Regan at the end of the first act.

Goneril repeatedly insists on blaming Lear's actions on "the infirmity of his age." It should be noted, however, that he has just returned from a strenuous hunting expedition which seems to be quite a feat for an "idle old man." In her eagerness to strip him of his power, Goneril deceives even herself. Her obvious disrespect for her father validates Cordelia's perceptive honesty in Act I when she says, "I know you what you are." Goneril's actions toward her father would have been seen as a clear violation of the natural hierarchy by the Elizabethan audience of Shakespeare's day.

Act I, Scene 4: Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Knight: one of Lear's many attendants

Fool: the king's professional court jester

Summary
The scene continues in Albany's palace, where Kent is considering the success of his disguise. He is convinced that if he falsifies his accent, the masquerade will be complete. Ironically, he wishes to remain loyal to the King who has banished him. Just as Lear returns from his hunting trip, Kent appears disguised in servant's garb. Lear questions his abilities and his motives for wanting to serve him. Answering each question in a jovial manner, Kent portrays a character unlike his own. Convinced of Kent's qualifications, Lear invites him to join him as his servant and immediately calls for his dinner and his Fool.

Oswald, Goneril's steward, enters and Lear demands to see his daughter. Walking away, Oswald purposely ignores the King's request. Lear calls him back, but when Oswald does not respond, he sends his knight after him. The knight comes back with the news that Oswald rudely refused to obey the King. Shocked at such defiance of the King, Lear discusses the matter with his knight who has also noticed the recent "abatement of kindness" evident in the servants, Goneril, and the Duke of Albany himself. Lear again calls for his Fool, whom he has not seen for two weeks and is told that he has been pining away for Cordelia ever since she left for France. Unwilling to discuss it further, Lear quickly dismisses the idea, instructing his knight to bring Goneril and his Fool to him.

In the meantime, Oswald appears and addresses Lear with insolence and disrespect. Lear strikes him and Kent trips his heels and pushes him out. Grateful to Kent, the King hands him money for his service.

Lear's Fool finally appears with humorous and witty remarks about his coxcomb or cap. The Fool's satiric jesting about Lear's loss of his title and the division of his kingdom is a sad but honest commentary on his plight in which his "daughters" have become his "mothers." Goneril enters and the King kindly asks her why she wears a frown on her face. The Fool chastises him for patronizing her. Goneril confronts her father with a long diatribe concerning his quarreling and riotous servants. She blames him for allowing them to exhibit this kind of behavior. Lear cannot believe these words are coming from his own daughter. Goneril is relentless, however, finally demanding that he diminish his "train of servants" so that there will be order in the palace again, and he will be able to act in a manner befitting his age. Lear reacts with rage, calling her a "degenerate bastard" and promising to trouble her no longer.

Unaware of the situation, Albany enters, telling Lear to be patient, but he turns a deaf ear to his son-in-law. Claiming his "train are men of choice," he tells Goneril she is lying about their conduct. Cordelia's faults suddenly seem small compared to Goneril's, and he beats his head, blaming himself for his foolishness and poor judgment in giving up his "fix'd place." Before he leaves, he invokes the goddess Nature to curse

Goneril with sterility, or, if she must bear a child, to let it be a spiteful child who will torment her and cause her to grow old before her time. Albany, still puzzled, questions Goneril about her father, but she evades the issue, telling him not to worry.

Having heard that Goneril has just reduced his train of followers by 50, Lear reenters, cursing his daughter for destroying his manhood. He threatens to leave and stay with Regan, convinced that she would scratch her sister's eyes out if she heard of the way in which Goneril had been treating her father. Goneril, however, quickly sends a letter to her sister, warning her that Lear is coming. Doubting the wisdom of Goneril's actions, Albany censures his wife for her decision, but she criticizes his "milky gentleness" and his "want of wisdom."

Analysis

As Kent interviews for a position as a servant in Lear's retinue, he takes on the mannerisms of the Fool. His witty humor, spoken in prose, prompts Lear to respond to him as he would to his Fool. Kent's long list of attributes that he thinks would make him a good servant, includes "to eat no fish," a Protestant virtue easily understood by an Elizabethan audience. At the opening of the scene, Kent speaks in verse but changes to prose when he takes on his disguise as a servant. Later, when he is left alone in the stocks, he will again speak in verse, assuming his true character as the noble Earl of Kent.

Oswald, addressed by Lear as "sirrah," a title for commoners, willingly carries out the wishes of his lady Goneril, linking him with the evil characters in the play. Under Goneril's instructions, he defies the King by ignoring his commands and defending himself against Lear's abusive insults. This behavior, demonstrated by a servant against a king or other nobility, would have been unheard of in Shakespeare's day.

When we first meet the Fool, he offers his coxcomb to Kent, demonstrating that anyone aligning himself with the King is a fool and needs to wear the cap of the Fool. The Fool warns Kent that he cannot take "one's (Lear's) part that's out of favor" and at the same time bring himself into the good graces of those now in power, or he will soon "catch cold" or be out in the cold. Lear's Fool is often referred to by critics as a character assuming the role of the "chorus" whose function is to comment on the action of the play. The Fool speaks the bitter truth about King Lear's folly in dividing his kingdom between his two oldest daughters. He is the only character who can speak the truth without the risk of banishment. Lear, in fact, threatens to whip him if he tells a lie. To the implication that he might be calling Lear a fool, he replies, "All thy other titles thou hast given away, that thou wast born with." Kent's response, "This is not altogether fool," shows the wisdom of the Fool, who is not merely there to entertain. The Fool censures Lear for splitting his crown in the middle and giving away both parts to his daughters. "Thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt" alludes to one of Aesop's fables in which the miller and his son foolishly carry a donkey instead of riding on his back. The analogy is clear. Both Lear and the miller have foolishly inverted the order of nature. Lear's response when the Fool asks him whether he can make use of "nothing," echoes the words first spoken regarding Cordelia. "Nothing can be made out of nothing" has become a haunting refrain, reminding us of the imminence of the move from order to chaos in the drama.

Goneril's diatribe concerning Lear's unruly train of followers is, perhaps, not altogether unwarranted, considering the rash behavior her father has exhibited thus far in the play. Lear insists, however, that his "train are men of choice and rarest parts" and curses Goneril with sterility or at least a child who will torment her so that she too will feel the pain of a "thankless child." In spite of his protest, she reduces his train by 50 followers. Lear decides to leave immediately, certain that his daughter Regan will take him in. Confident that her sister will not "sustain him and his hundred knights," Goneril quickly sends word to her sister, informing her of Lear's arrival. Goneril's true motive for reducing Lear's train comes out by the end of the scene. She is afraid that with a hundred armed knights "He may enguard his dotage with their pow'rs,/ And hold our lives in mercy." Her husband, Albany, is troubled by her actions, but she accuses him of lacking wisdom which is reminiscent of her treatment of the King.

Act I, Scene 5: Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Gentleman: one of Lear's train attending to the horses

Summary
The scene is set in the courtyard in front of Albany's palace. Preparing to leave for Regan's, Lear orders Kent to deliver a letter to her in the city of Gloucester. He urges Kent to make sure he arrives before Lear does. In an attempt to raise his master's spirits, the Fool engages in honest witty metaphors and nonsensical riddles. Lear plays the game for a short time but soon slips back into his preoccupations with his daughter's ingratitude and his fears of madness. His gentleman soon arrives with the horses, and they are on their way to Regan's.

Analysis
This short scene acts as a commentary on Lear's emotional state as he prepares himself for his new living arrangements with his middle daughter, Regan. His Fool, though annoying at times, honestly reflects his master's fears. Lear has, after all, failed, and one can imagine him contemplating his last chance. Judging by observations thus far and the opinion of the Fool on the matter, Goneril and Regan are of like mind. The Fool's honesty is no reassurance when he says, "She will taste as like this as a crab does to a crab." In his preoccupation, Lear seems unmoved by the Fool's comments as he ruminates about Cordelia. "I did her wrong" is reminiscent of the previous scene where her faults seemed small compared to Goneril's.

Lear's illusory world is no longer intact, giving him new insights concerning the worth of his daughters and new perceptions of his own identity. In the previous scene he has begun to question that identity. "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" The Fool's painful metaphor suggests that he is a snail that has given his shell or house away to his daughters. He considers taking Goneril's half of the kingdom back again, but the Fool interjects with "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise." The intrusion of his reality leads him to invoke the heavens to "Keep me in temper, I would not be mad!" Here again, we see his belief in the natural order of things with a higher being in control of the universe.

Act II, Scene 1: Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Curan: a courtier at Gloucester's castle

Summary
Curan, the courtier, informs Edmund that the Duke of Cornwall and Regan will be coming to Gloucester's castle shortly. He also gives Edmund inside information about the likelihood of war between Cornwall and Albany. Seizing the opportunity to use the Duke of Cornwall's visit to his own advantage, Edmund immediately sets his plan into action. Calling his brother Edgar from his hiding place, he warns him to flee in haste before his father can capture him. He tells Edgar that Cornwall's unexpected visit might prove dangerous to him. In an attempt to stage a convincing escape, Edmund draws his sword and urges his brother to do the same, pretending to defend himself against Edmund. He is supposedly trying to capture Edgar and bring him to his father. After Edgar's escape, Edmund, aware that Gloucester has been watching from a distance, secretly wounds himself in the arm. The sight of blood, he thinks, will impress upon his father that he has, indeed, fought a hard fight.

Gloucester approaches, demanding to know the whereabouts of Edgar. He calls for the pursuit of the villain. Edmund tells his father that Edgar tried to persuade him of "the murther of your lordship." Ironically, Edmund has supposedly warned his brother that the revenging gods are opposed to parricide, and the child is

“bound to th’ father.” Edmund continues his deceitful tirade, declaring how “loathly opposite” he stood to Edgar’s opinion and “unnatural purpose.” For all this Edmund received a wound from the fleeing Edgar. Gloucester reacts with rage, calling Edgar a “murderous coward” and declaring that he will catch him and bring him “to the stake.” He will use the authority of the Duke of Cornwall to bring him to justice. Edmund also accuses Edgar of calling him an “unpossessing bastard” whose word would not stand up against his if he denied writing the letter. According to Edmund’s account, Edgar told him that he could, in fact, easily blame the murder plot on Edmund. More determined than ever to find Edgar, Gloucester prepares to publish his picture throughout the kingdom. Calling Edmund his “loyal and natural boy,” he promises to arrange to have him acknowledged as his legal heir.

Cornwall and Regan enter, having heard the shocking news about Edgar. Quick to accept Edmund’s deceitful story, Regan promptly blames Edgar’s behavior on his association with Lear’s “riotous knights.” Having been informed by Goneril of Lear’s arrival, Cornwall and Regan have decided not to stay and wait for him. Cornwall invites Edmund into his service, commending him for his virtue and obedience. Explaining why they have come, Regan asks for Gloucester’s counsel concerning Goneril’s “differences” with her father.

Analysis
This scene, involving the subplot, is analogous to the first scene of the play. In the main plot, King Lear is duped by his older daughters into believing they love him “more than words can wield the matter.” In the subplot, Edmund deceives Gloucester about his own devotion toward his father, “by no means he could...Persuade me to the murther of your lordship.” Edmund’s gain is necessarily Edgar’s loss. In both cases, Lear and Gloucester, through their own lack of insight, must bear the loss of one of their children. W. R. Elton sees the double plot as a “developing metaphor” in which the action in these two parts “mirror each other.” (W. R. Elton, “Double Plot in King Lear.”) Gloucester’s rage, triggered by the slender evidence against his son Edgar, is reminiscent of Lear’s violent anger demonstrated toward Cordelia resulting in her banishment. The main plot and the subplot operate in contrapuntal fashion to render depth and a clearer perception of the play as a whole.

Curan’s news about the rumored civil strife brewing between the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall is a foreshadowing of future strife in the kingdom. Edmund is an opportunist who wastes no time plotting against his brother Edgar when he hears of Albany’s arrival at Gloucester’s castle. He is a master at manipulating the minds of Regan and Albany and immediately gains favor in their sight.

The irony runs deep in this scene when Edmund criticizes Edgar, attributing to him the very vices that are second nature to Edmund. There seems to be a role reversal with Edmund being the “loyal and natural boy” instead of Edgar. The irony reaches its peak, however, when Edmund talks of warning Edgar that the gods will wreak their vengeance against parricides, and “the natural bond of child to father” must be honored. In view of Edmund’s idea of nature, in which he rejects the hierarchical order in a previous scene, his fabricated story to his father is a masquerade. He is, indeed, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Gloucester’s lack of insight leads him to seek the wrong villain when he asks, “Now, Edmund, where’s the villain?”

Outwardly, Regan and Cornwall seem honest in administering justice in the case of Edgar. Regan, however, all too quickly links Edgar’s alleged actions to her father’s “riotous knights.” Her decision to be gone when her father arrives at her house reveals her true character, linking her with her evil sister Goneril.

Act II, Scenes 2 and 3: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Oswald appears at Gloucester’s castle, and Kent, Lear’s courier, promptly recognizes him as Goneril’s steward whom he had “tripp’d up by the heels” and beaten for his insolent behavior to the King only a few

days before. Feigning innocence, Oswald pretends he has never seen Kent. Kent rebukes him harshly and then draws his sword, challenging Oswald to do the same. Edmund enters in response to Oswald's cries for help. Edmund's sword is drawn and Kent turns on him, but Cornwall, who has just appeared, orders them to "keep peace." Regan and Gloucester, following closely behind Cornwall, are appalled at the sight of weapons. Cornwall demands to hear an account of their differences. Continuing to rail at Oswald, Kent calls him a "cowardly rascal" whom "Nature disclaims," and who must, therefore, have been made by a tailor. Oswald defends his cowardice, telling Cornwall he has spared Kent's life because he was a "grey beard." Enraged by Oswald's outright lie and his patronizing attitude toward him, Kent rants on with irreverent expletives about this rogue "who wears no honesty."

Cornwall takes the part of Oswald, however, and calls for Kent to be put in the stocks. Kent reminds Cornwall that he serves the King, and this move will surely create ill feelings. Troubled by the effect it will have on the King, Gloucester too pleads with Cornwall to rescind his decision. Cornwall remains stoic, however, and Regan is determined to put her sister's feelings above her father's.

Left alone, Kent is optimistic about his time in the stocks. He will catch up on some much-needed sleep and the remainder of the time he will spend whistling. Before he sleeps, he finds comfort in reading a letter from Cordelia.

Edgar's soliloquy in Scene 3 portrays him as "poor Tom," a Bedlam beggar. He will disguise himself by griming his face with filth, tying his hair in knots, and covering his nakedness with only a blanket. Fleeing from the law, he has escaped capture by hiding in the hollow of a tree.

Analysis

On the surface, it would seem that Kent's scurrilous treatment of Oswald in the beginning of the scene is excessive and unjustified. Greeting Kent with courtesy and decorum, Oswald seems undeserving of his verbal abuse. Kent immediately recognizes him as Goneril's insolent steward, however, who behaved badly to the King only a few days earlier. Kent also realizes that Oswald comes with letters against the King taking "Vanity the puppet's part." The implication is that Vanity, a character in ancient morality plays, is, in this case, personified by Goneril. Oswald repeatedly denies knowing Kent, but later he relates to Cornwall the details of his recent experience with Kent and the King. It is this pretense that Kent, who is characteristically blunt and honest, cannot tolerate. For his inability to engage in flattery, Kent is now awarded time in the stocks just as it had brought him banishment earlier. In this sense, Kent's experience is analogous to Cordelia's. Disorder flourishes in the world of the play where the honest characters are castigated and the deceitful ones rewarded.

As was true in previous scenes, lack of respect for old people is a recurring theme in the play. Cornwall refers to Kent as a "stubborn ancient knave" whom he intends to teach a lesson by putting him in the stocks. Kent's satiric retort, "Sir, I am too old to learn," lends humor to the idea that with age comes wisdom, which is in keeping with the natural order of things.

Cornwall spends much time and effort getting at the truth of the quarrel between Kent and Oswald. It is noteworthy that his abrupt decision to "Fetch forth the stocks" catching Kent and Gloucester by complete surprise, comes in the wake of Oswald's account of the King's abusiveness toward him. Cornwall's sudden decision to place Kent in the stocks is an act of defiance against the King's authority. The Duke is unmoved by Kent's appeal for the respect of his master, the King. Regan too feels it would be worse to abuse her sister's servant. To Gloucester's appeal "the King must take it ill/ That he,.../ Should have him (Kent) thus restrained," comes Cornwall's curt reply, "I'll answer that." The Duke shows no visible remorse for his act of rebellion against the King.

Left alone in the stocks, Kent speaks in verse at the end of the scene, reverting back to his true character, the noble Earl of Kent. He looks forward to perusing a letter from Cordelia who has fortunately been informed of his disguise and his situation as servant of the King.

Scene 3 is a short account of what has happened in Edgar's life since the betrayal of his half-brother, Edmund. In his soliloquy, Edgar tells us he has been living in the hollow of a tree, escaping "the hunt." Like Kent, Edgar will also take on a disguise to preserve his life. He plans to hide in the guise of a Bedlam beggar. Bedlam is another word for Bethlehem Hospital, a London madhouse of the sixteenth century. The madmen of that day who roamed the London streets begging for food became known as "poor Toms." "Edgar I nothing am," indicates his loss of identity as Edgar, son of the Earl of Gloucester.

Act II, Scene 4: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Lear, his Fool, and his Gentleman arrive at Gloucester's castle. The King finds it puzzling that Cornwall and Regan have left their house on the night of his expected arrival without sending a message to explain. Kent who is still in the stocks, greets his master. Shocked to see his courier in this shameful condition, the King thinks it must be a joke. Kent tells Lear it was Regan and Cornwall who placed him there. In disbelief, Lear argues with Kent, bandying back and forth until the King finally faces the truth. He insists that they would not dare engage in such an act of disrespect toward the King through his messenger. Incensed by Cornwall and Regan's actions, Lear calls it a "violent outrage" that is "worse than murther." When asked for a reason by the King, Kent truthfully admits that he demonstrated "more man than wit," when he drew his sword on Oswald.

Commenting on the action, the Fool recites fanciful rhymes about Lear's problems with his daughters, observing that poor fathers "make their children blind" while rich fathers "see their children kind." Asking for his daughter's whereabouts, Lear is told she is within. Determined to rectify the situation with Kent, Lear presently enters the castle, asking the others to stay behind. Kent inquires about the King's decreased train of followers. The Fool tells him that it is a question deserving time in the stocks. When Kent asks why, the Fool answers in prose and verse alluding to the stormy times ahead.

Lear and Gloucester enter with the news that Cornwall and Regan refuse to speak to Lear, giving the excuse that they are sick and weary from traveling all night. Lear requests a better answer from Gloucester, who discreetly reminds the King that the "fiery quality" of the Duke is at the heart of the problem. Lear's explosive reply calls for vengeance and death. He demands to speak with the Duke of Cornwall and Regan immediately, but Gloucester simply states that he has already informed them. The King's fury increases as he excoriates the "fiery Duke." His mood suddenly changes, however, when he considers that the Duke may not be well. When he is reminded of Kent's humiliation in the stocks, however, he is sure this act is a symbol of the death of his royal power as king. He again calls for the Duke and Regan to "come forth and hear me."

Gloucester enters with Cornwall and Regan. They both greet him with proper decorum, addressing him as "your Grace" and telling him they are glad to see him. Kent is set free. The King promptly begins his diatribe complaining about Goneril's depravity and her "Sharp-toothed unkindness," but Regan steps in to defend her sister. She asks him to return to Goneril and apologize for having "wrong'd her." Lear falls on his knees begging Regan to take him in. Annoyed, Regan tells him to stop his unsightly tricks and go back to Goneril's house. Cursing Goneril and swearing never to live with her again, he promises Regan that she will never have his curse.

The King asks Regan who put his man in the stocks, but is interrupted by Oswald's arrival. Recognizing him as Goneril's steward, Lear orders him out of his sight and again demands to know who stocked his servant.

This time he is interrupted by Goneril's arrival. Seeing her, the King invokes the heavens to come down and take his part. Lear admonishes her for daring to face him, but she feigns innocence and justifies her past behavior. Cornwall finally admits having put Lear's man in the stocks.

Regan approaches Lear, trying to persuade him to return to her sister's for the remainder of the month, dismiss half his train, and then return to her after she has had time to make provisions for his arrival. Infuriated, Lear declares that he would rather "abjure all roofs" than give up 50 of his men. Goneril casually tells him it is his choice. Rebuffing her with contempt, he reminds her he can stay with Regan and keep his 100 knights. Regan's quick reply, "Not altogether so," is a reminder that she has not yet made preparations for him and his large train of followers. What's more, she decides to reduce his train further and allow him only 25 followers. Lear's painful outcry "I gave you all" is met with a cold response from Regan. After some thought, he decides to go with Goneril where he will at least be allowed 50 knights, but Goneril and Regan proceed to cut his entire train and only allow him the use of their own servants. Condemning his daughters as "unnatural hags," Lear swears he will go mad rather than succumb to weeping. In "high rage" the King wanders out into the impending storm while Goneril and Regan affirm their resolution to cut off the services of all his knights. Regan and Cornwall then implore Gloucester to "Shut up your doors" against the wild night and leave Lear to his own devices.

Analysis

Lear's Fool places himself in the middle of the action in this scene with a variety of poignant phrases that again expose the truth of Lear's folly in relation to his daughters.

> Fathers that wear rags
> Do make their children blind,
> But fathers that bear bags
> Shall see their children kind.

With his use of metaphor, the Fool satirizes Lear's foolishness in giving away his "bags" of money to his daughters. In only a matter of weeks, Goneril and Regan have changed from overt expressions of love and kindness before his division of the kingdom to a dogged blindness to their father's needs after they inherit all his money. When Kent is placed in the stocks by Cornwall and Regan, the Fool's comment, "Winter's not gone yet," bears the implication that the worst is not over. The Fool clearly recognizes the act of irreverence and rebellion to the King inherent in their actions toward Kent, his messenger.

In the opening part of the scene, the Fool thinks Kent has been remiss in delivering an answer to Lear's letter from Regan. According to the Fool, Kent, therefore, wears "cruel garters" made of wood because he has been "overlusty at legs," or, run from his duty instead of tending to the service of the King.

The Fool foreshadows the imminent storm at the end of this scene when he talks in rhyme about those who "serve and seek for gain." They will, the Fool says, "pack when it begins to rain,/ And leave thee in the storm." The image is clear, working on the literal as well as the symbolic level of the play. Lear is, indeed, left out in the storm as Regan counsels Gloucester to "Shut up your doors."

The Fool's advice to "set thee to school to an ant, to teach thee there's no laboring i' th' winter" alludes to the Bible and would have been readily understood by audiences of Shakespeare's day.

> Go to the ant, thou sluggard;
> consider her ways and be wise:
> Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler,
> Provideth her meat in the summer,
> and gathereth her food in the harvest.

Proverbs 6: 6-8

Even the ant is wise enough to know there is no labor in the winter. Lear, in the winter of his life, is likened to a great wheel going downhill and finally deserted. But in the prophetic words of the Fool himself, “the Fool will tarry, the Fool will stay.”

Lear’s characteristic tendency to judge his daughters’ love on a mathematical scale is readily apparent in this scene. In the first scene he promises to extend the “largest bounty” to the one who “loves us most.” In the same mode, he refuses to live with Goneril after she dismisses 50 of his men. On the other hand, when Regan refuses to take him in unless he reduces his train of followers to 25, Lear suddenly decides to live with Goneril whose “fifty yet doth double five and twenty,/ And thou art twice her love.” Ultimately, of course, both daughters decide they will receive the King “But not one follower.” Devastated, Lear stumbles out into the storm in “high rage.”

By admonishing Lear to apologize to Goneril, Regan commits an atrocity well recognized in Elizabethan England. The King would not, by the laws of society, ask the forgiveness of his daughter, nor would he be forced to beg, though ironically, for food and raiment. Lear invokes the gods to touch him with “noble anger.” He vows to avenge his daughters who are “unnatural hags.” Some critics feel his behavior at this point in the play becomes almost childish. Hovering at the verge of a temper tantrum, he fights back “women’s weapons, water-drops.” The alliteration and rhythm forces a heavy emphasis on each word, creating a tone that demonstrates Lear’s disdain for acting “womanish,” and, thereby, destroying the natural order.

Act III, Scene 1: Summary and Analysis

Summary
On the heath near Gloucester’s castle, Kent, braving the storm, immediately recognizes the King’s Gentleman. He informs Kent that the King is “contending with the fretfrul elements” with only his Fool to keep him company. The Gentleman reports that Lear roams bareheaded on the stormy heath, striving to “outscorn...the wind and rain,” as his loyal Fool desperately tries to comfort him.

Kent quickly realizes the Gentleman is one whom he can trust. He discloses to him rumors of a division between Albany and Cornwall, though it is still not out in the open. The King of France, Cordelia’s husband, has sent his spies to attend the households of Cornwall and Albany as servants. Under their surveillance, quarrels and plots between the two houses have been reported and news of their abusiveness to the King has reached France. Kent thinks “something deeper” also may be brewing. France’s secret invasion of England’s “scattered” kingdom is imminent. Kent asks the Gentleman to go to Dover to disclose to its citizens the “unnatural” treatment of the King. Assuring the Gentleman of his noble birth, Kent gives him a ring to hand to Cordelia whom he will most likely find in Dover. He explains that she will confirm Kent’s true identity. The two then part ways, searching for Lear in the storm and agreeing to give the signal when he is found.

Analysis
This scene functions to inform us of Lear’s struggle against the elements on the stormy heath. The loyalty of the Fool who accompanies Lear is reminiscent of the previous scene where the Fool confirms his constancy and allegiance. When others “leave thee in the storm,” he says, “I will tarry, the Fool will stay.” Attempting to ease the King’s sorrows, the Fool “labors to outjest/ His heart-strook injuries.” If the fool’s candid jesting about Lear’s lack of good judgment as a father and a king has been annoying at times, one can only stand in awe of his loving care and devotion to the King in the worst of all possible situations, the storm on the heath.

In this scene we hear further rumors of the possibility of a war between the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany. Curan, a courtier in Gloucester's castle, has already predicted the conflict in his conversation with Edmund in Act II, Scene 1. It should be noted, however, that the dissension between the two households is likely to be led by Goneril rather than Albany.

In Cordelia's letter, read by Kent while he was in the stocks in Act II, Scene 2, she writes that she has been "inform'd/ Of my (Kent's) obscured course." In this scene, we learn that Cordelia's informers are, indeed, spies acting as servants in the houses of Cornwall and Albany. Kent informs the Gentleman that Cordelia will most likely be in Dover. Together with the French Army, she waits there to rectify her sisters' abuses toward her father, the King. In this scene, we are given a glimmer of hope that Cordelia will liberate her father from the hands of her self-seeking sisters. Certain that the recent events leading to the King's condition will anger his loyal citizens in Dover, Kent sends the Gentleman to spread the news.

Act III, Scene 2: Summary and Analysis

Summary
The groundwork has already been laid by the Gentleman in the previous scene informing us of Lear's struggle against the fierce storm on the heath. As the scene opens, Lear fervently calls upon the winds to blow, the lightning to "Spit, fire," the rain to "drench the steeples," and the thunder to crack open "nature's moulds" and spill the seeds that make "ingrateful man." The Fool counsels Lear to submit to his daughters' authority over him and beg to be taken out of the storm. He reasons that it would be better to "court holy-water," or, in other words, flatter his daughters, than to continue braving the stormy night. Ignoring the Fool's pleas, he addresses the elements, telling them he will show them no unkindness since he never gave them his kingdom, and, therefore, they owe him nothing. His mood quickly swings, however, as he rails against the rain, wind, thunder, and lightning, suspecting that they are, after all, only the "servile ministers" of his "pernicious daughters" fighting a battle against him.

The Fool, continuing his jesting in rhyme, again censures the King, telling him that the person who has "a house to put 's head in" has a good brain. In a strained attempt to control his passions, Lear swears he will be the epitome of patience.

Kent enters with expressions of terror at the night sky that is unparalleled in his memory. Lear calls on the gods to wreak their stormy vengeance on criminals who have never been brought to justice. He considers himself above them, stating that he is "More sinn'd against than sinning." Kent gently guides the "bare-headed" Lear into a hovel that provides shelter from the storm. He talks of turning back to Gloucester's castle with the intention of forcing them to receive him.

Lear tells the Fool his wits are beginning to turn. For the first time he shows compassion for him, asking him whether he is cold. The Fool delays the end of the scene, quoting a long prophecy in rhymed verse.

Analysis
In the sixteenth century, the theaters were relatively devoid of stage props. Shakespeare's setting of the storm on the heath is, therefore, largely dependent upon the strong and vigorous imagery of Lear's language. Though the Fool disagrees, preferring a "dry house" to the stormy night, Lear calls upon the elements to wreak their vengeance on "ingrateful man." With metaphors, he paints an image of rain, wind, thunder, and lightning that provide the setting for the storm.

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage, blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drench'd our steeples, (drown'd) the cocks!

You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head!

Personifying the elements, Lear sees them as "servile ministers" to his daughters who are engaging them in a battle to destroy him. Hence, the storm outside becomes analogous to Lear's inner struggle in his chaotic world where the political forces, who are now his daughters, threaten to destroy him. Having lost his powers when he gave away his kingdom, he is as vulnerable to his daughters' vengeance as he is to the all-encompassing storm when he roams bareheaded on the wild and barren heath.

Lear calls on the all-shaking thunder to "Crack nature's moulds" and spill the seeds that create "ingrateful man." J. F. Danby notes that the thunder acts as the King's agent that carries out the "King's desires in annihilating the corrupted world of man" (Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature, p. 183). Lear, however, cannot, at this point in the drama, identify with that corruption. He still feels he is "More sinn'd against than sinning."

In ancient times people were in constant fear that they would, by some inadvertent act, anger the gods who would, in turn, threaten to destroy them. Though *King Lear* is set in pre-Christian times, Shakespeare's audience would have held similar views. The audience harbored a strong belief in the natural hierarchy of things, which creates a perfect harmony among all stages of being all the way down to inanimate objects. This intricate balance could be upset, however. If, for example, a king was dethroned, as is true in the case of King Lear, God might show his wrath through frightening storms. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is comparable in that the storm is conjured up by the gods to avenge the impending assassination of Caesar. Casca trembles at the "scolding winds" attributing the storm to a world that has become "too saucy with the gods," incensing "them to send destruction" (*Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene 3). Kent's misgivings about the storm are analogous to Casca's when Kent says that he has never seen "such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder" since he was a man. Casca echoes Kent's feelings when he makes claims to have seen unsettling storms in the past "But never till to-night, never till now,/ Did I go through a tempest dropping fire" (*Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene 3).

Lear's indulgence in self-pity is all-pervading in this scene until the tone shifts suddenly with "My wits begin to turn." In a sudden flow of compassion, Lear remembers the humanity of his Fool, and, in fact, his own. "Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?/ I am cold myself." Lear's search for straw in order to warm himself humbles him as he realizes that necessity makes all human conditions relative.

The Fool's last speech delays his exit with a prophecy that seems to confuse time and place. His repeated use of the word "when" is anticipatory, though our immediate reaction to the first few lines is that these circumstances are not reserved for the future, but do, in fact, already reflect the evil world of the play. Reaching no conclusion, the Fool tells us that he is simply predicting the prophecy of Merlin who has not yet been born. The audience realizes then that it has attempted to follow his nonsensical rhyme to no avail.

Act III, Scene 3: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Taking Edmund into his confidence, Gloucester informs him that Cornwall and Regan have taken over the use of his castle, castigating him for attempting to help the King. They have forbidden Gloucester to seek any aid for the King and adamantly prohibit him to talk about him.

Edmund responds as his father expects him to, expressing surprise at such actions which are most "savage and unnatural." Gloucester tells Edmund there is division between the Duke of Cornwall and the Duke of

Albany. He asks Edmund not to divulge the dangerous contents of a letter he has received containing the news of a power ready to avenge the injuries done to the King. The letter is presently in Gloucester's closet under lock and key.

Instructing Edmund to cover for him at the castle in case Cornwall asks, Gloucester resolves to find the King and help relieve his misery. He tells Edmund that he has been threatened with death for taking the King's part and warns him to be careful.

Left alone, Edmund immediately decides to inform the Duke of Cornwall of all that his father has told him, including the contents of the letter. With his eye on his father's title as Duke of Gloucester, Edmund intends to expose him to Cornwall and, thereby, gain advantage over his own father.

Analysis
This short scene functions as an interim to the actions of Kent, Lear, and the Fool on the heath. It allows the trio enough time to reach the hovel in the next scene and keeps the audience abreast of the most recent developments in the subplot.

If there has been any doubt thus far in the play, this scene reveals Edmund's complete depravity. His cunning deception and betrayal of his father establishes him as an evil character in the play. Adept at covering his guilt, Edmund reacts appropriately to Gloucester's account of Cornwall and Regan's treatment of the King which is "Most savage and unnatural." But the minute Gloucester's back is turned, he decides to expose his father to Cornwall. Edmund is an opportunist and will stop at nothing, even the threat of death to his father, to gain power.

Gloucester has been caught in a precarious situation between his loyalty to his former master, the King, and his fear of offending Cornwall and Regan. In this scene, he finally takes a stand against the injuries imposed upon the King. It is not until Cornwall and Regan's harsh takeover of his castle, however, along with their directive to break all communication with the King, that he vows to side with Lear. The contents of the letter seemingly offer hope for some respite from the King's desperate situation. With the letter locked safely in his closet, Gloucester finally makes his death-defying decision to leave his castle and "incline to the King." We will later learn that the power that is "already footed" is that of the King of France and Cordelia, who are waiting on the shore near Dover with an army. For the first time since the division of the kingdom, there is hope that the tide will turn, restoring Lear's kingdom back to its natural order.

Act III, Scene 4: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Seeking shelter from the raging storm on the heath, Kent repeatedly prods Lear to enter the hovel. At first he rebuffs Kent, asking him to leave him alone, but the King finally replies that the storm invading his body is scarcely felt since the tempest in his mind is a "greater malady." Ranting on about "filial ingratitude," he reproachfully alludes to his daughters who, he thinks, "tear this hand" that feeds them. Vowing to refrain from weeping, he firmly resolves to endure, though his daughters have shut him out on a night like this. Calling their names through the din of the storm, he reminds them that he "gave all." He promptly checks himself, afraid he will go mad. He decides to shun that kind of talk. Kent responds positively and again urges him to enter the hovel. Lear finally agrees to go in, but asks Kent and his Fool to enter first. He promises to follow them after he has said a prayer. Praying with heartfelt compassion for the poor homeless and unfed wretches, he is remorseful for having taken "too little care of this."

As Lear ends his prayer, a strange voice is heard. Rushing out of the hovel, the Fool cautions Lear not to enter since there is a spirit inhabiting the shelter. Responding to Kent's command, Edgar, disguised as Tom o'

Bedlam, appears from the hovel, muttering incoherent phrases about the "foul fiend" who is following him. Lear immediately perceives him as one who has been swindled by Goneril and Regan, but Kent informs Lear that this man has no daughters. Lear is not convinced. He is sure that nothing but "Those pelican daughters" could have brought the madman to this pass.

The disguised Edgar portrays himself as a former servingman who has lived a life of questionable morals. The King contrasts Edgar to the three sophisticates: Lear, Kent, and the Fool. He recognizes Edgar as "the thing itself," devoid of all the trappings that distinguish man from a "bare, fork'd animal." Identifying with Tom's madness, Lear tears at his own clothes that are only "lendings" from nature.

Gloucester enters with a torch. The disguised Edgar identifies him as the "foul (fiend) Flibbertigibbet" who roams the streets at night. Gloucester gives an account of the impossible situation with Lear's daughters, explaining their command to bar the doors of his castle, shutting Lear out in the storm. He assures the King that he has come to take him to an outbuilding near his castle where he will be given food to eat. Lear, in his madness, responds by requesting a word with the philosopher, Tom o' Bedlam. In his concern for the King whose "wits begin t' unsettle," Kent implores Gloucester to extend the offer of food and shelter once more.

Gloucester empathizes with the mad Lear whose "daughters seek his death." He tells the disguised Kent that he had a son who also sought his life, and it has "craz'd my wits." Ironically, he makes a positive reference to the banished Kent who had predicted this would happen. Gloucester finally convinces the King to take shelter in the hovel, but Lear will only go in if his philosopher, Tom o' Bedlam, will keep him company. Humoring the King, Kent and Gloucester usher all of them into the shelter. Tom o' Bedlam echoes a familiar English ballad as the scene closes.

Analysis

The storm on the heath is symbolic of the tempest in Lear's mind. He censures Kent for his excessive concern over bodily comforts as he repeatedly urges Lear to go into the hovel. "Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm/ Invades us to the skin; so 'tis to thee." On the edge of madness, Lear is tormented by a "greater malady" bringing visions of his unkind daughters shutting him out on such a night. The storm outside is scarcely felt when it is met by a stronger affliction which is that of "Filial Ingratitude." Agonizing over his misfortunes, the tortured Lear can only see others' adversities in terms of his own. As he encounters Edgar, disguised as Tom o' Bedlam in the hovel, he repeatedly insists that it was Tom's daughters who brought him to this state of madness. "Didst thou give all to thy daughters? And/ art thou come to this?" When Kent interjects "He hath no daughters, sir," Lear threatens him with death, calling him a traitor for opposing his king.

The storm on the heath symbolizes not only Lear's emotional turmoil, but also the disorderly tumult pervading the entire kingdom. There are rumors of wars between the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany, and Edmund intends to join forces with them. Deceit runs rampant as children turn against their parents, and the honest characters, Kent and Edgar, must disguise themselves for their very survival.

Lear's self-centered obsession with his own difficulties, however, begins to turn as he prays for the "Poor naked wretches" out in the pitiless storm. Reflecting on the plight of the homeless and hungry left without shelter in the storm, he chides himself for having taken "Too little care of this!" L. C. Knights has observed that "This is pity, not self-pity; and condemnation of others momentarily gives way to self-condemnation." (*Shakespearean Themes*, p. 104) It is only momentary, however, and Lear again indulges in self-pity as he lashes out at his "pelican daughters."

Disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, Edgar's description of himself as a former servingman portrays the vision of a man who embodies all worldly vices: "False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey." He has, in fact, descended from a human being to a "poor,

bare, fork'd animal."

Lear's vision of Tom o' Bedlam as "the thing itself" stands in sharp contrast to the sophisticated three. Stripped of his power and rejected by his daughters, Lear lapses into a sudden visionary madness in which he longs for the natural state — "unaccomodated man." In his incongruous endeavor to escape his true identity as a dignified king, he tears at his clothes, muttering "Off, off, you lendings." Edgar later becomes Lear's philosopher, whom he takes to a hovel as a companion. It is noteworthy that Lear, who usually speaks in verse, reverts to prose in this speech as he descends from sophisticated humanity into madness.

The main plot and the subplot are analogous in the scene when the feigned madness of Edgar is held in juxtaposition to the actual madness of Lear. Gloucester's heartbreak concerning his son, who allegedly sought his life echoes Lear's devastating situation with his daughters who also seek his death. Confiding in Kent about his own griefs, Gloucester compares them to the King's. "Thou sayest the King grows mad, I'll tell thee, friend,/ I am almost mad myself." Ironically, he talks of "good Kent," unaware it is, indeed, the loyal Kent whom he is addressing. It is a strange paradox that Kent must hide his true identity from the King, just as Edgar must disguise himself from his father, Gloucester. In both the main plot and the subplot, the "good" characters must disguise themselves while the evil ones parade about openly.

Act III, Scene 5: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Acting as an informant against his father, Edmund convinces Cornwall that Gloucester is guilty of treason. Determined to have his revenge, Cornwall now reasons that Edgar's plot to kill his father was not entirely due to his brother's "evil disposition" but was, in fact, provoked by Gloucester himself. Bellying his evil motive, Edmund produces Gloucester's supposed letter as evidence that he has been supplying secret information to France. Edmund invokes the heavens to witness his regret that he should have detected his own father's treason. Cornwall rewards Edmund with his new title as Earl of Gloucester and urges him to find his father so that he can be apprehended. In an "aside" to the audience, Edmund voices his wish that he might find Gloucester "comforting the King," which would augment Cornwall's suspicions. He then turns to Cornwall, assuring him of his loyalty to the kingdom in spite of the conflict it will cause between him and his father. Confident that he can trust Edmund, Cornwall assures him that he will love him as his own son. (Better than Edmund's own father).

Analysis
We again see the development of the subplot in this scene in which Edmund uses Gloucester's letter as evidence of his guilt. Unlike Edgar's, Edmund's disguise is spiritual, rather than physical, as he hides behind an innocent facade, hoping to gain undeserved power and wealth at others' expense. Cloaking his deception in glossy language, Edmund laments the fact that he must "repent to be just." The irony is clear as Cornwall puts his complete trust in Edmund, promising to help him bear the loss of his father by offering himself as "a (dearer) father."

Cornwall is obviously being gulled by Edmund which becomes even more apparent in his "aside" to the audience. In his depravity, Edmund guilefully demonstrates his disloyalty to both Cornwall and Gloucester. "If I find him comforting the King, it will stuff his suspicion more fully." Turning to Cornwall, he vows to persevere in his "course of loyalty," but he is, in fact, only loyal to his own ambition of becoming the Duke of Gloucester.

Edmund calls upon the heavens to look with pity on his adversity. "O heavens! that this treason were not; or not I the detector!" He is fully aware that his piety will impress Cornwall. We are, however, reminded of Edmund's renunciation of the supernatural in Act I, Scene 2 when he condemns those who are "sick in

fortune" for blaming their plight on the heavens. Unknown to Cornwall, Edmund is only calling on the god of the natural world in view of his lack of belief in the supernatural.

Filled with a desire for revenge against Gloucester for taking the King's part against him, Cornwall, no less than Edgar, carries on an illusion of fairness and integrity throughout the scene. Reaching the height of all absurdity, he vows to replace Gloucester as a loving father to Edmund.

Act III, Scene 6: Summary and Analysis

Summary
In an outbuilding near his castle, Gloucester shelters Lear from the raging storm on the heath. Kent thanks Gloucester for his kindness, afraid that the King's "wits have given way to impatience." Promising his quick return, Gloucester leaves Kent, Edgar, and the Fool with Lear to find the necessary supplies for their comfort. Edgar, still disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, continues his chatter about the foul fiends that are plaguing him. Alluding to Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," he says that Frateretto tells him "Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness." He implores the Fool to pray and beware of the "foul fiend." The Fool continues his lighthearted humor, asking whether a madman is a yeoman or a gentleman, to which Lear quickly replies, "A king, a king."

Breaking into the middle of the Fool's continued jesting, the King suddenly decides to conduct a mock trial. Edgar will be his "learned justicer" and his wise Fool will assist him. He appoints Kent as one of the judges. His daughters, Goneril and Regan, are the "she-foxes" who are brought to trial, taking the form of joint stools.

Kent urges Lear to lie down and rest, but Lear ignores his pleas and decides that Goneril will be the first to be arraigned. Lear testifies that she "kick'd the poor king her father." Turning his thoughts to Regan, he rails at her for the corruption she has brought and censures the "false justicer" for letting her escape. Feeling deep sympathy for the King in his madness, Kent realizes Lear's wits are failing. Edgar also tells us that his tears for the King make his disguise and buffoonery difficult to maintain. Kent finally convinces the King to lie down and rest.

Gloucester enters, asking for Lear but is told by Kent that his "wits are gone." Gloucester instructs Kent to put him in a litter and quickly drive him to Dover because his life is in danger. He warns Kent that within a half hour the King and everyone associated with him will be killed if they stay in this place. Making sure the Fool is not left behind, Kent orders him to help lift his master, who is now asleep.

Left alone, Edgar, again speaking in verse, drops his disguise as Tom o' Bedlam and decides he will disclose his true identity and get involved in the recent events of the kingdom. After seeing the King's suffering, he decides that his pain is light by contrast. He ends by wishing the King a safe escape.

Analysis
Lear's mock trial of his daughters, the "she-foxes," is closely associated with grotesque comedy. Bordering on the absurd, Lear, in his madness, appoints Tom o' Bedlam as his "robed man of justice" which is, of course, a pun on his sole article of clothing, a blanket. The incongruity of the Fool acting as a "yoke-fellow of equity," a legal partner of Tom o' Bedlam, is utterly preposterous. Two joint-stools are set up representing Lear's daughters, the defendants. The Fool immediately mistakes Goneril for a joint-stool and all the while Edgar is muttering about the foul fiend who persecutes him. Goneril has committed the crime of kicking "the poor king her father," and even the household dogs bark at him. Lear has, in his madness, turned his tragedy into an undignified farce, arousing our pity, but not our reverence and awe.

Kent's deep concern for the King's welfare, consistent throughout the scene and the play as a whole, lends dignity to Lear. "O pity! Sir, where is the patience now/ That you so oft have boasted to retain?" Edgar, too, breaks down, almost unable to go on, as he sees the King slip further into madness. Even Lear himself, still seeking for an answer to his tragic situation, wishes to "anatomize Regan" so he can get at the cause of her hard heart. This is only temporary, however, as he quickly turns to Edgar, ready to refashion his garments, and we are back to absurdity again.

This is the last appearance of the Fool in the play. His affinity with Cordelia is noteworthy. When we first meet him, he is yearning for Cordelia who has been banished by the King, and he disappears from the action before she reappears. In Act V, Scene 3, Lear, holding the dead Cordelia in his arms, talks of his poor fool being hanged. There has been much controversy over this passage since the Fool has not been seen in the play since Act III. Some critics say that "Fool" is an affectionate name for Cordelia and others simply admit to confusion. The Fool has acted as Lear's conscience, functioning to disturb him with truths about his erroneous choices regarding the division of his kingdom and the resultant effects they have had on his life. The wise sayings of the Fool have sometimes been disguised as paradoxical truths. Overall, his wisdom and insight have usually been cloaked in riddles and humorous verse bordering on the grotesque.

Edgar's last speech is spoken in verse as he sheds his disguise as Tom o' Bedlam to follow the rumored events between France and England. "Tom away!/ Mark the high noises, and thyself bewray." Edgar's opportunity to share in Lear's suffering has made his own pain seem "light and portable." The next time we see Edgar he will again need to disguise himself as Tom o' Bedlam as he leads his blind father to Dover. The motive for his disguise will no longer be fear of Gloucester but one of love and concern for him instead.

Act III, Scene 7: Summary and Analysis

New Characters:

Servant #1: Cornwall's servant who stabs him and is fatally wounded by Regan

Servants #2 and #3: they follow Gloucester to Dover and soothe his bleeding eyes.

Summary
Cornwall instructs Goneril to bring Albany a letter containing the news that France's army has landed. He then orders his servants to find the traitor Gloucester and bring him back. Regan wants him hanged immediately, and Goneril calls for his eyes to be plucked out. Assuring them he will take care of things, Cornwall advises Edmund to accompany Goneril since their revengeful act toward his father will not be fit for his eyes. Cornwall asks Goneril to encourage the Duke of Albany to send an answer back as quickly as possible. He bids Goneril and Edmund good-bye, addressing him as "my Lord of Gloucester." Oswald enters with reports that Lear is being conveyed to Dover by the Lord of Gloucester accompanied by about 36 of the King's knights. He has also heard they will all be under the protection of well-armed friends in Dover. Oswald then prepares the horses for his mistress Goneril, and she and Edmund begin their journey.

Cornwall's servants quickly bring Gloucester back to his castle where he is immediately bound to a chair and cross-examined. Addressing them as guests, Gloucester begs them not to involve him in any foul play. Plucking his beard, Regan calls him an "ingrateful fox" and a "filthy traitor." Gloucester rebukes Regan for her unkind treatment of her host. Continuing their inquiry with harsh invectives against the so-called traitor, Cornwall and Regan question him about the letter from France and about the "lunatic" King. Gloucester admits the King is on his way to Dover where he will be protected from Regan and Goneril's cruel treatment of him. Lashing out at them for leaving Lear out in the storm, Gloucester calls for swift vengeance from heaven to overtake the King's children. In response, Cornwall promptly gouges out one of his eyes. As

Gloucester cries for help, Regan coldly prods Cornwall to pluck out the other eye, too. In defense of Gloucester, Cornwall's lifelong servant draws his sword and orders Cornwall to stop tormenting the old Duke. Cornwall is wounded and Regan grabs a sword, stabbing the servant in the back and killing him. Cornwall immediately gouges out Gloucester's other eye. Calling for his son Edmund to "quit this horrid act," Gloucester is told it was Edmund who disclosed his father's act of treason. Invoking the gods to forgive him for his foolishness in trusting Edmund, Gloucester blesses Edgar and hopes he will prosper. Regan orders Gloucester thrust out to "smell/ His way to Dover." As Regan leads her wounded husband by the arm, Cornwall orders the dead servant thrown on the dunghill.

Left alone with Gloucester, two of the servants decide to follow him to Dover with the hope of engaging the help of Tom o' Bedlam to lead the blind Duke. But first they apply a soothing remedy to his bleeding face.

Analysis

In this scene we see the most overt expression of cruelty anywhere in the play, and, perhaps, in all of Shakespeare's works. Cornwall unmercifully gouges out Gloucester's eyes, which is shocking to our human sensibilities and has contributed to the difficulty producers have long had in staging this scene. Some critics have perceived Cornwall's deed as an awe-inspiring act of terror designed to satisfy the human desire for sensationalism in Shakespeare's sixteenth-century theater. This view does not consider, however, the symbolism of the blinding of Gloucester and its relation to the play as a whole. Ironically, it is not until Gloucester has literally suffered the loss of his eyes that he is able to realize how little he saw when he actually had eyes. As soon as his sight is gone, Gloucester immediately sees the villainy of Edmund, who has informed on him. Promptly recognizing his folly regarding Edgar, he asks the gods to forgive him. Stanley Cavell has observed that these three actions take only 20 syllables. Gloucester's "complete acquiescence" to his sudden fate is, according to Cavell, attributed to the Duke's realization that his blindness is a retribution for past deeds, "forcing him to an insight about his life as a whole" (Stanley Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear, 1987). He has misjudged both of his children and must now pay a heavy price.

It is notable that all of the evil characters in the play, Cornwall, Regan, Goneril, Edmund, and Oswald are gathered together in one place, Gloucester's castle. Ironically, Gloucester has literally been evicted from his own castle where "robber's hands" have taken control. Besides Gloucester, the only characters in this scene with any compassion and human decency are the three servants. Fearless in his valor, one of the servants stands up with his sword against Cornwall's brutality. He pays for his actions with his life which stands in stark contrast to the cruel and unprincipled Cornwall. The other servants also show concern as they care for Gloucester. "I'll never care what wickedness I do,/ If this man comes to good." They apply "flax and whites of eggs," a household remedy for his bleeding eyes, before they guide him to Dover.

On the surface, Gloucester's only crime is in befriending the King. To Cornwall and Regan, however, the King represents a threat to their own power in the kingdom. That threat becomes even more imminent as the armies of France hover along England's shores, ready to restore the kingdom back to its natural order. Although Gloucester is the victim of cruel and barbaric treatment, Cornwall and Regan's actions seem to be indirectly pointed toward the King. Except for his friendship with the King and his followers, Gloucester would pose little threat to them. "And what confederacy have you with the traitors/ Late footed in the kingdom?" asks Cornwall. Regan demands to know "To whose hands you have sent the lunatic king." They associate Gloucester with the King's potential political power. Regan also condemns his age and parenthood by plucking his gray beard and making condescending remarks about his age. "So white, and such a traitor?" They also support and identify with Edmund, who has double-crossed his own father.

Images of sight pervade this scene, moving the action forward. Gloucester echoes Goneril's words in her desire to "pluck out" Gloucester's eyes. As his reason for sending the King to Dover, Gloucester tells Regan he "would not see" her "Pluck out his poor old eyes." Threatening to "see" vengeance done to Lear's children, Gloucester's challenge is met by Cornwall with "See't shalt thou never" as he plucks out the old

Duke's eye. Ready for the other eye, he responds to Regan's urging with "If you see vengeance," but is stopped by his servant. As Cornwall's servant dies in defense of Gloucester, he cries out, "My lord, you have one eye left/ To see some mischief on him." As if the servant has given him the cue, Cornwall continues the business at hand. He gouges out the other eye "lest it see more...Out, vile jelly!" Darkness then falls on Gloucester who has, at last, been prevented from seeing the evil so prevalent in this scene. Ironically, his insight improves as he "smells his way to Dover."

Act IV, Scene 1: Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Old Man: Gloucester's tenant who leads him after he is blinded

Summary
Alone on the heath, Edgar reasons that things can only improve since fortune has already imposed the very worst on him. Confident in the belief that he has paid his dues and now "Owes nothing" more, he begins on a positive note until he sees Gloucester. Edgar's mood quickly changes as he watches his blinded father led by an old man, a former tenant. Concerned about the old man's safety, Gloucester urges him to leave since the old man can do nothing for him. Troubled about Gloucester's inability to see his way, the old man is persistent. Gloucester tells him he has no way and, therefore, needs no eyes since he "stumbled" when he saw. Lamenting the loss of his "dear son Edgar," Gloucester wishes for a chance to touch him once more. Edgar is soon recognized by the old man as "poor mad Tom." Seeing his blind father has caused Edgar to feel his life is worse than ever. Gloucester recalls meeting a madman and a beggar in last night's storm. He remembers that seeing him brought his son Edgar to mind though they were not yet friends.

Edgar then greets his master and is immediately recognized by Gloucester as the "naked fellow." The blind Duke orders the man to bring some clothes for Edgar and meet them a mile or two down the road to Dover. Gloucester says he will allow Edgar to lead him to Dover. The man exclaims that Edgar is mad, but Gloucester says it is a sign of the times "when madmen lead the blind." Determined to find the very best apparel for Edgar, the old man leaves.

Edgar is afraid he will be unable to continue his disguise, but he decides he must. He looks sadly into his father's bleeding eyes as he assumes the role of poor Tom who is haunted by the foul fiends. He assures the blind Duke that he knows the way to Dover. Gloucester then entrusts him with his purse as he confirms his belief in a more equitable distribution of wealth so that all men can have a sufficient amount. Gloucester describes a cliff near Dover where he wishes to go. After that he will need poor Tom no more. Edgar takes the blind Duke's arm and the strange pair begin their trek to Dover.

Analysis
In his opening soliloquy, Edgar expresses genuine hope that his situation will now improve since he has seen the worst. He decides the worst can only return to laughter. A reversal of circumstances in which he sees his blinded father immediately changes his perspective, however. He decides that the worst is, after all, a relative condition.

> O Gods! Who is't can say, "I am at the worst"?
> I am worse than e'er I was.
> And worse I may be yet: the worst is not
> So long as we can say, "This is the worst."

The degree of suffering is relative to our own experience, and, therefore, we can never say "This is the worst." As is the case with Edgar, the characters in the play are repeatedly led to the brink, believing relief

from suffering is in sight, but are again thrust into an even more difficult situation. This is particularly true of Lear and Gloucester. Lear's madness continues in subsequent scenes and his suffering does not end even after he meets Cordelia. Gloucester too has suffered the sting of mistaken loyalties, lost his castle and title, and now even his eyes. Metaphorically, he voices his futility: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods." This is, in Edgar's words, not the worst, however, for he still has the image of his "dear son Edgar," and he lives to "see thee (Edgar) in my touch."

As Gloucester meets Edgar in this scene, he remembers a madman and a beggar whom he met in the storm the night before. He refers to Tom o' Bedlam "Which made me think a man a worm." Shakespeare's audience would have been familiar with this concept from the Bible. It appears in Job 25:6. Bildad is speaking to Job regarding man's position relative to God. "How much less man, that is a worm? and the son of man, which is a worm?"

Commentators have often compared the suffering of Lear to the prolonged afflictions of Job. It seems no accident that Biblical imagery, also from the book of Job, is alluded to as Gloucester asks the man to find "some covering for this naked soul." In his worship Job declares, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither." (Job 1:21) Nakedness in Edgar is akin to "the thing itself" which is "unaccomodated man." It is man stripped of all his illusions. Ironically, it is not until Gloucester has lost his sight that he gains his capacity to feel for poor naked Tom. He orders a covering for his nakedness which would raise him above a mere worm or a common animal.

Gloucester reprimands the "superfluous and lust-dieted man," who has no insight regarding his excesses because he has no feeling for the poor. Advocating equal distribution of wealth, Gloucester's speech echoes Lear's prayer in Act III, Scene 4 when the King prays for the poor, naked wretches without a roof over their heads or food to eat. Before they experienced their own suffering, Lear and Gloucester had both "taken too little care of this." Gloucester himself admits he stumbled when he saw. Shakespeare's audience, anchored in the Christian tradition, would have seen Lear and Gloucester's new concern for the poor as a sign of the beginnings of a moral regeneration that has come about through suffering.

Act IV, Scene 2: Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Messenger: brings news of the death of Cornwall

Summary
Goneril and Edmund arrive at the Duke of Albany's palace. As Oswald enters, Goneril inquires about Albany and is told he is altogether changed. Puzzled by the Duke's behavior, Oswald reports that Albany smiled when he was told the French had landed, showed annoyance when he heard his wife was coming, and called him a sot when he told him of Gloucester's treason and Edmund's loyalty to the kingdom. Albany's attitude is the direct opposite of Oswald's expectations. Goneril promptly attributes his changed disposition to his cowardice. Afraid that Edmund will not be welcomed by Albany, Goneril advises him to go back to Cornwall and aid him in assembling an army against France. She tells Edmund she will take charge at home, switching roles with her "mild husband" and handing her duties over to him. She assures him that Oswald, her trusty steward, will keep them both abreast of the latest news. She then kisses Edmund, promising that he may find a mistress dispatching his commands. Edmund leaves in high spirits.

Reflecting on his manliness, Goneril refers to Edmund as "Gloucester" and compares him to the fool who "usurps my (bed)." Albany enters, immediately chastising her for what she has done to her father, the King. He tells her she is not "worth the dust which the rude wind/ Blows" in her face. He calls Goneril and Regan "Tigers, not daughters," as he engages in a long diatribe concerning her degenerate and unnatural behavior.

Ignoring his anger, she tells him his words are foolish, coming from a "Milk-liver'd man" who pities villains that are justifiably punished before they can do any harm. She tells him France is, at this very moment, ready to invade their military troops while he wastes his time moralizing. Unmoved by the news, Albany tells her she is a devil disguised as a woman, and he finds it difficult to keep from striking her.

A messenger enters with news of the death of the Duke of Cornwall. He informs them that the Duke has been killed by his own lifelong servant who opposed the act of plucking out Gloucester's eyes. He tells them that before the servant died, he wounded Cornwall who has since succumbed to the injuries he received. Overcome with empathy for Gloucester, Albany is promptly convinced that a higher power exists that has avenged Cornwall's crime.

In an aside, Goneril expresses ambivalence about Cornwall's death which would, on the one hand, give her complete power. Regan, being widowed, would, however, have free access to Edmund. The messenger continues the gruesome tale of the blinding of Gloucester. Albany, grateful for Gloucester's kind treatment of the King, calls for revenge.

Analysis
In reference to Goneril's cruel treatment of her father, Albany censures her for the nature in which she holds contempt for her origins. With the use of imagery representing a family tree, he chides Goneril for slivering and disbranching or, in other words, cutting herself off from "her material sap." He tells her that surely such a tree will wither and die. Referring to Lear as "A father, and a gracious aged man," he reminds her of the reverence she owes him. Albany is certain that if the heavens do not show their powers soon to vindicate the good and punish the evil in the kingdom, chaos will be the result.

> It will come
> Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
> Like monsters of the deep.

When daughter turns against father and no respect is shown for age or origins, we are left with Edmund's unnatural world where power is bought at any price, even the blinding of one's own father. Conversely, Albany is the proponent of an orderly respect between child and parent where kings are awarded the reverence that is their due. This is not only Albany speaking but Shakespeare as well. Compare the famous speech on degree in Troilus and Cressida (Act I, Scene 3).
Take but degree away, untune that string
And hark what discord follows,

> And the rude son should strike his father dead,
> Force should be right, or rather, right and wrong
> (Between whose endless jar justice resides)
> Should lose their names, and so should justice too!
> Then everything include itself in power
> Power into will, will into appetite,
> And appetite, an universal wolf
> (So doubly seconded with will and power),
> Must make perforce an universal prey
> And last eat up himself.

Shakespeare's sixteenth-century audience understood the natural law of degree. Bestial humanity, only strong in its "vild offenses," could not long endure, for it would "prey on itself,/ Like monsters of the deep" and finally destroy itself. It is already happening with the death of Cornwall which Albany perceives as divine justice for his "nether crimes." When Regan is widowed, Goneril shows signs of jealousy over Edmund

which will culminate in the sisters' murder and suicide in Act V.

We last saw Albany in Act I, Scene 4 when Goneril had just stripped the King of 50 of his knights. Albany, in that scene, demonstrated a rather mild-mannered position regarding Goneril's aggressive behavior toward the King. In view of Albany's image so far in the play, Oswald's words describing him as a "man so chang'd" seem entirely credible. In this scene, we see Albany as the new exponent of moral goodness who rails at Goneril for injustices done to her father. Ironically, Goneril, whose evil deeds have just been scrupulously exposed by Albany, still thinks of her husband as a "milk-liver'd man." Albany's forceful denunciation of the unnatural acts committed against Lear and Gloucester, and his determination to avenge the injustices done to them give us hope that their horrible fate will finally be reversed.

Goneril's attraction to Edmund is simply another link in the chain of events leading to her downfall. Edmund is a master of deceit and comes across as a cavalier in the service of his lady. "Yours in the ranks of death," he utters with grace and charm. Through Goneril he sees his opportunity to achieve the luxury and splendor of the political position as Earl of Gloucester that he has relished for so long.

Act IV, Scene 3: Summary and Analysis

New Character:
Gentleman: brings news to Kent of Cordelia and the King of France

Summary
This scene takes place in the French encampment near Dover. Explaining the reason for the King of France's sudden departure from the camp, a Gentleman tells Kent that the King was called back to France on urgent business that, in his absence, could prove dangerous to the state. He has left Monsieur La Far, his marshal, in charge while he is away. Kent inquires about the letters he has written to Cordelia concerning Goneril and Regan's cruel treatment of their father. The Gentleman explains that often a tear would trickle down her cheeks as she fought to control her passion while she was reading the letters. He describes her queenly dignity and patience, and the way she covered her tears with smiles. Musing about the contrast between Cordelia and her sisters, Kent wonders how one parent could produce such different offspring. He concludes it is "The stars above us, that govern our conditions."

Kent informs the Gentleman that Lear is in town, but, when in his right mind, has refused to speak to Cordelia out of guilt and shame for what he has done to her. Kent tells of the things that sting the King's mind. He has stripped Cordelia of his blessing, given her rights to her "dog-hearted" sisters, and turned her out to foreigners. His shame detains him from seeing her.

Kent then tells the Gentleman that Albany and Cornwall have raised an army, but he has already heard. Apprising the Gentleman of some secret business, Kent invites him to come with him to see the King to whom the Gentleman will attend until Kent returns.

Analysis
In this scene, Cordelia stands in juxtaposition to Goneril, who in the previous scene, according to her husband, is "not worth the dust which the rude wind/ Blows" in her face. Cordelia, by contrast, is "queen/ Over her passion." This is reminiscent of the first scene in which Cordelia, by calmly telling her father that she loves him "according to my bond" refuses to resort to the flattery in which Goneril engages. We again meet Cordelia in the next scene, 20 scenes after her last appearance. The conversation between Kent and the Gentleman portrays Cordelia as Lear's ideal daughter.

The *First Folio*, published in 1620, does not include this scene. It was, perhaps, thought to be unessential for moving the action along. For the most part, the scene functions to inform. Expounding on the moral goodness of Cordelia, it signals her return to the play in the next scene. The Gentleman discloses the news of the return of the King of France called back to attend to urgent business. This scene also provides information about King Lear's condition and his feelings toward Cordelia since he has arrived in Dover.

In his effort to understand how Lear could have fathered the virtuous and loyal Cordelia and her self-seeking sisters as well, Kent attributes the mystery to the stars. His belief that the stars "govern our conditions" echoes that of Gloucester in Act I, Scene 2. Gloucester blames the "late eclipses of the sun and moon" for all the societal ills in the kingdom. Edmund scoffs at his father and all others who subscribe to the idea that the stars control our destiny. "I should have been that I am, had the maidenl'est star in the firmanent twinkled on my bastardizing." John F. Danby feels that Shakespeare's sympathy is with Edmund. "Edmund is the new man...Edmund is the last great expression in Shakespeare of that side of Renaissance individualism which has made a positive addition to the heritage of the West." Kent and Gloucester embrace the orthodox view which, is already becoming old-fashioned in the sixteenth century. Perhaps this is why Edmund's view is more readily understood by people in our modern society.

The Gentleman's description of Cordelia presents an image of the conflicting feelings of simultaneous smiles and tears. Pearls become a metaphor for her tears and diamonds represent her eyes. She is always the literal and symbolic "queen over her passions." The Gentleman, explaining to Kent how "she shook/ The holy water from her heavenly eyes," metaphorically, capitalizes on the effects of alliteration as he draws his divine image of her. In his poetic description of Cordelia, he has made his point. Cordelia represents the "better way" in her love and grief for her lonely and dejected father, the King.

Act IV, Scene 4: Summary and Analysis

New Characters:
Doctor: Cordelia's physician brought to heal the mad King

Messenger: brings news of England's armed troops

Summary
In the French camp, Cordelia speaks of her mad father who has been seen wandering around in the fields, wearing the weeds that grow among the corn as a crown on his head. She orders the officer to scour every acre of the fields until they find him. She then asks the doctor whether medical knowledge can do anything to heal the King's mind. The doctor assures her that rest, brought about with the aid of medicinal herbs that grow in the countryside, will be an effective treatment to cure the King's madness. Cordelia calls upon the rare healing herbs of the earth to grow as they are watered by her tears. Afraid the King may die, she feels an urgency in her request.

A messenger enters, telling Cordelia that the British powers will soon invade the French army. Cordelia has officially taken command of the French troops in the absence of her husband. She wants it understood, however, that it is not her own ambition for power that moves her army to fight. She declares that her motive is solely to defend her father's rights so unjustly taken over by Goneril and Regan.

Analysis
After Lear falls asleep in the shelter during the storm, we do not hear from him again for almost 500 lines. His next appearance will be in the countryside near Dover where he meets the blind Gloucester who is led by Edgar. In this scene, Cordelia prepares us for his reappearance by describing his condition, which has steadily declined into madness. Singing loudly, Lear wears a crown made of weeds and flowers that grow in the

cultivated fields. The gruesome picture Cordelia paints is a far cry from the image of the King in royal robes that she remembers. In view of this contrast, it is no wonder that she is moved to tears.

The “idle weeds” that the King has shaped into a crown for his head is, ironically, an incongruous symbol of his kingship. Hemlock, immediately associated with Socrates’ death, is a poisonous plant with a disagreeable odor, and nettle is an herb with stinging bristles. Cordelia’s aversion to this pathetic image of her father promptly leads her to send out an officer to search for him.

Cordelia does not accept the King’s fortune as one that is governed by the stars as Kent and Gloucester would, nor does she invoke the gods to free her father of evil spirits. In her grief, she turns to the doctor to heal the King. Stephen Greenblatt has noted that “Lear’s madness has no supernatural origin; it is linked, as in Harsnett, to...exposure to the elements, and extreme anguish, and its cure comes at the hands not of an exorcist but of a doctor” (Shakespeare and the Exorcists, 1988, p. 282). Greenblatt attributes this idea to Shakespeare’s source, Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603). The doctor prescribes only sedated rest, brought about by medicinal herbs.

> Our foster-nurse of nature is repose,
> The which he lacks; that to provoke in him
> Are many simples operative, whose power
> Will close the eye of anguish

.

Symbolically, Cordelia’s tears are called upon to water the rare herbs that will aid the King in his “repose.” If rest is, indeed, the cure for her father’s illness, her tears, symbolic of her love, will be a remedy for his distress, allowing him to rest peacefully.

France’s invasion of Britain is sanctioned by Cordelia as an act of pity for her father, the King. It is his business that she is transacting. In view of Cordelia’s self-assured integrity, there can be no doubt that she is fighting to protect her “ag’d father’s right.”

Act IV, Scene 5: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Back in Gloucester’s castle, Oswald informs Regan that Albany, after much fretting (“much ado”), has reluctantly agreed to raise an army against France. He adds that Goneril is a better soldier than her husband, Albany. Oswald has come to deliver Goneril’s letter to Edmund. Referring to him as “Lord Edmund,” Regan questions the contents of the letter, but Oswald claims he does not know. Expressing regret about letting the blinded Gloucester live, Regan is sure that sympathy for the old man will turn people against them. She thinks Edmund is on a mission to murder his father and, thereby, strengthen their cause.

Oswald is determined to find Edmund, but Regan urges him to go with the troops the next day since the way is dangerous. Oswald apprises her of his duty to his mistress, Goneril. Suspicious of her sister, Regan questions her secrecy, wondering why she is not sending her message by word-of-mouth instead of by a letter. Promising to make it worth his while, she asks Oswald’s permission to unseal the letter. Oswald protests, but Regan tells him that she has observed her sister approach Edmund with amorous looks, and she knows Oswald is in Goneril’s confidence. Oswald feigns innocence, but Regan confidently reaffirms her belief that he knows the truth. She tells him that she and Edmund have already agreed that she would be a more convenient wife for him than Goneril since she is now a widow. She promises a reward if Oswald will find Edmund and present him with a token from her. She tells Oswald to warn her sister about their conversation

concerning Edmund. Promising Oswald a promotion, she asks him to find the blind Gloucester and kill him. He agrees to do what she asks and, in this way, prove what political party he favors.

Analysis
Only a few scenes earlier, Albany predicts what will happen if Regan and Goneril's "vile offenses" are not tamed (Act IV, Scene 2). His prophetic words have come to fruition in this scene where evil is beginning to "prey on itself." In their sinister attempts to satisfy their appetites for power, the sisters have worked well together. They have turned their father out in the storm, stripping him of all dignity and title, and have blinded Gloucester, who stood by the King in his time of need. But now we finally see the evil results of their licentious behavior turn in on themselves. Goneril has already apprised us of her fear of Regan's competition for Edmund's attentions at the time of Cornwall's death. Now Regan makes it clear that, as a widow, she is the logical woman for Edmund's hand in marriage. Edmund is an opportunist who cares for neither of the sisters, but sees them as a means toward his own ends.

Kent, in an earlier scene, has already expressed his opinion of Oswald and has been thrown in the stocks for it. Oswald had, in that case, only done the will of his mistress Goneril who instructed him to be rude to the King. In this scene, we again see Oswald obeying Goneril's commands. Even Regan's bribery does not tempt him to let her unseal Goneril's letter to Edmund. His stoicism in denying any knowledge of Goneril's relationship to Edmund is also reminiscent of his denial in Act II, Scene 2 where he pretends to be a complete stranger to Kent. As a result, Kent abhors him because he "wears no honesty." Oswald is, nevertheless, faithful to the shrewd and manipulative Goneril. Perhaps his loyalty to her is his only redeeming quality, though he is, in fact, loyal to an evil cause.

Goneril, Regan, and Edmund have all aimed their vicious cruelty at their own fathers, making their wickedness seem more atrocious than that of the other evil characters in the play. Regan speaks of Edmund, who has gone out to kill his father as if it is a trifling matter. It is the expedient thing to do in order to assuage "The strength of the enemy." Evil deeds have become second nature to Regan, who stops at nothing to get what she wants. The outcome of the sisters' rivalry over Edmund remains to be seen.

Act IV, Scene 6: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Edgar, dressed as a peasant, is supposedly leading the blind Gloucester to the precipice near Dover where the Duke plans to end his life. In an effort to dissuade him, Edgar tries to mislead his father by telling him they are nearing the steep cliff. Though they are on flat ground, Edgar talks of the sounds of the roaring sea and the ascent of the rising terrain that is leading them to the hill. Gloucester insists the ground is even, but Edgar replies that losing his sight must have affected his other senses.

His father perceives a change in Edgar's improved speech, but Edgar flatly denies it. When they arrive at "the place," Edgar gives a lengthy description of the view below with its people who appear dwarfed from such dizzying heights. Gloucester hands Edgar a purse with a valuable jewel and bids him farewell. In an aside, Edgar explains that his motive for his actions is to cure his father's despair. Before he jumps, Gloucester prays to the "mighty gods" and renounces the world whose afflictions he can no longer bear. He blesses Edgar if he is still alive and then falls to the ground. Edgar then calls out to Gloucester, but he tells him to leave him alone and let him die. Pretending to be a passing bystander who has observed him from the bottom of the precipice, Edgar tells Gloucester his life is a miracle since he has survived a dangerous fall from the high, chalky cliff. Edgar lifts the disappointed Duke to his feet, and asks him about the fiend he had seen with him on top of the hill. Confused, Gloucester replies that he had taken him for a man. Edgar reminds his father that the gods, who deserve our reverence, have miraculously saved his life.

Lear enters, wearing a crown of weeds and flowers on his head and mumbling incoherently. Edgar is stunned at the sight of the mad Lear, and Gloucester promptly recognizes the King's voice. Lear, in his madness, identifies Gloucester as "Goneril with a white beard." Gloucester insists it must be the King. Lear replies, "Ay, every inch a king" and continues a long tirade defending adultery and denouncing cold, chaste women who feign virtue but are Centaurs from the waist down.

Asking Lear whether he recognizes him, the blind Gloucester laments that Lear, in his condition, is a "ruin'd piece of nature." Referring to him as blind Cupid, Lear asks Gloucester how he sees the world without eyes, and he replies that he sees "it feelingly." Lear reasons that he must look with his ears since he is left without eyes. The King again engages in a long diatribe, railing against the official who administers punishment by whipping the whore when he, in fact, should be whipped for using her in that way. He adds that "Robes and furr'd gowns hide all," as sin is plated with gold, while those wearing rags are quickly brought to justice. Edgar observes that Lear's talk reflects "Reason in madness." Finally calling Gloucester by name, Lear preaches him a sermon on birth when all come to "this great stage of fools."

A Gentleman enters who has been sent by Cordelia to rescue the King and bring him back to her, but the mad Lear runs away from them, challenging them to come after him. The Gentleman informs Edgar that any hour now, Albany's army will be advancing toward the French at Dover.

Gloucester's tone has changed as he calls on the "ever-gentle gods" to keep the evil spirit from tempting him to take his own life. With pity for Gloucester, Edgar takes him by the hand, leading him to a shelter. As Oswald enters, he promptly claims the blind Gloucester as his "prize" that will increase his good fortune. He draws his sword on Gloucester, but Edgar politely interrupts, asking Oswald to let them pass. Oswald challenges the audacity of a poor slave who would defend a traitor. Edgar slays him, and, as he is dying, Oswald requests that Edmund receive the letter he was sent to deliver to him. Edgar reads Goneril's letter to Edmund in which she asks him to murder her husband, Albany, in order to win her hand in marriage. Drums are heard in the distance as Edgar leads his father to lodge with a friend.

Analysis

The subplot and the main plot have been staged in contrapuntal fashion throughout the play so far. Both remaining faithful to their fathers, Edgar, in the subplot, is Cordelia's counterpart in the main plot. Lear's wicked daughters, Goneril and Regan, correspond to Gloucester's evil son, Edmund. Thematically, both plots have dealt with parent-child relationships. In this scene, the two plots are merged in the actions of Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar. The anguish that each father has suffered at the hands of his children, though it is different, runs parallel to the other. Gloucester suffers physical agony while Lear suffers mental torment.

Gloucester's absurd attempt at suicide has set the scene for Lear's equally preposterous image as he enters, bedecked with a crown of weeds and flowers, declaring he is the "King himself." An incongruous and humorous figure for a king, to be sure, but at this point we can only feel pity. Equally incongruous is the image of the blind Gloucester who has been rendered powerless even to accomplish his own suicide. "Is wretchedness depriv'd that benefit,/ To end itself by death?" His ludicrous actions as he falls on the flat ground prepare us for the comic madness of Lear. We are not, however, moved to laughter but only compassion and tears.

It is Edgar who observes that Lear reaches "Reason in madness." Lear reasons that even "a dog's obey'd in office." He has learned profound truths through his suffering. "Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. (Plate sin) with gold," but if that same sin is found on one wearing rags, he will be quickly punished by the law. He has learned the difference between appearance and reality. Ironically, Gloucester must lose his sight before he learns to see. Regarding Edmund's betrayal and Edgar's loyalty, Gloucester himself has already declared previously that "I stumbled when I saw" (Act IV, Scene 1). When Lear wonders how Gloucester can see the way the world goes, he replies, "I see it feelingly." Gloucester has learned to "feel" both literally and

emotionally, but Lear adds another dimension. He advises Gloucester to “Look with thine ears.” If he listens, Lear says, he will find it difficult to distinguish the “justice” from the “thief.”

Lear complains that his daughters “flatter’d me like a dog...To say ‘ay’ and ‘no’ to everything that I said! ‘Ay’ and ‘no’ too, was no good divinity.” In these lines, Shakespeare alludes to the Biblical passage regarding advice against the swearing of oaths. It is found in James 5:12. “...but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.” Lear now understands the mortality even of the king. He knows he is not “ague proof” as his daughters had led him to believe.

In his short sermon to Gloucester, Lear describes life as a “great stage of fools.” When we are born, he says, we come into the world crying. Stanley Cavell notes that “Lear is there feeling like a child, after the rebirth of his senses...and feeling that the world is an unnatural habitat for man” (Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear” 1987, p. 250). Lear had been unaware of injustice and the plight of the poor, however, while he was still the King. He is now being forced into a new level of human sensibility, and he cries out in protest like a newborn baby.

Edgar’s disguises change throughout the play as he slowly progresses closer to his own true identity. Tom o’ Bedlam serves his purpose as long as he is escaping from his father’s wrath. After Gloucester’s sight is gone, Edgar leads him to Dover as Poor Tom, fully clothed but still haunted by fiends. It is not until the fiends are gone, and he emerges as a peasant with altered speech that he calls Gloucester “father” for the first time since he fled his castle. Though unrecognized by Gloucester, Edgar refers to him as “father” four times in this scene. It is not until the end of the play, however, that he makes his true identity known to his father.

Lear’s speech, in which he denounces women who pretend to be chaste and virtuous but are actually fiends, is reminiscent of his reference to Regan’s dead mother in an earlier passage. Regan has just told the King she is glad to see him.

> If thou shouldst not be glad,
> I would divorce me from thy (mother’s) tomb,
> Sepulchring an adult’ress
> (Act II, Scene 4, II. 130-32)

The implication is clear. If Regan, too, would turn him away as Goneril has just done, Lear would think they were not his natural daughters.

Kent has, in an earlier scene, denounced Oswald, calling him a coward and declaring that “a tailor made thee” (Act II, Scene 2, l. 55). An opportunist, Oswald sees the blind Gloucester only as a “proclaim’d prize” with a price on his head. Oswald is insulted by the advances of Edgar, a lowly peasant who would dare to protect a villainous traitor. He remains true to his mistress, Goneril, to his dying moment, however, requesting that Edgar deliver her letter to Edmund.

Oswald is nothing but a “serviceable villain” who does his duty, carrying out the vices of his mistress without question. He has, in this case, entrusted the letter to an enemy. In his rigid attempt at being a dutiful steward, he has inadvertently divulged the contents of the letter to Edgar. Ironically, Goneril and Edmund’s secret love affair and their plot to murder Albany has been exposed because of Oswald’s strict adherence to duty.

Act IV, Scene 7: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Kent has divulged his true identity to Cordelia though he is still dressed as Caius. With heartfelt gratitude,

Cordelia tells Kent she will not live long enough to adequately repay him for what he has done for her father, the King. Kent assures her that acknowledgment of his services is, in fact, an overpayment. She asks him to change his attire so they can put behind them, all reminders of the "worser hours" he has spent with the King on the heath. But Kent tells her he is not ready to reveal his identity yet. To do so would cut his purpose short. She promptly concedes, turning to the doctor to inquire about the King. He tells her the King is still asleep. Calling upon the "kind gods," she asks them to cure the "great breach" in his nature and tune up the discord in his life brought about by his children.

The doctor then asks permission to awaken the King, and Cordelia leaves it up to his better judgment. She is assured by the Gentleman that they have dressed her father in fresh garments. Certain that the King will maintain his self-control, the doctor asks Cordelia to stay nearby when her father awakes. Lear is brought in on a chair carried by servants as soft music plays in the background. Cordelia kisses her father with the hope of repairing the harm done to the King by her sisters. With compassion, she gazes at his face, reflecting on the suffering forced upon him in the storm. She agonizes over his necessity of finding shelter with the swine and lowly rogues.

When the King stirs, Cordelia is the first to speak with him. Thinking he has died, Lear sees her as a "soul in bliss." He imagines being bound to a "wheel of fire," however. Cordelia asks him whether he knows her and he replies that she is a spirit.

Confused, he does not know where he is now, nor where he spent the night. Cordelia asks him for his benediction, but he kneels to her instead. Realizing he is not in his "perfect mind," he begs them not to mock him. Cordelia is overcome with joy when he finally recognizes her as his child. He acknowledges the fact that she does not love him, adding that she has some cause, but her sisters have none. In a forgiving spirit, Cordelia declares she has "no cause." Questioning his whereabouts, Lear asks whether he is in France and is told he is in his own country. Observing that the "great rage is kill'd" in the King, the doctor suggests that he be left alone to avoid the danger of too much exertion.

After the King and his party leave, Kent informs the Gentleman that Cornwall has been slain, and Edmund has stepped in to take his place as the leader of his people. Unaware that he is speaking to the disguised Kent, the Gentleman apprises him of the latest news of Edgar and Kent who are rumored to be in Germany together. Left alone, Kent decides that the upcoming battle will determine his fate.

Analysis

When Lear awakens from his drugged sleep, "the great rage" has died in him, and he enters a world of awareness and insight he has never experienced before. Confused at first, his mind revives the mental sensibility of the suffering mad King. But he soon recognizes his "child Cordelia" and calls her by name. He has gained knowledge through his suffering and admits he is a "very foolish fond old man." There is no longer any need for hypocritical expressions of love from Cordelia as there had been when they last met in the first scene of the play. Through suffering, Lear has cast off that illusory world. L. C. Knights sees the action in this scene as "a moment of truth...the painful knowledge that has been won will reject anything that swerves a hair's breadth from absolute integrity" (L. C. Knights, *Shakespearean Themes*, 1960, p. 115). This truth has been arrived at through Lear's new capacity to feel. Like Gloucester, he now sees the world "feelingly." When he first sees Cordelia, he no longer makes demands on her.

> I know you do not love me, for your sisters
> Have (as I do remember) done me wrong:
> You have some cause, they have not

.

Cordelia promptly responds to his unselfish sentiment with “No cause, no cause.”

Thinking he has come out of the grave, Lear immediately recognizes Cordelia as “a soul in bliss.” He remains hopelessly bound to a “wheel of fire,” however. It seems quite clear that the soul that is in bliss would represent one who has gone to his eternal reward, but much controversy has centered around Lear’s “wheel of fire,” an image of hell. If Lear imagines himself in hell, there would be no souls in bliss. Mary Lascelles points out that Shakespeare uses this image to show that Lear is convinced that what he has done separates him from Cordelia forever (Mary Lascelles, “King Lear and Doomsday,” p. 64). Lascelles also notes that “The Kalendar of Shepherdes, ed. H. O. Summer, London, 1892” reproduces a cut of “the account given by Lazarus of the pains of hell,” showing the torture of the wheel as the punishment of pride. In any case, we can assume that the incongruous heaven/hell image puts Lear on a different level from Cordelia. He has been bound to the wheel of pride while she is free of the deceptive, illusory world so characteristic of not only Lear but of Goneril and Regan.

Kent’s loyalty to the King does not go unnoticed by Cordelia. Her acknowledgment of his services to her father, though important, is not his chief motive for his fidelity. Kent belongs to the generation that reveres not only King Lear but the very office of the king. He serves his master because he believes in the King’s authority. When that authority is challenged, as it was by Oswald in an earlier scene (Act I, Scene 4, ll. 79-92), Kent is moved to violent wrath. Oswald, whom Kent abhors, calls him a “grey beard.” Kent is no longer a young man, and he realizes it at the end of this scene when he considers that his labors for the King are coming to an end.

> My point and period will be thoroughly wrought,
> Or well or ill, as this day’s battle’s fought.

Even if he survives and the powers of good are victorious, he is cognizant of the possibility that this will be his last battle.

Act V, Scenes 1 and 2: Summary and Analysis

Summary
Among the regalia of drum and colors, Regan and Edmund, accompanied by their soldiers, enter the British camp near Dover. Edmund shows concern regarding Albany’s absence. He wonders whether Albany has made a firm decision to fight the French in view of their support of King Lear. Regan is sure Albany has met with some misfortune and Edmund agrees. Jealous of her sister, Regan begins to question Edmund about his relationship with her. Edmund swears that he holds only an “honor’d love” for her and that he has never enjoyed her sexual favors. He assures Regan she need not fear that he will become too “familiar” with Goneril.

Albany and Goneril enter with drum, color, and soldiers. At first sight of Regan and Edmund, Goneril, in an aside, declares that she would go as far as to lose the battle rather than relinquish Edmund to her sister. Albany greets Regan and Edmund formally and politely. He informs them that in view of the fact that the King has many followers who have defected to France because of the cruelties suffered under the new rule, the honorable thing to do would be to fight only the imposing army of France. His quarrel is not with the King and his followers. Edmund commends his statement as nobly spoken, and Goneril agrees that domestic strife is “not the question here.”

Albany then invites Edmund to join him and his most experienced soldiers in his tent to determine the proceedings of the battle. To prevent her sister from spending time alone with Edmund, Regan insists that she go with her. Just as the entire party leaves, Edgar enters with an urgent letter for Albany. Insisting that Albany

read it before he goes into battle, Edgar promptly leaves though Albany coaxes him to stay until he has read the letter.

Left alone, Edmund ponders over his dilemma. He has "sworn his love" to both the sisters and agonizes over which one to "enjoy" without offending the other. He reasons that he cannot take Goneril as long as her husband is alive and finally concludes that he will use Albany for the battle and then allow Goneril to devise a method of getting rid of him. With Albany out of the way, Edmund will be in power, and he decides he will never grant mercy to Lear and Cordelia as Albany intends to do.

In Scene 2, the alarum sounds as Cordelia and the King, marching with drum and colors, accompany the French army across the field between the French and English camps. Edgar leads Gloucester to the shade of a nearby tree where he will be comfortable until Edgar returns. He prays that the "right may thrive," and leaves his father with a blessing. Soon after Edgar leaves, the alarum sounds within and Edgar rushes to his father's rescue, informing him that King Lear has lost the battle, and Cordelia has been captured. Taking him by the hand, he urges Gloucester to flee from danger. Gloucester balks at Edgar's demands, insisting that he wishes to go no further but would rather die in the field. Edgar reminds him that he must continue to endure but be ready for death when it finally comes. Gloucester agrees that this is true.

Analysis
As the scene opens, we are aware of the Duke of Albany's dilemma in fighting Cordelia's army. He is "full of alteration and self-reproving." His decision has become even more crucial after the death of the Duke of Cornwall, for now he is the top official in charge of the state. On the one hand, he does not wish to fight the King and his supporters, but, on the other hand, he must prove his loyalty to Britain. Shakespeare's audience would not have tolerated Britain's defeat at the hands of the French even though it would be in the best interests of the King and Cordelia. To resolve his dilemma, Albany justifies his actions against the King by rationalizing it as a separate issue. "For this business,/ It touches us as France invades our land,/ Not bolds the King." Goneril is quick to agree that "these domestic and particular broils/ Are not the question here." He goes into battle with confidence that his cause is just, and he fully expects to grant mercy to Lear and Cordelia if the French are defeated.

When Edmund acknowledges the fact that "To both these sisters have I sworn my love" and yet "Neither can be enjoy'd/ If both remain alive," we can readily see love corrupted to mere lust. Cloaking his deceit in the language of respectability, Edmund speaks to Regan with phrases like "honor'd love" and "by mine honor, madam." Always the opportunist, Edmund realizes that whether he marries Goneril or Regan, he will be the victor. Unwilling to take chances, he pledges his love to both and, in this way, assures his future. He is content to use them to further his own ambition. Goneril is, perhaps, the better choice since she is already plotting her husband's murder. "Let her who would be rid of him devise/ His speedy taking off." With Albany out of the way, Edmund can reach his ultimate goal. Unknown to Edmund, however, Edgar exposes the murder plot by delivering Goneril's letter, intended for Edmund, into Albany's hands. The letter has been found by Edgar on Oswald's dead body, and its repercussions remain to be seen.

In Scene 2, Edgar's reproof of Gloucester's unwillingness to continue in the face of further adversity demonstrates a central idea prevalent in the seventeenth-century Jacobean period. When Gloucester wishes to die, Edgar admonishes him for his thoughts.

> Men must endure
> Their going hence even as their coming hither,
> Ripeness is all.

In these words, Edgar espouses the belief that one should maintain a stoical acceptance of the turn of fortune or loss of reputation characterized by an unflinching endurance in the face of pain. It is essentially a pagan

philosophy that Gloucester himself expresses earlier in the play. “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,/ They kill us for their sport” (Act IV, Scene 1, ll. 36-7). There is a lack of justice in this fatalistic view where even the gods offer no comfort in the face of suffering. Of prime importance is the fact that one must accept whatever comes, be that death or suffering, stoically and with no hope of reward. To accept the will of the gods is the one virtue. Edgar taught Gloucester earlier that he must endure and that suicide is opposed to “ripeness.” Gloucester has been duped into thinking the ever-gentle gods have saved his life, and he later prays to the gods that he will not be tempted again to “die before you please” (Act IV, Scene 6, l. 218).

Edgar carefully situates Gloucester safely in the shadow of a tree. There is no doubt about his anxiety concerning his father’s safety as he urges him to come away with him after the battle has been lost. Edgar’s diligent attendance upon his father is constant and loyal after he has been cruelly blinded by Cornwall. But Edgar repeatedly chooses not to reveal himself to Gloucester as his son. In Act IV, Scene 1, he seems to have reached the perfect opportunity to drop his disguise in response to his father’s lament, “O dear son Edgar...Might I but live to see thee in my touch,/ I’ld say I had eyes again.” Gloucester has just had his eyes plucked out, but Edgar remains cruelly silent. It is not until the last act of the play that he reveals his true identity, but it is too late. Too weak to bear the news, Gloucester dies. It is only then that Edgar finally confesses his error. “Never (O fault!) reveal’d myself unto him.” To the very end, Edgar is not sure whether his father will actually give him his blessing.

Act V, Scene 3: Summary and Analysis

Summary
In military triumph over France, Edmund enters with Lear and Cordelia whom he has taken captive. Cordelia assures the King that they are not the first who have lost their fortunes in spite of good intentions. Her concern is for her father, but he is perfectly content to be confined with Cordelia “like birds i’ th’ cage.” Edmund then instructs his soldiers to take them away to prison where they will be kept until they can be arraigned. He slips the captain a private note, promising him an advancement if he carries out the devious scheme he has outlined for him. The captain quickly agrees to the scheme.

Albany enters with Goneril, Regan, and their soldiers. Formally commending Edmund for his valiant efforts in battle, Albany promptly demands to see the captives that have been taken in the day’s combat. Hesitantly, Edmund delays the Duke by telling him he has seen fit to send the King and Cordelia into confinement. He reasons that the King’s title and influence could tempt Albany’s soldiers to waver in their loyalties and cause them to turn against him. He advises Albany to wait until a more appropriate time and place when the sweat and blood of the battle will no longer be fresh in their minds. They can then settle the question of what will be done with the captives. Albany promptly questions Edmund’s audacity in making such major decisions, thereby considering himself an equal to the Duke. Regan immediately speaks up in Edmund’s defense, claiming that Edmund had been commissioned to take her place in the battle. Goneril rebukes her sister, maintaining that Edmund has noble qualities by his own merit. The sisters throw insults at each other and an argument ensues.

Regan complains that she is not well which keeps her from airing her full-blown anger. She makes it known, however, that Edmund is her proposed “lord and master.” Goneril objects, but Albany tells her there is nothing she can do to prevent it. As Edmund enters into the argument, Albany promptly arrests him, along with Goneril, on charges of “capital treason.” With bitter satire, Albany informs Regan that Edmund is betrothed to Goneril, Albany’s own wife, and if Regan wants to marry, she will need to regard him as a possible mate.

Albany calls for the trumpet to sound, challenging any man of quality or degree to declare that Edmund is a traitor. Dropping his glove, Albany is ready to fight in case no man appears at the sound of the third trumpet.

Accepting the challenge, Edmund drops his glove in the same fashion, swearing to defend his "truth and honor firmly." In the midst of it all, Regan, who has been poisoned by Goneril, becomes increasingly ill and must be led away.

The first trumpet sounds and the Herald reads the legal document calling for any man in the army of quality or degree to appear, declaring Edmund a traitor. At the sound of the third trumpet, Edgar arrives. In reply to the Herald's questioning, Edgar informs him that his name has been lost but swears he is of noble birth. He testifies that Edmund is his adversary and a false traitor to the gods, his father, and his brother. Calling him a toad-spotted traitor, Edgar lifts his sword ready for action. Edmund resists Edgar's accusations and challenges him to fight. There is a skirmish and Edmund is immediately wounded. Goneril protests that Edmund has been duped with trickery, but Albany sternly reprimands her, showing her the letter she has written to Edmund in which she plots the Duke's murder. Defiantly, she challenges Albany to arraign her, knowing full well she is immune to the law. She leaves in a fit of anger, and Albany, concerned about her desperate state of mind, sends his soldiers after her. Aware that he is dying, Edmund confesses his guilt to Albany. Turning to Edgar, he forgives him for slaying him if he is, indeed, noble. Edgar then reveals his true identity to Edmund. Agreeing with Edgar that the gods are just, Edmund declares that the wheel has come full circle and he is back where he started.

Upon Albany's request, Edgar relates his "brief tale" of his difficulties with the blind Gloucester, his father. He regrets that only one-half hour ago he revealed himself to Gloucester as his son, Edgar. The news was too much for his father's already "flaw'd heart" and it "burst smilingly." Edmund urges him to keep talking, but Albany is afraid he can take no more. Edgar apprises them of the whereabouts of the banished Kent and his "piteous tale of Lear" whom he has been serving in the capacity of a slave. The Gentleman enters, crying for help with a bloody knife in his hand. He informs Albany that he found it on the body of his lady Goneril. Before she died, she confessed to the Gentleman that it was she who poisoned Regan, and then she killed herself. With irony, Edmund notes that he was contracted to both of them and now they will all be married in death. Albany orders the Gentleman to bring in the bodies whether dead or alive.

At this moment, Kent enters, requesting to see the King so he might bid him goodnight. Engaged in Edgar's story, Albany has completely forgotten the incarceration of Cordelia and Lear. He questions Edmund, but is interrupted as the bodies of Goneril and Regan are brought in. As Edmund "pants for life," he hurriedly decides to do some good in the world by rescinding his orders against the lives of Lear and Cordelia. He hands Edgar his sword to give to the captain as a token of reprieve, but it is too late. Lear enters in a few minutes with the dead Cordelia in his arms. In his agony, Lear knows she is "dead as earth," but tries to find some life. Horror-stricken, Kent attempts to comfort the King by kneeling to him and identifying himself as Lear's friend, the noble Kent. But Lear shouts back in desperation, calling them all murderers and traitors. The King feels some comfort in the fact that he killed the slave who was hanging Cordelia.

Lear then recognizes Kent but asks about his servant Caius. Kent tells him he is the same man as Caius who has followed the King since the time his fortunes began to decline. Kent informs the King his oldest daughters have died by their own hands (which is only true of Goneril). Lear takes the news without emotion which leads Albany to conclude that he is not in his right mind.

A messenger enters, announcing Edmund's death, but Albany replies simply, "That's but a trifle here." Addressing the "lords and noble friends" who are present, Albany recognizes the King as the "absolute power" for as long as he lives. He grants honor to the virtuous and punishment for his foes.

Lear again cries out that his "poor fool is hang'd." As he gazes on the dead Cordelia's face and lips, he dies. Edgar thinks he has fainted and coaxes him to "look up," but Kent admonishes him to let the King pass. Albany instructs Kent and Edgar to rule the state jointly, but Kent declines the offer. He says he must soon follow his master. Only Edgar is left to restore order in the state.

Analysis

This final scene, the Catastrophe, represents the falling action of the play. It winds up the plot and, because it is a tragedy, involves the death of the tragic hero. Today, denouement is a term more commonly used though it is not limited to tragedy. In King Lear, it includes the clearing up of mistaken identities and disguises, as in the case of Kent and Edgar. The villain, who is Edmund, is also exposed and brought to justice in the last scene. The reunion of father and child is demonstrated in the main plot through Lear and Cordelia, as they are led away to prison, and in the subplot through Edgar and Gloucester. When Edgar makes himself known to Gloucester, his mixed emotions of joy and grief cause his heart to "burst smilingly." Though father and son are momentarily reunited, the meeting ends tragically with the death of Gloucester. Representing the tragic hero of the subplot, it is essential that Gloucester should die before Lear. Echoing Gloucester's death in the subplot, Lear dies in somewhat the same manner. As Kent implies, the King dies of a broken heart. "Break heart, I prithee break!"

One of the central themes of the play is the education and transformation of Lear. He has gained new insights and knowledge through suffering brought about by his own folly. Humiliated by his older daughters, he has come to realize that their flattery meant nothing, for he found he was not "ague proof." High position was of no use to him in the raging storm. Slowly he has been stripped not only of wealth and power, but of pride and deception. Now all that is left for him are the bare realities. In this scene, as he goes away to prison with Cordelia, they will "sing like birds i' th' cage." Purged of the outward trappings of pride that were once so important to him, he will make up for lost time as he and Cordelia

> …laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too—
> Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out—
> And take upon's the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies;

He now sees himself as a mere impartial observer of the trivial life of the royal court. With new insight he rejects his past life and his past beliefs. L. C. Knights states "For what takes place in *King Lear* we can find no other word than renewal."

The subplot intensifies the theme as it runs parallel to the main plot. Gloucester too begins to see after he is blinded. His lack of insight regarding Edmund's deception has, ironically, cost him his eyes.

Albany's earlier prediction that "Humanity must perforce prey on itself,/ Like monsters of the deep" (IV, 1, I. 48-9) has reached its final climax in this scene. In this reference he pointed to Goneril and Regan's cruel treatment of their father, and his fear that chaos and anarchy would be the result. As Albany anticipated, Goneril and Regan, involved in a love triangle with Edmund, have finally turned their hatred on each other as Goneril poisons Regan and then kills herself. Edmund is stabbed by Edgar because of his traitorous attempt on Albany's life. Edmund is a Shakespearean villain whose wheel has now come full circle, for, as Edgar says, "The gods are just," and Edmund is back where he began.

The "noble Kent" who has served his master, the King, so selflessly throughout the play, is growing old. We are led to believe he will shortly follow the King in death. "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go:/ My master calls me, I must not say no." Devoted to the King, Kent is of a different time when Lear's name was still revered. After the death of Lear, he recognizes that his time will soon come and he is ready. When Kent comes "To bid my king and master aye good night," we can clearly see the symbolism as being that of death, not only Lear's but also his own. This is true particularly in the light of his last speech in the play.

After Lear's death, Kent's comment, "The wonder is he hath endur'd so long," echoes Cordelia's words spoken earlier. She has just heard the account of her father's night in the storm where he was sheltered in a hovel with the common beasts. "Tis wonder that thy life and wits at once/ Had not concluded all" (IV, 7, l. 40-1). Lear seems to survive the most dire circumstances, and when he finally dies, Edgar, still unbelieving, wants him to "look up."

An understanding of the play must necessarily include an adequate perception of the Elizabethan view of order. Harry Levin, in the Introduction to The Riverside Shakespeare describes this divine order.

The age-old conception of a "great chain of being," extending from God through the angels toward mankind and downward to beasts, plants, and inanimate matter, links together all created things.

This idea has been reviewed elsewhere in the text, but it bears repeating in the light of Kent's comment as he sees Lear enter with the dead Cordelia in his arms. "Is this the promis'd end?" Kent asks, and Edgar adds "Or image of that horror?" John Holloway notes that "the king's end is like the end of the world: not the Day of Judgement, but the universal cataclysm which was to precede it" (John Holloway, "King Lear," 1961). For the Elizabethans then, any breakdown in the natural universal order could be a potential for a collapse into world chaos. Their belief that the end of the world was imminent was an integral part of their fears. Though set in pre-Christian Britain, this is, nevertheless, the world of *King Lear*, beginning with Lear's unnatural division of the kingdom and ending with Edgar's almost impossible task of restoring some semblance of order to the "gor'd state."

King Lear: Quizzes

Act I, Scene 1: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Explain briefly why King Lear has called his family together in the first scene.

2. Which characters are involved in the subplot of the story?

3. Name one of the major themes of the play.

4. At what period in history does the play take place?

5. Why does Kent defend Cordelia when her father banishes her?

6. Why does the Duke of Burgundy reject the offer of Cordelia's hand in marriage?

7. Who are the Duke of Albany and the Duke of Cornwall?

8. Who eventually marries Lear's dowerless daughter? Where will she live after her marriage?

9. What advice does Cordelia give to her sisters as she leaves with the King of France?

10. What do Goneril and Regan do as soon as everyone is gone and they are alone together?

Answers
1. King Lear calls his family together in order to divide his kingdom among his three daughters.

2. Gloucester and his illegitimate son Edmund and his legitimate son Edgar are the characters involved in the subplot.

3. A major theme of the play is appearance versus reality. King Lear is more impressed with his older daughters' flowery speeches of love than Cordelia's sincere response.

4. The play supposedly takes place in pre-Christian Britain but exhibits many sixteenth-century values.

5. Kent defends Cordelia because he feels it is his duty to keep the King from making a "rash" decision.

6. The Duke of Burgundy will not accept Cordelia because she has no dowry to bring into the marriage.

7. The Duke of Albany is Goneril's husband, and the Duke of Cornwall is Regan's husband.

8. The King of France marries Cordelia in spite of her banishment and lack of a dowry. He will take her to France.

9. Cordelia asks her sisters to treat their father well.

10. Goneril and Regan immediately begin to plot ways in which to usurp the power of the King, their father.

Act I, Scene 2: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. In his soliloquy, what does Edmund want to take from his legitimate half-brother Edgar?

2. What is the piece of paper Edmund is supposedly hiding from his father? What does it say?

3. What is Gloucester's reaction to the letter?

4. Give an example of alliteration in Edmund's soliloquy.

5. What does Edmund think of his father's view of nature?

6. What does Edmund tell Edgar about his father?

7. What does Edmund tell Edgar he must do if he intends to walk in public?

8. Where is Edgar instructed to go?

9. How will Edgar be able to talk to his father?

10. Why is Edmund gloating at the end of the scene?

Answers
1. Edmund wants to take land that now rightfully belongs to his half-brother Edgar.

2. The piece of paper is a forged letter supposedly written by Edgar plotting his father's murder.

3. Gloucester's reaction to the letter sends him into a rage against his son Edgar.

4. An example of alliteration in Edmund's soliloquy is "With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?"

5. Edmund thinks his father is only blaming the stars for his own failures.

6. Edmund tells Edgar his father is very angry with him and might harm him.

7. Edmund tells Edgar he must arm himself if he intends to "stir abroad."

8. Edgar is instructed to go to Edmund's lodging.

9. Edmund promises to bring Edgar to his father so he can hear him speak.

10. Edmund gloats because he has duped his father and half-brother into believing his story.

Act I, Scene 3: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Where is the scene set?

2. What arrangement have Goneril and Regan made for the care of their father, the king?

3. Where has King Lear gone at the beginning of the scene?

4. What kind of servant is Oswald?

5. What does Goneril instruct Oswald to do in order to anger the king?

6. Why does Goneril pretend to be sick?

7. Where does Goneril plan to tell her father to go if he does not like it at her palace?

8. Why does Goneril decide to write to her sister?

9. What is the significance of the father/daughter relationship in this scene?

10. What would an Elizabethan audience of Shakespeare's day have thought of Goneril's attitude toward her father?

Answers
1. It is set in the palace of the Duke of Albany.

2. Goneril will keep her father first. Then she and Regan will alternate each month.

3. The King has gone hunting.

4. Oswald is a steward in charge of other servants.

5. Goneril instructs Oswald and his fellows to treat Lear's knights with cold looks and to put on "weary negligence."

6. Goneril is too angry to speak to her father when he comes home from his hunting trip.

7. Goneril will tell Lear to go live with her sister Regan.

8. Goneril hastily writes to her sister to tell her that Lear is acting badly and might decide to come live with her.

9. This is our first glimpse of the deterioration of the father/daughter relationship.

10. They would have seen Goneril's attitude as a violation of the natural hierarchy.

Act I, Scene 4: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why does Kent speak in verse and then change to prose in the beginning of the scene?

2. Why does the Fool offer his coxcomb to Kent?

3. Why is the Fool often referred to as the chorus?

4. What behavior does Oswald demonstrate to the King?

5. Why is Goneril angry at her father in this scene?

6. In Lear's rage against his daughter Goneril, who does he think he can turn to?

7. How many of Lear's followers does Goneril take from him?

8. What does Goneril do to warn her sister of Lear's departure from Albany's palace?

9. How does the Duke of Albany feel about his wife's actions against the King?

10. What is Goneril's response to Albany's fears?

Answers
1. Kent speaks in verse because he is the Earl of Kent. He speaks in prose when he is disguised as a servant.

2. The Fool offers his coxcomb because he thinks Kent is a fool for following Lear.

3. Traditionally the chorus functions as a commentary on the action of the play. The Fool plays the role of the chorus.

4. Oswald is defiant and treats the King with disrespect.

5. Goneril tells her father that his train of followers are unruly and quarrelsome.

6. Lear says Regan will take him in.

7. Goneril reduces Lear's followers by 50.

8. Goneril writes Regan a letter warning her of Lear's arrival.

9. Albany is troubled by his wife's actions.

10. Goneril accuses Albany of a lack of wisdom in his decision-making.

Act I, Scene 5: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who is sent with a letter for Lear's daughter Regan?

2. How does the Fool expect Regan to receive her father?

3. How does Lear feel about Cordelia at this point in the play?

4. What does the Fool mean when he says that a snail has a house to put his "head in, not to give it away to his daughters"?

5. What does Lear want to do to Goneril because of her ingratitude?

6. In what way is Lear's illusory world disappearing?

7. What does the Fool mean when he says he is "old before his time?"

8. What evidence do we have that Lear believes in a higher being?

9. What is the purpose of the Fool in this scene?

10. What is the main purpose of this short scene?

Answers
1. Kent, the disguised servant of King Lear, is sent to the city of Gloucester with a letter for Regan.

2. The Fool thinks Regan will be exactly like her sister.

3. Lear feels he has not treated Cordelia properly.

4. The Fool is censuring Lear for giving his kingdom to his daughters. He feels it is an unnatural thing to do.

5. He would like to take Goneril's half of the kingdom back.

6. He has gained new insight regarding his daughter Cordelia.

7. The Fool means that Lear is "old before he is wise."

8. Lear invokes the heavens to keep him from going mad.

9. The Fool acts as an honest commentary on the King's fears.

10. This short scene reflects Lear's emotional state at this point in the play.

Act II, Scene 1: Questions and Answers

Study Questions

1. Why does Edmund ask Edgar to raise his sword against him?

2. Why is Edmund's arm bleeding in this scene?

3.What does Gloucester propose to do after Edgar's escape?

4. Who does Gloucester ask to help him find Edgar and bring him to justice?

5. Who does Regan blame for Edgar's alleged problem with his father?

6. What will the King find when he and his followers reach Regan's house?

7. Why have Cornwall and Regan come to Gloucester's castle? What do they wish to discuss with him?

8. Why does Cornwall commend Edmund?

9. Whom does Gloucester call his "loyal and natural boy"?

10. Why does Gloucester intend to publish Edgar's picture throughout the kingdom?

Answers

1. Edmund wants his father to see him attempting to prevent Edgar's escape.

2. Edmund gave himself a wound with his own sword to impress his father.

3. Gloucester says that Edgar shall not remain uncaught and proposes to send his picture throughout the kingdom.

4. Gloucester asks the Duke of Albany's help in finding Edgar and bringing him to justice.

5. Regan blames his association with the King's "riotous knights" who, she thinks, have put him up to it.

6. The King will find that Regan and her husband are not there.

7. Cornwall and Regan have come to ask for Gloucester's advice about the quarrel between Goneril and the King.

8. Cornwall commends Edmund for his virtue and obedience.

9. Edmund is called Gloucester's "loyal and natural boy."

10. Gloucester plans to publish Edgar's picture throughout the kingdom so that someone will report having seen him, which could help matters regarding his capture.

Act II, Scenes 2 and 3: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why is Kent violently angry at Oswald, Goneril's steward?

2. Does Oswald pretend that Kent is a total stranger to him? What proves him wrong?

3. Why is Kent placed in the stocks?

4. What does Regan think would be worse than putting her father's servant in the stocks?

5. What is Cornwall's response to Kent's statement that he serves the King?

6. How does Gloucester feel about Kent being placed in the stocks?

7. Why does Kent speak in verse when he is alone in the stocks and in prose earlier in the scene?

8. Whose letter does Kent read before he falls asleep?

9. Where has Edgar been living since he fled from his father's castle?

10. How will he disguise himself in order to save his life?

Answers
1. Kent is angry because Oswald comes with letters against the King and, pretends he has never seen Kent.

2. Oswald pretends he has never met Kent, but later he tells Cornwall the entire story.

3. Kent is placed in the stocks because Cornwall takes Oswald's side against Kent's in the quarrel.

4. Regan feels it would be worse to have her sister's steward abused than to have her father's courier put in the stocks.

5. Cornwall remains stoic about putting the King's servant in the stocks.

6. Gloucester feels the King will "take it ill" when he sees him in this condition.

7. When he is alone he no longer needs to maintain his disguise.

8. Kent reads a letter from Cordelia.

9. Edgar has been living in the hollow of a tree.

10. Edgar will disguise himself as Tom o' Bedlam.

Act II, Scene 4: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why is the King puzzled when he arrives at Gloucester's castle?

2. Whom does the King see in the stocks? Why was he put in the stocks?

3. Which metaphor does the Fool use to foreshadow the storm?

4. What excuse do Cornwall and Regan give for not greeting the King when he arrives at Gloucester's castle?

5. Why has Lear come to Regan's house?

6. Why does Lear fall on his knees to Regan?

7. How many of Lear's men has Goneril dismissed when he arrives at Gloucester's castle?

8. How many men does Regan want him to have in his train?

9. Whom does Lear refer to as "unnatural hags"?

10. Where does Lear go after his daughters reduce his train of followers to nothing?

Answers
1. The King cannot understand the reason for Cornwall and Regan's absence on the night of his expected arrival.

2. The King sees Kent, his messenger, in the stocks. He has been placed there by Cornwall.

3. The Fool says that those who serve for gain "Will pack when it begins to rain,/ And leave thee in the storm."

4. Cornwall and Regan say they are tired and sick from traveling all night.

5. Lear and Goneril have quarreled, and he wants Regan to take him to live with her.

6. On his knees, Lear begs Regan to take him in.

7. Goneril has reduced Lear's train of followers by 50 men.

8. Regan thinks 25 in his train would be an ample amount.

9. Lear refers to his oldest two daughters as "unnatural hags."

10. Lear goes out into the storm and braves the "wild night."

Act III, Scene 1: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Where is the King at this point in the play?

2. Who has stayed with the King to give him comfort?

3. What are the rumors concerning Cornwall and Albany?

4. Who are the spies sent to England by the King of France?

5. What news do France's spies bring regarding King Lear?

6. Where does Kent think Cordelia will be staying?

7. What does Kent tell the Gentleman to show Cordelia as proof of Kent's identity?

8. Before the Gentleman goes to Dover, what does he do?

9. What does the French Army intend to do in England?

10. What is Cordelia's purpose for her temporary stay in Dover?

Answers
1. Lear's Gentleman tells Kent that the King is in the storm on the heath outside of Gloucester's castle.

2. Only the Fool accompanies the King on the heath.

3. It is rumored that there is division between Cornwall and Albany, leading to civil strife in the kingdom.

4. The spies act as servants in the households of Cornwall and Albany.

5. The spies bring the news that King Lear has had to bear the abuses of Goneril and Regan, his daughters.

6. Kent thinks Cordelia is waiting in Dover.

7. Kent instructs the Gentleman to give Cordelia a ring as proof of Kent's identity.

8. The Gentleman helps to find Lear in the storm.

9. The French Army intends to stage a secret attack on England.

10. Cordelia waits, along with the French Army, to rectify her sisters' injustices to the King.

Act III, Scene 2: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. How does Lear set the scene at the beginning?

2. How does Lear compare his daughters to the elements?

3. What does the Fool beg Lear to do to get out of the storm?

4. Who later joins Lear and the Fool in the storm?

5. Where does Kent finally lead Lear to shelter him from the storm?

6. What does Kent plan to do after he finds shelter for Lear and the Fool?

7. How does Lear express his compassion for his Fool?

8. What does Lear wear on his head when he goes out into the storm?

9. Whose prophecy does the Fool recite?

10. According to the King, who has sent the terrible storm on the heath?

Answers
1. Lear uses imagery depicting the storm on the heath.

2. Lear personifies the elements as "servile ministers" of his daughters who are trying to destroy him.

3. The Fool begs Lear to ask his daughters' blessing so they will take him in.

4. Kent joins Lear and the Fool in the storm.

5. Kent leads Lear into a hovel to shelter him from the wind and the rain.

6. Kent plans to go back to Gloucester's castle to see whether he will receive him.

7. Lear feels sorry for the Fool, inviting him into his hovel and asking him whether he is cold.

8. Lear goes into the storm bareheaded.

9. The Fool recites the prophecy of Merlin who has not yet been born.

10. Lear thinks the gods have sent the storm to punish the secret crimes that have never been brought to justice.

Act III, Scene 3: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why do Cornwall and Regan refuse to grant Gloucester the use of his own castle?

2. How does Edmund feel about the abusive treatment of the King?

3. What news does Gloucester's dangerous letter contain?

4. What powers are "already footed" in this scene according to Gloucester?

5. Where does Gloucester keep the letter?

6. What does Edmund decide to do about the news his father has given him?

7. Why does Edmund betray his father's trust in him?

8. What does Gloucester tell Edmund to say to Cornwall if he asks for him?

9. What will be the penalty if Cornwall discovers Gloucester's intentions?

10. In what way does this scene function as an interim scene?

Answers
1. Cornwall and Regan are punishing Gloucester for giving help to the King.

2. Edmund claims it is “savage and unnatural,” but he feels otherwise.

3. We may assume that the letter talks of powers that are waiting to avenge the abusive treatment of the King.

4. The King of France and Cordelia, we will learn later, are waiting on the shore near Dover with an army.

5. Gloucester has locked the letter in the closet.

6. When Gloucester leaves, Edmund immediately decides to impart the information to Cornwall.

7. Edmund wants his father’s title as Earl of Gloucester.

8. Gloucester asks Edmund to tell Cornwall he is sick in bed.

9. Gloucester has been threatened with death for associating with the King and offering him help in his time of need.

10. This scene functions as an interim scene, breaking the action of Lear, Kent, and the Fool on the heath.

Act III, Scene 4: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What does the storm on the heath symbolize?

2. Who is Edgar in disguise?

3. What type of clothing does Tom o’ Bedlam wear?

4. According to Lear, who are the three sophisticated ones?

5. Who does Lear say is the “thing itself”?

6. Whom does Lear pity in his prayer on the heath?

7. What is Gloucester carrying as he enters the hovel?

8. What does Edgar call Gloucester when he approaches the hovel?

9. How does Gloucester’s situation compare to Lear’s?

10. Why has Gloucester come out into the storm?

Answers
1. The storm symbolizes Lear’s tempest in his mind.

2. Edgar is disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, a madman.

3. Tom o' Bedlam wears only a blanket.

4. The three sophisticated persons are Lear, Kent, and the Fool.

5. Edgar in disguise is referred to as the "thing itself." He is natural, "unaccommodated" man.

6. Lear pities the homeless and hungry who have no place to go for shelter from the storm.

7. Gloucester is carrying a torch into the hovel.

8. Edgar calls him the foul fiend who walks the streets at night.

9. Gloucester and Lear both have children who seek their death.

10. Gloucester has come to find Lear and offer him food and shelter in an outbuilding near the castle.

Act III, Scene 5: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. What does Edmund produce as evidence of Gloucester's treason?

2. What important information does the letter contain?

3. How does Cornwall reward Edmund for being his informant against Gloucester?

4. Why does Edmund call upon the heavens?

5. What will Cornwall do to Gloucester for his crime of treason?

6. What is Edmund's main ambition?

7. What does Cornwall think might have been the cause of Edgar's plot to murder his father?

8. What does Cornwall promise to do to replace Edmund's loss of his father?

9. What is Cornwall's attitude as a Duke in this scene?

10. How will Cornwall search for the Duke of Gloucester?

Answers
1. Edmund shows Cornwall the supposed letter that Gloucester received from France.

2. The letter, it can be assumed, contains news of France's impending invasion of England.

3. Cornwall rewards Edmund by giving him the new title of the Duke of Gloucester.

4. Edmund calls upon the heavens to pity him in his adversity.

5. Cornwall will apprehend Gloucester when he is found.

6. Edmund hopes to replace his father as Earl of Gloucester.

7. Cornwall thinks that Gloucester might have provoked Edgar to plot the death of his father.

8. Cornwall promises Edmund that he will love him even “dearer” than his own father would.

9. Cornwall pretends to possess the qualities of fairness and integrity and will see that justice is done.

10. Cornwall asks Edmund to bring his father back to him.

Act III, Scene 6: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who are the defendants in Lear’s mock trial?

2. Who is chosen by Lear as the “justicer” in the mock trial?

3. Why does Lear refer to Edgar as a “robed man of justice”?

4. What is the Fool’s position in the mock trial?

5. How does Kent respond to his position as one of the judges?

6. Whom does the King arraign first in the mock trial?

7. What is Goneril’s crime in the trial?

8. What does the King wish to do to Regan?

9. What does Gloucester tell Kent to do with the King? Why?

10. What is significant about Edgar’s actions at the end of the scene?

Answers
1. Goneril and Regan are the defendants in Lear’s mock trial.

2. Lear chooses Edgar, disguised as Tom o’ Bedlam, as his “justicer.”

3. The blanket Edgar wears is considered a robe by Lear.

4. The Fool is Edgar’s “yoke-fellow of equity” or legal partner.

5. Kent feels only pity for the King and says very little.

6. The King arraigns Goneril first.

7. Goneril’s crime is kicking “the poor king her father.”

8. The King would like to “anatomize Regan” to find the cause of her “hard heart.”

9. Gloucester tells Kent to take the King to Dover in a litter. Gloucester is afraid for the King’s life.

10. Edgar’s pain has become “light and portable” and he feels restored.

Act III, Scene 7: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who accompanies Goneril on her way to see her husband, the Duke of Albany?

2. What news does Oswald bring to Cornwall and Regan?

3. Why does Cornwall advise Edmund to leave?

4. What happens to Gloucester after the servants bring him back?

5. Where does this scene take place?

6. Why does Gloucester say he took the King to Dover?

7. Who gouges out both of Gloucester’s eyes? Who encourages him?

8. Who draws his sword on Cornwall and wounds him?

9. Who kills the servant of Cornwall by stabbing him in the back?

10. Which characters appear to be the only good ones in this scene?

Answers
1. Goneril is accompanied by Edmund.

2. Oswald tells Cornwall and Regan that the King and 36 of his knights are on their way to Dover.

3. Cornwall says that it is not wise for Edmund to observe the revenge they will take upon his traitorous father.

4. Gloucester is bound to a chair and cross-examined.

5. Ironically, the scene takes place in Gloucester’s own castle.

6. Gloucester tells Regan he took the King to Dover so she would not pluck out his eyes with her nails.

7. The Duke of Cornwall, Regan’s husband, gouges out Gloucester’s eyes in his own castle. Regan encourages him.

8. Cornwall’s servant draws a sword in defense of Gloucester. He receives a fatal wound for it.

9. Regan stabs the servant in the back and kills him.

10. Besides Gloucester, the servants appear to be the only good characters in this scene. Full of compassion, they are unable to bear the cruel treatment of Gloucester.

Act IV, Scene 1: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who is leading the blind Duke as the scene opens?

2. Who leads Gloucester to Dover?

3. What is Edgar's mood in his soliloquy?

4. How does Edgar feel when he sees his blind father?

5. What does Gloucester tell the old man to bring for Edgar?

6. How does the old man respond to Gloucester's request for clothes?

7. Why is it difficult for Edgar to keep up his disguise?

8. Why does Gloucester give Edgar his purse?

9. In this scene how does Gloucester feel about the distribution of wealth?

10. Where does Gloucester want Edgar to lead him near Dover?

Answers
1. The old man, a former tenant, leads the blind Gloucester.

2. Edgar, still disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, leads Gloucester to Dover.

3. Edgar feels encouraged, thinking that the worst is over.

4. Edgar feels he is worse than he ever was, now that he sees his blinded father.

5. Gloucester tells the old man to bring Edgar, disguised as poor Tom, some clothes to wear.

6. The old man says he will bring the best apparel that he has.

7. It is difficult for Edgar to look at his father's condition and still keep up his madman's disguise.

8. Gloucester gives Edgar his purse because he trusts him. He is blind and cannot handle his own money.

9. Gloucester feels each person should have enough.

10. Gloucester wants Edgar to lead him to a cliff near Dover.

Act IV, Scene 2: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why does Goneril send Edmund away when they arrive at Albany's palace?

2. In what ways has Albany's disposition changed?

3. To what does Goneril attribute Albany's change?

4. What does Albany accuse Goneril of doing?

5. What news does Goneril bring to her husband, Albany?

6. In what way does Goneril compare Edmund with Albany?

7. How does Albany describe Goneril's personality?

8. What important news does a messenger bring to Goneril and Albany?

9. What is Goneril's reaction to Cornwall's death?

10. Why does Albany want revenge?

Answers
1. Goneril sends Edmund back to her sister because she does not think he would be welcomed by the changed Albany.

2. Albany smiles when told the French army has landed, he does not welcome his wife upon her arrival, and calls Oswald a "sot" for telling him of Gloucester's traitorous activities.

3. Goneril feels Albany is cowardly and, therefore, he wishes to avoid the recent events that have taken place in the
kingdom.

4. Albany accuses Goneril of cruel treatment of her father, the King.

5. Goneril brings news of the impending invasion by France.

6. Goneril sees Edmund's manliness as superior to Albany's.

7. Albany describes Goneril as a devil disguised in a woman's body.

8. The messenger brings news of the Duke of Cornwall's death.

9. Goneril has mixed feelings about Cornwall's death. She delights in the power she has gained but is afraid that her sister might strike up a new relationship with Edmund.

10. Albany wishes to avenge the recent sufferings of Gloucester, who had his eyes gouged out.

Act IV, Scene 3: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Where has the King of France gone?

2. What letters does Kent ask the Gentleman about?

3. What is Cordelia's reaction to Kent's letters about her father?

4. What reason does Kent give for the differences in Lear's daughters?

5. Why does Lear refuse to see his daughter Cordelia?

6. Who will watch over the King in Kent's absence?

7. Is Kent aware that Cornwall has died?

8. What does the "holy water" represent in this scene?

9. Who are the "dog-hearted daughters" whom Kent refers to?

10. Where is Lear in this scene?

Answers
1. The King of France has gone back to France to take care of business that could, in his absence, prove dangerous to the state.

2. Kent asks the Gentleman about the letters written to Cordelia containing news of her father's suffering.

3. Cordelia reacts with sorrow and love for her father.

4. Kent thinks the answer is given in the stars that "govern our conditions."

5. Lear is filled with guilt and shame for what he has done to her, and, therefore, refuses to see her.

6. The Gentleman will watch Lear while Kent is gone.

7. Kent speaks of Albany and Cornwall's powers so we can assume he thinks Cornwall is still alive.

8. The "holy water" is a metaphor for Cordelia's tears.

9. The "dog-hearted daughters" are Goneril and Regan.

10. Lear has been taken to Dover where he will be safe from his older daughters.

Act IV, Scene 4: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. As Cordelia enters, what has she heard regarding the King?

2. What does Cordelia instruct her officer to do?

3. Who does Cordelia depend on to heal her ailing father?

4. What will the doctor use in his treatment of the King?

5. What kind of treatment does the doctor prescribe?

6. In what way will Cordelia's tears aid the King's treatment?

7. Why is Cordelia anxious to find her father very soon?

8. Why does Cordelia's army invade Britain?

9. What is this scene's main function?

10. What was the King wearing when Cordelia last saw him?

Answers
1. Cordelia has heard that the King is singing loudly and wears a crown of weeds on his head.

2. Cordelia instructs her officer to search for the King until he finds him.

3. Cordelia depends on the Doctor to heal her father.

4. The Doctor will use medicinal herbs to treat the King.

5. The Doctor prescribes sedated rest for the King.

6. Cordelia's tears will water the rare herbs that will remediate her father's distress.

7. She is afraid he will die if he goes on much longer.

8. Cordelia says the French army is there to defend her "ag'd father's right."

9. This scene functions to give us background on the King's condition before he reappears.

10. The King was dressed in his royal regalia when Cordelia was banished in Act I.

Act IV, Scene 5: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Has Albany raised an army to fight France?

2. Who is a better soldier than Albany? Why?

3. What does Regan think Edmund has set out to do?

4. Why does Regan want Gloucester out of the way?

5. Who sent Oswald with a letter for Edmund?

6. Why does Regan want to read Goneril's letter to Edmund?

7. Does Oswald know what the letter contains?

8. According to Regan, what are the obvious signs of Goneril's love for Edmund?

9. What does Regan ask Oswald to do to Gloucester?

10. How does Oswald feel about his instructions to kill Gloucester?

Answers
1. Albany has raised an army, but only with much persuasion.

2. Goneril, Albany's wife, is a better soldier than he because she has ambition for her own power.

3. Regan thinks Edmund plans to murder his father.

4. Regan wants Gloucester killed because sympathy for his blindness will turn people against her.

5. Goneril sent Oswald with a letter for Edmund.

6. Regan wants to read Goneril's letter because she sees her sister as her rival for Edmund's attentions.

7. Oswald probably does not know the contents of the letter.

8. Goneril has been gazing amorously at Edmund.

9. Regan wants Gloucester to be killed.

10. Oswald will do anything as long as he can get a promotion for doing it.

Act IV, Scene 6: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. How is Edgar dressed in this scene?

2. Where is Gloucester standing when Edgar tells him he is at the edge of the cliff?

3. Who does Gloucester think has saved him when he supposedly jumped off the cliff?

4. What does Edgar call Gloucester after he has jumped?

5. How does Gloucester say that he can see without eyes?

6. What is the "great stage of fools"?

7. Who is Oswald's "proclaimed prize"?

8. Who kills Oswald to protect Gloucester?

9. What are Goneril and Edmund plotting against Albany?

10. What is the Gentleman's news to Edgar about the war with France?

Answers
1. Edgar is dressed as a peasant in this scene.

2. Gloucester is standing on flat ground far from the roaring sea.

3. Gloucester thinks that the gods have saved his life.

4. Edgar calls Gloucester father for the first time since his escape from Gloucester's castle when he fled for his life.

5. Gloucester says that he sees "feelingly."

6. The "great stage of fools" is the world that all of us come to when we are born.

7. Oswald sees the blind Gloucester as a prize since Regan has put a price on his head.

8. Edgar kills Oswald to protect Gloucester from being killed.

9. Goneril and Edmund are plotting Albany's death.

10. The Gentleman tells Edgar that Albany's army will arrive to fight the French.

Act IV, Scene 7: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why does Kent prefer not to reveal his true identity to anyone except Cordelia?

2. In what way has the King's attire been changed?

3. Why is the King able to sleep so well?

4. How long has it been since Cordelia has seen her father?

5. When Lear awakens, where does he think he has been?

6. Is Lear angry at Cordelia in this scene?

7. How does Cordelia feel when her father finally recognizes her as his daughter?

8. Why does the doctor want Cordelia and the others to leave the King alone after they have spoken with him for a while?

9. What news does the Gentleman tell the disguised Kent about Edgar and Kent?

10. Who has taken the former Duke of Cornwall's place as the leader of the people?

Answers
1. Kent is not ready to reveal his identity because at this point in the play his purpose for the disguise has not been completely fulfilled.

2. The King's clothes have been changed from the ragged attire that he wore in the storm to "fresh garments."

3. The King has been given a drug to help him sleep.

4. Cordelia has not seen her father since she was banished in the first scene of the play.

5. Lear thinks he has been taken him out of the grave.

6. Lear is not angry at Cordelia but tells her she has cause to hate him.

7. Cordelia is overjoyed when her father identifies her as his daughter.

8. The doctor does not want to risk the overexertion of the King.

9. Ironically, the Gentleman tells the disguised Kent that Edgar and Kent are rumored to be residing in Germany.

10. Edmund has taken Cornwall's place after his death.

Act V, Scenes 1 and 2: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Why is Albany concerned about the battle with France?

2. How does Albany finally resolve his dilemma about fighting the French?

3. To which sister has Edmund sworn his love?

4. Who joins Albany in the tent to talk about the upcoming battle with France?

5. Who delivers Goneril's letter to Albany?

6. What information does the letter contain?

7. Why is Goneril the better choice of mate for Edmund?

8. How does Edmund plan to treat Lear and Cordelia if Britain wins the battle with France?

9. Where does Edgar place his father during the battle?

10. What does Edgar tell his father when he does not want to flee to safety after the battle?

Answers
1. Albany is concerned about fighting his own father-in-law, the King.

2. Albany decides that the war with France is a separate issue from the domestic quarrels with Lear and Cordelia.

3. Edmund has sworn his love to both Goneril and Regan.

4. Edmund and the oldest and most experienced officers join Albany in his tent.

5. Edgar delivers Goneril's letter to Albany.

6. The letter, intended for Edmund, contains a plot to kill Goneril's husband, Albany.

7. Goneril plans to kill Albany, which would put Edmund in the top position in the kingdom if he married Goneril.

8. Edmund plans to show no mercy to Lear and Cordelia.

9. Edgar places his blind father safely in the shadow of a tree.

10. Edgar tells him that "Men must endure."

Act V, Scene 3: Questions and Answers

Study Questions
1. Who has taken Lear and Cordelia captive after the French have lost the battle?

2. Who delivers Goneril's letter, intended for Edmund, to Albany?

3. Who answers the Herald's third trumpet sound?

4. How does Gloucester die?

5. How do Goneril and Regan die?

6. How does Edmund react to being stabbed by Edgar?

7. What have Goneril and Edmund planned to do to Albany?

8. How does Lear feel about going to prison with Cordelia?

9. What becomes of Cordelia in prison?

10. Who is left to rule the kingdom at the end of the play?

Answers
1. Lear and Cordelia have been taken captive by Edmund.

2. Edgar delivers Goneril's letter to Albany.

3. Edgar appears on the call of the third trumpet to expose his half-brother Edmund as a villainous traitor.

4. His heart bursts when Edgar reveals himself as his true son.

5. Goneril poisons Regan and then kills herself with a knife.

6. Edmund forgives Edgar for killing him as long as he proves to be noble.

7. Goneril and Edmund have planned to kill Albany.

8. Lear is happy to be in prison with his long-lost daughter. In prison, they will sing and discuss the matters of the court.

9. Edmund has ordered that she be hanged. The order is rescinded by Edmund, but it is too late.

10. Albany appoints Edgar and Kent. Kent declines and leaves only Edgar to restore the kingdom to order.

King Lear: Essential Passages

Essential Passage by Character: King Lear

KING LEAR:
Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of
stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'ld use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.

KENT:
Is this the promised end?

EDGAR:
Or image of that horror?

ALBANY:
Fall, and cease!

KING LEAR:
This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.

KENT:
[Kneeling]
O my good master!

KING LEAR:

Prithee, away.

EDGAR:
'Tis noble Kent, your friend.

KING LEAR:
A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever!
Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.
I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.

CAPTAIN:
'Tis true, my lords, he did.

KING LEAR:
Did I not, fellow?
I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
I would have made them skip: I am old now,
And these same crosses spoil me. Who are you?
Mine eyes are not o' the best: I'll tell you straight.

Act 5, Scene 3, Lines 305-333

Summary
In the play's culmination, King Lear, out of his madness, at last comes to the full realization of all that is caused by his hubris and self-love. Having wandered away from the protection of the Duke of Gloucester and Kent, he has been captured by Edmund, imprisoned with his loyal daughter Cordelia. Albany has arrested Edmund for the treason he has committed against the king. Lear's unfaithful daughters, Goneril and Regan, are dead. Regan has been poisoned by Goneril out of suspicion and jealousy, should she manage to snare Edmund in her newfound widowhood. Out of grief at Edmund's arrest and sure execution, Goneril has committed suicide. In a duel, Edgar, the legitimate son of the Duke of Gloucester, has mortally wounded Edmund, who lies dying. In a last ditch attempt to do something good, he warns Albany that he has ordered the deaths of Lear and Cordelia. They are to be hanged in an attempt to make it appear that the two have committed suicide. The guards rush to their place of imprisonment, but it is too late. Cordelia has been hanged, but Lear managed to kill the hangman before he himself suffered the same fate. Cordelia's body is carried to the stage by Lear himself.

In his grief, Lear castigates those remaining alive in their seeming indifference to all the loss that has been suffered, especially in the death of Cordelia. He struggles to accept his daughter's death, stating at first that she is "as dead as earth." He insists he knows who is alive and who is dead, and yet he cannot quite accept it. He asks for a mirror against which he can check to see if Cordelia still has breath enough to fog up the mirror.

Kent, Edgar, and Albany wonder if this is indeed the end of the world because so many deaths have occurred at a single time. While they cry against the heavens, Lear holds up a feather to Cordelia's lips and thinks he sees it moved by her breath. "She lives," he states simply. If this is true, he says, it would redeem all the sufferings he has encountered thus far.

Kent approaches his king, but Lear orders him away in his despair. In grief, Lear calls all of them murderers and traitors, yet he realizes that he himself could have saved her if he had only not cast her out.

As his mind slips, Lear thinks he hears Cordelia whispering something to him, stating that “her voice was ever soft, gentle, and low, an excellent thing in woman.” Then bluntly he announces that he himself killed her executioner, to which one of the guards offers verification. Lear seems to take some pride in this fact, stating that in his youth he could have done a much better job of it. Yet now he is old, burdened by adversities that plague him. Seeing a figure before him, he asks who it is (it is Kent). Lear admits that his sight is not the best.

Analysis
In this passage, Lear learns all the lessons he is supposed to learn, albeit too late. Through his failure as a king and a parent, those closest to him have died, and he himself is near his end. Through his madness, Lear begins to realize some element of truth.

Lear must face the consequences of his hubris—a self-absorbed pride that holds that all the world revolves around oneself. He began this path the moment that he decided to partially abdicate his throne: he wanted to keep the title and the rewards but not the responsibilities. The attitude that the kingdom “owes him a living” without any effort on his part goes against all that was held to be the right order of society at the time. Kings were kings until death. The idea of “retirement” was unheard of.

Not only in his stately duties was Lear a taker and not a giver. In his own family, he continued this practice, expecting love simply because he was a father, without any idea of being lovable. He expected his daughters to hold him as the center of their universe, in a sense their “god.” Goneril and Regan acquiesced to this, simply out of their own pride and future hope of reward. Following his example, these two eldest daughters paid lip service to their king and parent, while holding themselves as the center of their own universes. Goneril, in copying her father, rejected the then “traditional” concept of a wife and made herself the head.

Cordelia alone lived a life of humility or, as she labeled it, duty. Her thought was not for herself and what reward she would get from her father. Her refusal to speak in lofty, and insincere, terms of her love for her father was condemned by Lear (hypocritically so) as pride. It was only in the end, as they faced death together, that Lear truly understood the meaning of love.

Lear speaks to Kent of his difficulty in seeing. Beyond the physical loss of eyesight, Lear had lost his vision of reality. He saw what he wanted to see. The reality of Cordelia did not fit that which he saw, and thus he was blind to it. In the case of Kent, Lear also failed to see the love born out of duty that caused Kent to rebuke him at his exile of Cordelia. It was not a condemnation but a correction, one that pointed Lear back to the truth after he strayed along the paths of his own self-deception.

Whether or not one can say that Lear achieved redemption through his revelation of the truth is problematic. He came to this realization only after it was too late. There was no correction of his errors, since death had come as a consequence to all. If one can say that redemption of the mind is equal to redemption of the physical realm, then Lear indeed achieved redemption. Yet what good is redemption if it is confined to the realm of the mind? As such, it would be limited to Lear himself. The land itself, the kingdom of Britain that Lear abandoned and failed, must be redeemed by another.

Essential Passage by Theme: Fatalism

GLOUCESTER:
Away, get thee away; good friend, be gone:
Thy comforts can do me no good at all;
Thee they may hurt.

OLD MAN:

Alack, sir, you cannot see your way.

GLOUCESTER:
I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;
I stumbled when I saw: full oft 'tis seen,
Our means secure us, and our mere defects
Prove our commodities. O dear son Edgar,
The food of thy abused father's wrath!
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I'ld say I had eyes again!

OLD MAN:
How now! Who's there?

EDGAR:
[Aside]
O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'?
I am worse than e'er I was.

OLD MAN:
'Tis poor mad Tom.

EDGAR:
[Aside]
And worse I may be yet: the worst is not
So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'

OLD MAN:
Fellow, where goest?

GLOUCESTER:
Is it a beggar-man?

OLD MAN:
Madman and beggar too.

GLOUCESTER:
He has some reason, else he could not beg.
I' the last night's storm I such a fellow saw;
Which made me think a man a worm: my son
Came then into my mind; and yet my mind
Was then scarce friends with him: I have heard more
since.
As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods.
They kill us for their sport.

Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 15-40

Summary
Gloucester, blinded at the command of his illegitimate son Edmund, wanders the barren countryside, accompanied by an old man. He is met by his legitimate son Edgar, who is disguised as a beggar to protect his

life from the death warrant signed by Gloucester, based on the false accusations of Edmund.

Earlier in the scene, Edgar reflects that it is better to be a beggar and openly despised than to be quietly despised but flattered. He taunts the "unsubstantial air" (reflecting his disbelief in the gods and their interest in mankind) that has blown him into such a low estate. He then sees his father, blinded and led by a peasant.

The old peasant expresses his loyalty to the Duke of Gloucester, stating that he has always been loyal, even from the time of the duke's father. Yet Gloucester can accept no comfort; his despair is at its lowest point.

The old man resists leaving, saying, "You cannot see your way." In total resignation, Gloucester says, "I have no way." He does not need eyes to see where he is going if he has nowhere to go. In fact, states Gloucester, even when he had eyes, they proved to be of little use to him. Perhaps having no eyes will help him to see more clearly. Yet it is too late, as far as concerns his son Edgar. Gloucester wishes that he could "see" him once again, even if just by touch.

When the old man calls out, Edgar states that he cannot say he is at his worst, since things always seem to get even worse. As a response to Gloucester's query, the old man says that a madman and a beggar approaches. Gloucester marvels, since the night before he thought he saw such a person, which made him realize that men are but worms in significance. He also remembers that he thought of his son Edgar at that moment, even though he was still angry with him. Now, Gloucester says that he knows better. Mankind is nothing but a plaything of the gods, who kill them purely for sport.

Analysis
This passage exemplifies the fatalism expressed by so many characters throughout the play. Man is the victim of fate, which cannot be influenced by an individual's choices, as opposed to destiny, which can. The sense of helplessness increases from Cordelia's exile to the final act.

Cordelia, in her loyalty, is rejected. Being truly good, she is condemned. Her only recourse would have been resignation to falsity, as her sisters do. Yet she must be true to what she knows in her heart—the real love that she has for her father. Yet her commitment to truth grants her nothing, leading only to her eventual death. In Gloucester's viewpoint, goodness is not a guarantee of reward.

Yet neither is goodness alone condemned. Lear himself, who has sunk into his pride, faces the same outcome, as do Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall. Good and bad, they all die. Regardless of the deeds that have done, their fate is an untimely death.

Gloucester's pre-Christian philosophy mirrors those of others, like the ancient Greeks. They too believed that they were the playthings of the gods. The notion of sacrifices and offerings were not gifts of devotion. Rather, they were seen as a way to placate the gods in order to get them to leave humans alone and in peace. The notion of the love of a god would not come until the later Judeo-Christian tradition. In this, Shakespeare manages to avoid "Christianizing" the ancient tale of Lear (or "Leir"). Keeping true to the ancient pagan faith of Britain, he removes the personal interest of the gods in human affairs.

Gloucester's fatalism removes any kind of spiritual relationship on the part of mankind. It is only for this life that one has hope of any sort of happiness, even though that may be marred by the arbitrary actions of the gods. No sense of duty to the divine also plays out in having no sense of duty to a parent, as is evident in the actions of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. The benevolence of fathers is a thing not known, which the parallel plots of Lear and Gloucester highlight. Lear has had little true love for his children, making their inheritance conditional on the spoken professions he wants to hear (whether they be true or not). In a sense, therefore, Lear's daughters are also a "plaything" to their father. He toys with their destiny for amusement and self-gratification.

Likewise, Gloucester displays a self-absorbed nature in his relationships with his sons. Both sons, “equal in his love,” are products of his duty to his wife and his surrender to his passions. In the eyes of the Elizabethan audience for which this play was performed, the preference for an illegitimate child over the rights of a legitimate child would be an upset of the balance of the natural order. In a sense, therefore, while Gloucester proclaims that he is but the plaything of the gods, he has made the gods playthings of himself. Rejecting “what is right,” he has done what he wanted for his own benefit or amusement.

Gloucester’s fatalism has thus replaced any sense of justice in the world. Gloucester rejects the divine because he feels the divine has rejected him. As he himself now must live in darkness due to his blindness, all of mankind might as well give up their eyes. There is nothing to see for which seeing will make any difference.

King Lear: Themes

Since it was first staged and published in the early seventeenth century, Shakespeare's *King Lear* has been the subject of extensive literary interpretation and the object of intense critical debate. The key issue here is whether *King Lear* is a classical tragedy with a redemptive moral or a radical departure from genre conventions, a play with a profoundly pessimistic, even nihilistic, view of man and the world he briefly inhabits. At the center of the division between the traditional and the modern readings of Shakespeare's *Lear* is the subject and theme of nature, human and universal, and the question of whether there is a moral order to be discerned within its workings. The traditional view of *King Lear* points to an array of unnatural forces, most notably Lear's premature abdication of his throne and his rejection of Cordelia's qualified love, as temporarily overturning the moral mechanisms of nature. This view of *King Lear* ascribes a regenerative function to nature, one that imparts a tragic nobility to the play's final outcome. On the other hand, many modern literary critics see unbridled and chaotic nature as the central force behind Lear's fall, with the overwhelming power of a brutish cosmos crushing Lear into a pathetic madman pointlessly crying out in a world without hope for redemption.

From a traditional perspective, Lear's downfall is the result of a tragic flaw in his character: his majestic sense of himself is not bounded by the norms of the natural order. Owing to this self-inflated dignity, Lear is blind to the natural precepts that govern Cordelia's response to her father's concern with the extent of her filial devotion. He not only fails to grasp Cordelia's moral viewpoint, he creates the preconditions for his own demise. He does so by abdicating his throne, disowning his natural child and then issuing a curse upon Cordelia in which he deigns to bend nature to his will, calling upon the sun and the goddess Hecate to help him obliterate his natural bond to Cordelia.

In the first instance, Lear earns his tragedy through a disruption of both the political and the natural order of things. Not only does he break up his kingdom, once Cordelia's refusal to acknowledge Lear's unbounded glory becomes plain, he overturns natural order as well. When Cordelia says that because she intends to marry she must share her love equally between her father and her future husband, we realize that this is plainly a proper and natural state of human affairs. Cordelia's assertion that, "I love your majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less" (I.i.93), reflects a natural reciprocation of familial duties that were seen by Shakespeare and his audiences as right and fit. The bond to which Cordelia refers in justifying her qualification of duty is the bond of nature that ties the child to its parent in God's harmonious world. Thus, by rejecting the natural truth behind Cordelia's response, Lear sets himself against the fundamental laws of nature.

Worst of all, Lear brings tragedy upon himself when he speaks his famous oath by the 'radiance of the sun, Hecate and the night,' "by all the operation of the orbs" (I.i.110), thereby invoking cosmic forces and disturbances well beyond his power to command. Enraged by Cordelia's repeated "nothing," Lear launches

into a diatribe that ends:

> The barbarous Scythian,
> Or he that makes his generation messes,
> To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
> Be as well neighbour'd, pitied, and relieved
> As thou my sometime daughter.
> (I.i.115-119)

Shortly thereafter, when France and Burgundy arrive, Lear reneges upon his promise of a dowry for Cordelia and again interferes with the natural course of life by trying to dissuade the suitors from marital union with his youngest daughter. After Cordelia explains to them that she is guilty of no grave offense, Lear overturns the natural life-cycle altogether through his utterly rash statement, "Better thou / Hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better" (I.i.234-5).

Consistent with this reading, the destructive elements which batter the body of the unaccomodated and naked Lear are but the outer show of his own disordered mind, the storms of the night animating the discord inside. The distraught king invokes the full fury of nature, and nature responds by inflicting its ravages upon him. In Act III, scene ii, Lear issues a self-destructive summons to the physical forces of the cosmos.

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage, blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
> You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
> Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
> Singe my white head!
> (III.ii.1-6)

At this juncture, the harm that Lear suffers at the hands of his older daughters, the reduction of his stature, is far surpassed by the cataclysmic destruction that the king calls down upon himself.

Yet in this traditional interpretation of the play as a heroic tragedy, the natural powers that Lear distorts by dint of his will are also purifying forces. Deluded by his blindness, Lear revels in the savagery of the natural forces that he himself has set into motion. He ultimately tries to fuse with nature by rending his garments to become "unaccommodated man." But it is precisely when he is in this abject and unsheltered state that Lear's blindness is lifted. What transforms Lear after his experience in raw nature is his acceptance of his own natural limitations, of his place within, and not above, the natural world. In his reconciliation scene with Cordelia, Lear accepts that he is "a very foolish fond old man" and realizes that he is "not of perfect mind." In this traditional reading of the play, the protagonist's exposure to the elements of nature purifies the tragic hero. At the plays conclusion, then, Lear once again lives in a morally ordered, natural realm. Granted, he suffers for his own shortcomings, as does his beloved Cordelia, but there is a lesson to be learned here while the deaths of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund affirm the existence of justice in the world.

During the twentieth century, many modern literary critics have challenged this view of Shakespeare's *Lear*. Far from affirming the existence of a natural moral order, the modern perspective on the play posits that Shakespeare was intent upon showing us the truth about human nature; that when shorn of all props, man is but a "mortal worm" and no more. From this perspective, Cordelia's refusal in the play's opening scene is not an expression of natural law, but an ironic refutation of her father's view that nature and reason are compatible.

Consistent with this interpretation, at least some modern critics have read the remainder of *King Lear* as a conflict between reason and will in which Lear, as Everyman, abandons reason and pursues his natural impulses. The seeming insight that Lear attains on the heath has no actual bearing on the play's outcome; it is simply a crutch that Lear uses to deny the inherent absurdity of the cosmos. The king's ordeal on the heath does not impart wisdom to him; it leaves him completely addled, as displayed in his denial of Cordelia's death. From this critical perspective, the play's conclusion is not an affirmation of a universal normative order, but a pathetic portrait of a lower-case everyman (or universal "No-man") who is deluded by the hope that some sort of meaning lies at the bottom of a relentlessly chaotic cosmos. According to the revisionist reading of *Lear*, the play is not a tragedy, but an abysmally dark comedy. That hard ends are meted out to both "evil" and "good" characters proves that the world of Shakespeare's *Lear* is completely amoral, indifferent toward human conceptions of justice, and devoid of any regenerative capacity.

As it now stands, the traditional reading of *King Lear* remains regnant among Shakespeare scholars. Through it, the play's predominant themes of patriarchy, evil, kingship, madness and the like are rendered meaningful. But the case for *Lear* as an absurd, nihilistic vision can be buttressed through references to the contradictions that arise within each of these thematic strands. Thus, for example, the traditional view emphasizes Lear's overblown conception of royal fatherhood, while the modern reading focuses on Lear's devolution into infantile dependency.

King Lear: Character Analysis

Albany (Character Analysis)

The duke of Albany is Goneril's husband. He is a nobleman with lands of his own, but he inherits half of Lear's kingdom through Goneril. Because Lear's kingdom is divided, tension exists between Albany and Cornwall, Regan's husband. It is rumored that Cornwall and Albany might war against each other. Instead, they end up combining their efforts against the French contingent which has landed at Dover and is trying to redeem Lear and reinstall him as king at the direction of Cordelia. When Lear goes to live with Goneril and Albany, Albany finds out after the event that Goneril has cast her father out. He sympathizes with Lear, but since Lear is Goneril's father, he does not actively intervene. Later, after Goneril and Regan have forced Lear out into the storm, Albany criticizes Goneril's treatment of her father. He says to her, "You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face" (IV.ii.30-31). He calls Goneril and Regan "Tigers, not daughters" (IV.ii.40) and accuses them of making Lear, "a gracious aged man" (IV.ii.41), mad. Goneril, in turn, calls Albany a "Milk-liver'd man! / That bear'st a cheek for blows" (IV.ii.50-51).

Albany bears it patiently when Goneril flirts with Edmund in front of him. He has received letters from Edgar, taken from the dead Oswald, which reveal that Goneril and Edmund are hatching a plot on his life. Although Albany does not know Edgar's true identity, he agrees to summon him after the battle that Edgar might prove Edmund is a traitor. Albany is depicted as a good-hearted optimist. When he receives word that Cornwall has died of the wound inflicted by his own servant, Albany declares,

> This shows you are above,
> You justicers, that these our nether crimes
> So speedily can venge!
> (IV.ii.78-80)

But Albany's optimism is not born out at the end of the play. The wicked are punished, but so are the good. Albany announces his intention to restore Lear's absolute power, but Lear dies before that noble gesture can be realized.

Cordelia (Character Analysis)

Cordelia is Lear's youngest daughter. When her turn comes to outdo her sisters in their protests of great love for Lear, she is strangely silent. Lear reacts with passion and withholds her inheritance, casting her fortune to fate since he will have nothing more to do with her. We might question why Cordelia does not say what Lear wants to hear when to do so would take little effort on her part. She demonstrates her deep love for her father later in the play. Why, then, does she not demonstrate this love at the beginning and save her father the torment that follows? The answer to this question may be that Lear has chosen an awkward and arguably inappropriate moment to ask his only unwed daughter to declare him the sole object of her love. Cordelia has two potential suitors, Burgundy and France, waiting in the wings. Since the transfer of a daughter's dependence from father to husband was a critical moment in her life, it would not do for Cordelia to reveal a willingness to cater to a father's every demand, when those demands might conflict with those of the future husband. Goneril and Regan do not have this particular concern since they are already married. Another explanation might be that Cordelia sees the gross flattery of her sisters as hollow and degrading, true expressions of love best delivered in a private not a public forum. Additionally, perhaps Cordelia feels that her love for her father is an obvious fact of their close relationship (which her sisters discuss later: "He always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly" [I.i.290-92]), a fact which need not be stated verbally and put up for comparison with her sisters' relationship with their father.

Despite Lear's harsh treatment of her, Cordelia remains a loyal and loving daughter. She convinces her husband the king of France, who has graciously embraced her penniless and untitled condition, to mount an effort to save Lear from the cruelties of Goneril and Regan. When that effort fails and Cordelia and Lear are captured, Cordelia suffers for the love she has extended to her father. Yet she remains somewhat standoffish, never too openly or too profusely professing that love in words. In this reserve, she remains consistent with the reserve she has demonstrated at the beginning of the play. When Lear expresses his glee at the prospect of their life in prison together, Cordelia again is silent. We might imagine that her loyalties are again divided between husband and father, but Cordelia, perhaps, does not relish the thought of imprisonment as much as Lear. Cordelia says to her father, "For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down; / Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown" (V.iii.5-6). She is more concerned for her father than for herself, and, as always, she has expressed her love in actions rather than words.

Moreover, it has been suggested that Cordelia is meant to be seen, partly, as a Christ figure. When a messenger informs her that the English troops have assembled to oppose her own, she says, "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about" (IV.iv.23-24). She is on a spiritual mission to save her father's soul, and her words recall those of Christ in the Temple. And like the love Christ extends to humanity, Cordelia's love to Lear is extended freely; it is never a matter of question and cannot be commanded. It is always there for Lear to accept or reject.

In V.iii.244-48, Edmund renounces his decree to have Cordelia and Lear executed, but only a few lines later, Lear enters with Cordelia's body.

Edgar (Character Analysis)

Edgar is Gloucester's legitimate son. His half-brother Edmund frames him, letting on to Gloucester that Edgar is impatient for his inheritance and means to kill his father. Edgar is forced into hiding, and he adopts the disguise of "Poor Tom," a mad Bedlam (from Bethlehem hospital, an asylum for the insane) beggar. During the raging storm into which Goneril and Regan have forced Lear, Edgar finds himself in the same hovel with the mad king and Lear's Fool. Acting mad is perhaps the best disguise for Edgar since the insane were invisible in Elizabethan society, quickly dismissed and rarely scrutinized. Edgar is forced to give up his

identity as Gloucester's son and heir just as Lear struggles to come to grips with his own conflicting sense of identity: the feigned madness of Edgar parallels the real madness of Lear. Lear, in his confusion, assumes that Poor Tom's madness must result from the same cause as his own. He asks of Edgar, "Has his daughters brought him to this pass?" (III.iv.63) Lear is wrong about the cause, but his remark heightens the sense that madness is the inevitable cause of identity loss.

After Gloucester's eyes have been plucked out by Cornwall, Edgar appears as Poor Tom and leads his father to the Cliffs of Dover, where Gloucester intends to kill himself. Edgar knows that that is Gloucester's intention, so he deludes his father by telling him the flat space upon which he stands is the dizzying height of Dover. After Gloucester falls, Edgar appears with a different identity, pretending that Gloucester has survived the fall. He says, "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (IV.vi.33-34). Edgar further pretends that he has seen a demonic figure with Gloucester before the latter leaps, hoping that Gloucester will think his urge to suicide was prompted by demonic impulses, hoping that, in thinking so, Gloucester will gain a renewed zeal for life.

At the end of the play, Edgar appears in yet another disguise, a suit of armor. He fights and kills his bastard brother to prove him a traitor, while none of the onlookers realize who he is. It is only after he has demonstrated his nobility that he can reveal his true identity. Like that of Cordelia and Kent, Ed gar's nobility must be proved in action and not in words.

Edmund (Character Analysis)

Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester and half-brother to Edgar, commits a number of villainous acts throughout the course of the play: he forces his brother, Edgar, into hiding, telling Gloucester that Edgar means to kill him; he betrays his father and leaves him to the barbarous treatment of Cornwall and Regan; he encourages both Goneril and Regan to believe he loves the one to the exclusion of the other, causing them to quarrel and, ultimately, die as a consequence; and he orders the execution of Lear and Cordelia.

At the beginning of the play, Gloucester acknowledges to Kent that Edmund is his bastard son. Gloucester says, "Though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged" (I.i.21-24). Edmund's nativity is the subject of good sport and joking. He has probably endured a lifetime of being treated this casually and contemptibly. It is no wonder, then, that such a constantly reinforcing experience might have embittered him not only toward his father and half-brother but also toward the world. Edmund compares himself to Edgar and finds that he is his equal in all but the name and legitimacy that is conferred not on the basis of one's qualities, but only on the basis of social convention. Edmund denies that social convention and abandons the dictates of any higher authority. He says, "Thou, nature, art my goddess, to thy law / My services are bound" (I.ii.1-2). He will operate only by the laws of nature—the survival of the fittest—without any sense of compassion for the suffering of others. He means to get that which he feels has been denied him by the circumstances of his birth, apparently believing ruthless ambition to be a fair compensation for his social exile.

Edmund's attitude toward his father and the society his father represents is best illustrated by his dismissal of his father's belief that the stars influence people's lives. When Gloucester learns of Lear's banishment of Kent and Cordelia, he believes Lear's rash behavior to be a consequence of "These late eclipses in the sun and moon" (I.ii.103). Gloucester also believes that one's nature is determined by the placement of stars and planets at one's birth. The consequence of such reasoning is the belief that people's actions are predetermined. Edmund takes the opposite view. He says, "An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star!" (I.ii.126-28). In denying Gloucester's belief, Edmund endorses the opinion that man can make of himself anything he chooses, an endorsement that fits well with his Machiavellian behavior. It is curious, then, that at the end of the play Edmund should desire to save the lives

of Cordelia and Lear. When he says, "Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature" (V.iii.244-45), he contradicts his earlier stated position. Perhaps he has been influenced by the noble behavior of many around him.

Gloucester (Character Analysis)

The earl of Gloucester is the father of Edgar and Edmund. As a character, Gloucester connects the main plot with the subplot of the play. His situation parallels the situation of Lear. He mistakenly believes Edmund when the latter pretends to read a letter that is falsely said to be written by Edgar. In that letter, Edgar supposedly tells Edmund of his impatience to inherit Gloucester's estate. Gloucester, like Lear, responds emotionally, immediately denouncing his legitimate son (Edgar) and trusting in the son who really intends to do him wrong (Edmund). And like Lear, Gloucester is to be punished for his lack of insight or moral vision. That punishment comes in the form of a brutal incident wherein his eyes are ruthlessly plucked out by Cornwall. The physical blinding of Gloucester is symbolic of both his own and Lear's blindness to the truth about their children.

When the old man, a longtime tenant of Gloucester and Gloucester's father, tries to assist Gloucester because he cannot see his way, Gloucester replies, "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; / I stumbled when I saw" (IV.i.18-19). He can see better now that his eyes are gone, and he sees that he has placed his trust in the wrong son. He has reached the depth of despair, feeling there is no way to undo what he has done. It is this despair that compels him to say, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods. / They kill us for their sport" (IV.i.36-37). Edgar, in disguise, leads Gloucester to the Cliffs of Dover, from which Gloucester intends to hurl himself and commit suicide. Edgar deludes Gloucester, making him think he has, in fact, fallen from a great height. This scene would be comical if not for the serious intention Edgar has in doing what he does. He wants to cure Gloucester of his despair, a despair that still blinds Gloucester even though he thinks he now sees the truth about his life.

Both Gloucester's despair and Lear's madness are conditions which allow the two old men to evade one of the inevitable realities of aging. At some point, parents need to depend on their adult children. Both Gloucester and Lear eventually emerge from those conditions which have blinded them and accept the necessity of that dependence. Edgar is able to report at the end of the play that, when finally revealing himself to his father, Gloucester's heart "'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly" (V.iii.198-99). Again, like Lear, Gloucester dies in the grip of two emotional extremes, but at least he has learned that joy is possible when one accepts the love and devotion of another human being.

Goneril (Character Analysis)

Goneril is Lear's eldest daughter. She seems to understand that her father sometimes acts in a petty manner, and she knows how to please him. If she can inherit a third of Lear's kingdom by simply telling him that she loves him profoundly, she will gladly do it. To do so costs her nothing. Unlike Cordelia, Goneril knows how to cover her true feelings with high-blown rhetoric. Later in the play, Goneril treats Lear severely and appears quite monstrous.

After Lear's angry responses to the behaviors of Cordelia and Kent, Goneril and Regan discuss Lear's state of mind. In an effort to explain that state of mind, Goneril says, "He always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly" (I.i.290-92). Regan replies, "'Tis the infirmity of his age: yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (I.i.293-94). The two have obviously been subjected to Lear's whims before, and they feel what is perhaps an understandable resentment at his previous favoring of their younger sister. At first, Goneril and Regan unite against Lear in self defense. It is only later that their behavior becomes inexcusable.

Goneril's increasingly cruel treatment of Lear is proof of the adage that "power corrupts." Her request of Lear to conduct himself civilly in her home is not an unreasonable one. At first, perhaps, she wants to force a confrontation with Lear in order that he might alter his behavior, but when she sees that she can manipulate her weakened father, the sense of her own power seems to go to her head. She apparently does not feel remorse for causing her father anguish, because, in her mind, he deserves it. Inheriting half of Lear's kingdom has also put her on a different, more equal, footing with her husband, Albany. In opposing the threat posed by the French forces at Dover, Goneril's wealth and influence are needed. She abandons all obedience to her husband, calling him a "Milk-liver'd man!" (IV.ii.50). She appears to be attracted to Edgar because he represents the raw desire and unapologetic quest for power she seems to now find so thrilling. In her quest for power, she will stop at nothing, even poisoning her sister Regan. In the end, it is reported that Goneril commits suicide after confessing that she has poisoned Regan.

Kent (Character Analysis)

The earl of Kent is a nobleman and an unselfish, devoted supporter of King Lear. When Lear so harshly denies Cordelia, Kent attempts to intervene. He says, "See better, Lear; and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye" (I.i.157-58). Lear then rashly banishes Kent. But instead of pouting, going off to lick his wounds, or fostering a hatred of Lear for his actions, Kent adopts the disguise of Caius, a rough character of lower social station than Kent really is, and devotes himself to helping Lear see better, sticking by Lear's side and protecting him until the end.

Like Cordelia and Edgar, Kent represents the love and devotion that persists even through adversity. And, like Edgar, Kent extends that love and devotion in disguise. In one sense, disguise functions in *King Lear* to stress the necessity of seeing beyond outer appearances in a hostile world in which those appearances can be deceiving. In another sense, disguise demonstrates that true nobility results, obviously, not from one's title or social distinction but from an inner sense of morality. Kent and Edgar demonstrate their nobility in their actions, just as the lowly servant of Cornwall performs a noble act of courage in opposing his master and dying in defense of the helpless Gloucester.

Kent's final words in the play pose a mystery. After Lear dies, Kent says to Albany, "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; / My master calls me, I must not say no" (V.iii.322-23). Is Kent referring to Lear or God, his earthly or spiritual "master"? Perhaps the play means to suggest that the distinction doesn't matter, that in serving one, one serves the other.

King Lear (Character Analysis)

As the play opens we learn that King Lear is getting on in years and has decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. Lear is already demonstrating his eccentric nature. Although he has previously determined that the realm will be equally divided, he insists that each of his three daughters try to outdo the others in her proclamation of love for him. When Cordelia fails to satisfy his desire for praise and need for love, he immediately reacts in a purely emotional way, disinheriting her and refusing to listen to the reasonable arguments of Kent, whom Lear also banishes quickly without thinking the matter through.

Lear's expectations about his life in retirement are unrealistic. Lear, who uses the royal "we" to refer to himself, announces that

> 'tis our fast intent
> To shake all cares and business from our age;
> Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
> Unburthen'd crawl toward death.

(I.i.38-41)

Lear wants to regain the untroubled life of a second childhood, yet he does not want to relinquish the authority and respect that he has become accustomed to as king. Lear intends that "Only we shall retain / The name, and all the additions to a king" (I.i.135-36). He wants the best of both worlds, the perks of kingship without its responsibilities. When Lear resides with Goneril, it quickly becomes apparent to her that Lear cannot have both. Although he has supposedly given up authority, he still acts like he is in charge. Both Goneril and Regan realize that Lear has no real power without his knights, and they quickly strip Lear of those. Regan says quite pointedly, "I pray you, father, being weak, seem so" (II.iv.201). But Lear, long conditioned to think of himself as king, cannot reconcile his current condition with his lifelong self-image.

It is this slippage in Lear's self-image which contributes to Lear's descent into madness. He associates weakness with women and scolds himself for his impotence and crying. He tells Goneril, "I am ashamed / That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus" (I.iv.296-97). When Lear says, "Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element's below!" (II.iv.57-58), he is specifically identifying the feelings that threaten to overwhelm him as feminine, since *hysterica passio*, or "the mother," was an affliction of the womb, obviously affecting only women. For Lear, a masculine response to emotion is to harden oneself against feeling. The ultimate crisis of identity comes when he sees Goneril and Regan allied against him. At that moment he realizes the extent of his reliance on others and begins to feel guilt for having treated Cordelia so unfeelingly. Lear's raging against the storm he cannot control reflects his inner struggle against unfamiliar emotions.

When Lear emerges from his mad state, through the gentle ministrations of Cordelia's doctors, he seems to have a different image of himself. In response to Cordelia's request that Lear bless her, he says, "Pray, do not mock me: / I am a very foolish fond old man" (IV.vii.58-59). He has learned to be weak. Admitting that weakness and relinquishing the need to control events, Lear can enjoy that second childhood which he so desires. As he and Cordelia are ushered off to jail after their capture, Lear sees their future imprisonment as a time when he and his daughter can "pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh" (V.iii.12), a carefree time in which the intimate bonds of childhood can be regained. Even in his last moments, at the height of his sorrow at his youngest daughter's death, Lear acts somewhat childishly, distractedly bragging that he has killed one of Cordelia's hangmen, though he also acknowledges the guilt he feels at her death, saying that he "might have saved her" (V.iii.271). Lear dies grieving over his daughter's corpse.

Critical assessment of Lear varies widely. One of the main issues surrounding his character is the question of whether Lear is a victim of others or other forces or is responsible for his own tragic downfall. What elements of his own nature contribute to what happens to him in the play? Some argue that his decision to abdicate his throne and divide his kingdom violates natural order and that this act condemns him. Others fault Lear for his early treatment of Cordelia, for his pride, and for his rash nature. Some people wonder whether or not Lear learns anything about himself during the play. It has been argued that during the scene on the heath, as Lear survives the physical storm, he also transcends his own emotional despair and comes to understand himself and his guilt. Other people are not convinced and allow that Lear has only gained a limited understanding of the consequences of his actions. Lear's ending leaves people with the same uncertainty as do these other issues. A few commentators have asserted that Lear actually dies happy, believing that Cordelia lives. Others believe that while Lear does not actually die happy, he is reconciled with what is ultimately a benevolent universe. Finally, many audiences and critics alike feel that Lear's ending offers a mixed message: while evil does not prevail at the play's end, neither does good.

Additional Character Analysis

Ironically, turn-of-the-century critics like A. C. Bradley believed that while *King Lear* contains the finest examples of Shakespeare's dramatic verse, it was not his best play. The disparity here arises from the fact that while the plot has plenty of action, the external drama is over-shadowed by the action that occurs within

Lear's mind. Looking back over the text, many critical events, including the defeat of the French army and the deaths of Goneril and Regan, take place off-stage and are conveyed to us as verbal reports. The storm that Lear confronts on the heath is certainly dramatic, but it pales by comparison with the mental storm that he experiences and that he expresses through supremely powerful images and hyperbolic rhetoric. Today, modern production techniques have reversed the opinion that Lear does not work well on the stage. But this now heterodox assessment does underline one crucial point about the play: the character of Lear predominates.

Despite his tragic hubris, King Lear is a commanding figure. He is presented to us by Shakespeare as a majestic monarch at the pinnacle of his power. His stately presence is ushered into view by the pomp and trumpets. We soon learn that during his lengthy tenure as the realm's sovereign, Lear has served well, adding to the commonwealth's prosperity and estate. On the surface, at least, his decision to pass his authority down to his children at this stage of life seems both benevolent and wise. Shakespeare introduces us to Lear elevated on a pedestal, and this only contributes to our sense of how far he will ultimately fall.

Lear's character flaw is a variation of the classical notion of hubris, or excessive pride, and like many of the heroes of ancient Greek tragedy (Oedipus, for example), Lear is blind to this fatal fault. To be sure, Lear acknowledges that he is not in his right mind. At the onset of his madness, Lear allows that "we are not ourselves / When nature, being oppress'd, commands the mind / To suffer with the body" (II.iv.107-109). But as this statement suggests, Lear does not ascribe his misfortune to his own violation of nature, but to the oppression of nature by the actions of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, whom he repeatedly maligns as "cats" or other sub-human beasts.

It is in his naked condition on the heath that Lear undergoes a transformation. Devoid of his stature in the society of civilized man, he becomes a spokesman, an Everyman character who achieves universal stature by grappling with the cosmos itself. We hear and feel Lear's pain. By the time that Lear says in the final scene of Act IV that he is "bound / Upon a wheel of fire" (IV.vii.46-47), the audience/reader senses the depth of his despair. But just when we (and Lear) believe that no worse fate can befall the king, Shakespeare demonstrates that disconsolation has no limits save in the grave. Captured with Cordelia, Lear seeks to place the future in a positive, if much reduced, frame, saying "Come, let's away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage" (V.iii.8-9). But Edmund's murderers snatch even this ray of hope from a downsized Lear, reducing him to nothingness. By any measure, Lear's tragedy ends in utter despair. Whether Lear deserves his downfall as traditional critics maintain or is simply the victim of common human cruelty is moot. That Lear plunges into the depths is not at issue, and we are hard pressed to identify any other character in Shakespeare's canon who suffers to the same extent as King Lear.

Other Characters (Descriptions)

Burgundy (Duke of Burgundy)
The duke of Burgundy appears only briefly at the beginning of the play. He is a wealthy, powerful nobleman, but his actions do not place him in a favorable light. He has been negotiating against the king of France for Cordelia's hand in marriage, but when he learns that she is not to inherit any of her father's wealth, he quickly expresses his lack of further interest in her.

Captain
After Lear and Cordelia have been captured by the English forces and Edmund has sent them of to prison, the captain agrees to follow with Edmund's command to execute the former king and his daughter quickly. Edmund has already promoted the captain, and he promises to do so again. The captain says, "I cannot draw a cart, nor eat dried oats; / If it be man's work, I'll do 't" (V.iii.37-38), meaning that, for the promise of reward, he will do anything of which he is physically capable. Another captain appears in the scene immediately

following this one. He sounds the trumpet that calls Edgar to challenge Edmund.

Cornwall (Duke of Cornwall)
The duke of Cornwall is Regan's husband. Like Albany, his own wealth has been increased by the inheritance of half Lear's former realm. When Cornwall discovers that the French are afoot in England, he feels that wealth being threatened. He ruthlessly tries to find out all that he can about the French intentions and the English who might be conspiring to aid the French. Gloucester has revealed to Edmund the existence of a letter demonstrating just such a conspiracy, and Edmund finds the letter and shows it to Cornwall. Cornwall brings Gloucester in for questioning, first binding the old man and then cruelly gouging out his eyes. Outraged by his master's horrible treatment of Gloucester, one of Cornwall's own servants challenges him and delivers to him a wound that will eventually kill him.

Curan
Curan is a courtier. He appears in the first scene of the second act of the play. He informs Edmund that he has told Gloucester to expect a visit from the duke and duchess of Cornwall that evening. Curan discusses with Edmund the rumors of war between Cornwall and Albany.

Doctor
When Cordelia reports that Lear has been seen wandering about mad, the doctor assures her that rest is a cure for that madness. He tells Cordelia he knows of many medicinal herbs to induce the necessary rest. After Lear has been apprehended by Cordelia's attendants, the doctor ministers to Lear. He directs Cordelia to waken her father, again assuring her that the prescribed rest will have soothed his madness. He directs the music to be played louder; and when, at first, Lear speaks incoherently to Cordelia, the doctor tells Cordelia that Lear is groggy yet from sleep but will eventually be alright.

Fool
King Lear's Fool is a licensed one. That is, he could say anything he wanted without fear of punishment. This license was extended to Fools partly for the humor it caused Fools to produce and partly for the insights it provided the Fool's listeners. Lear's Fool is often funny, but he is more often tragically accurate in his assessment of Lear's situation. He acts as Lear's conscience by constantly reminding him of his mistake in banishing Cordelia from his sight and by insisting that Lear admit the truly vicious natures of Goneril and Regan. When Lear begins to go mad as the result of his elder daughter's ingratitude, the Fool reminds him that he has brought his suffering upon himself by not seeing that ingratitude earlier.

When Lear takes refuge in the hovel and finally lies down to rest, the Fool utters his last line in the play: "And I'll go to bed at noon" (III.vi.85). He mysteriously disappears after that point. The Fool has been pining the absence of Cordelia, and his disappearance is often explained as the consequence of that pining. It is usually assumed by the audience that the Fool sickens and dies. A theatrical explanation for the Fool's disappearance is that Cordelia and the Fool, some critics have argued, were perhaps played by the same actor, making the Fool's disappearance necessary to allow time for a costume and makeup change. Whatever the reason, the Fool's disappearance works to good effect dramatically. Once Lear has become fully mad, there simply is no reason to provide him with a dramatic conscience in the character of the Fool, since the conscience is dependent on a reasoning process Lear now lacks.

France (King of France)
The king of France is present at the beginning of the play during the praising contest in which Lear tests the love his daughters have for him. He has been negotiating for Cordelia's hand in marriage, competing with the duke of Burgundy for that privilege. But unlike Burgundy, who loses interest in Cordelia the moment she is disinherited, France says he will take her even though she has no money and no title. He will take Cordelia to his own country and make her a queen there. His is a loving and noble gesture, and, as we learn later, he continues to be loving and generous with Cordelia. Because she is saddened by her father's circumstances,

France brings his own forces to England in an attempt to save his wife's father. He is called back to France on urgent business there, but he leaves Cordelia to continue the effort.

Gentleman
In Elizabethan England, the title of "gentleman" was given to a man belonging to the gentry class, landowners just below the nobility in social rank. Several minor characters designated as "a gentleman" appear in *King Lear*. In I.v, a gentleman informs Lear that the horses have been made ready for Kent to carry Lear's letter to Regan; in II.iv, a gentleman agrees with Lear that Regan's sudden departure from home is strange; in III.i, the same gentleman, perhaps, agrees to take Kent's letter and identifying token to Cordelia in Dover; in IV.iii, that same gentleman tells Kent that Cordelia has received Kent's letters, and the two discuss the circumstances of the king of France's necessary return home; in IV.vi, a gentleman, acting on Cordelia's behalf, finds the mad Lear and sees that he is escorted to Cordelia; in IV.vii, the same gentleman tells Cordelia that he has helped the doctor minister to Lear by putting fresh clothes on the disturbed king; in V.iii, a gentleman enters with a bloody knife and announces that Goneril has killed herself after admitting to poisoning Regan; and, finally, later in that same scene, a gentleman confirms Lear's story about having killed one of Cordelia's assailants.

Gentlemen
In V.i, a number of gentlemen appear without speaking in the company of Edmund, Regan, and the English soldiers at the advent of battle between the English and French forces.

Herald
In V.iii, after the captain has sounded the trumpet in a general challenge, an act which Edgar has previously requested of Albany, the herald reads the proclamation: any man who would prove by strength of arms that Edmund is a traitor should appear immediately.

King of France
See France

Knights
One of the conditions upon which Lear insists when relinquishing the crown is that he be allowed to keep one hundred knights. That number steadily dwindles, and, eventually, all the knights see the handwriting on the wall and desert Lear. In I.iv, the knights return to Goneril's home after hunting with Lear. One of those knights reports that he has been treated rudely by Oswald, Goneril's servant. The Knight observes that Lear is no longer treated with the same respect he once enjoyed. He also remarks that Lear's Fool is pining away in sadness since Cordelia has gone.

Messengers
Several messengers appear throughout the play: in IV.ii, a messenger announces to Albany that Cornwall has died of the wound inflicted by his own servant. The messenger relates the circumstances of the struggle between Cornwall and his servant and explains how Edmund is the cause of the outrage done his father; in IV.iv, a messenger informs Cordelia that the English forces have been assembled against her; and in the last scene of the play, a messenger announces that Edmund has died of the wounds suffered in his engagement with his brother Edgar.

Officers
In V.iii, Edmund directs some officers to take Cordelia and Lear off to prison after their capture.

Old Man
The old man pities Gloucester after Gloucester's eyes have been gouged out by Cornwall. The old man has lived on Gloucester's land for quite some time. He offers to guide Gloucester but defers to Edgar when the latter offers to do so.

Oswald
Oswald is Goneril's steward. He is an ambitious social climber, fulfilling Goneril's requests in the interests of his own advancement. When Goneril charges him to be rude with Lear, in order to force a confrontation between herself and her father, Oswald enthusiastically carries out the task with a flourish. Kent sees Oswald's true nature and regards him with utter contempt, tripping him as Oswald walks by purposefully ignoring Lear's summons. He acts primarily as a go-between, carrying letters from Goneril to Regan and Edmund, and on one occasion is drawn into another quarrel with Kent, who is put in the stocks as a consequence. Oswald justifies Kent's contempt of him when he descends on the blind Gloucester, intending to kill him and recover the reward that has been put on Gloucester's life. Thinking that he is attacking only a blind man and a rustic peasant, Oswald is killed by the much stronger and more noble Edgar occupying that rustic disguise. Indicative of Oswald's total lack of moral scruples, he is found to be carrying letters between Goneril and Edmund that plot the murder of Albany.

Regan
Regan is King Lear's middle daughter. Like her elder sister, she knows that to gain a third of Lear's kingdom by saying what he wants to hear takes little effort on her part. She outdoes even Goneril in her praise of Lear. Regan's protestations of love are so overly flattering that the audience cannot help but realize that she, and by extension Goneril, is being insincere. Like Goneril, Regan has suffered the whimsical nature of her father. She willingly goes along with Goneril's plan to unite against Lear. And Regan, too, finds Edmund attractive, perhaps because of his self-assuredness and unstoppable determination to gain the power society has denied him.

Regan and Goneril are almost indistinguishable in their characteristics. When one tries to find differences between them, it becomes apparent that their varying insensitivities balance out in degree of cruelty. If Regan seems less despicable in that she, at least, does not pursue Edmund until Cornwall is dead, she compensates for this almost acceptable behavior by encouraging Cornwall to gouge out Gloucester's eyes. If Regan seems like a victim in being poisoned to death by Goneril, the audience withholds its sympathy, remembering how Regan has viciously stabbed her husband's noble servant in the back. Goneril and Regan die together, along with Edmund, who says, "all three / Now marry in an instant" (V.iii.228-29).

Servants
In II.i, servants appear with Gloucester as Edmund frames his brother Edgar by lying to his father about Edgar's designs on Gloucester's life. Later in the play, the servants of Cornwall appear. In III.vii, Cornwall's servants have apprehended Gloucester, and Cornwall directs them to bind the former. In a moving scene, one of the servants objects to Cornwall's brutal treatment of Gloucester and fights with his master, inflicting a wound that will eventually kill Cornwall. This servant is slain by Regan who attacks him from behind. In this scene, two other of Cornwall's servants sympathize with Gloucester and comfort him as best they can.

Soldiers
These are both the French soldiers Cordelia has gathered to liberate her father and the English soldiers assembled by Albany and Cornwall to oppose Cordelia's efforts.

King Lear: Principal Topics

Double Plot
Commentary on the double plot or subplot in *King Lear* frequently combines discussion of its function in the play with critiques of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund. Historically, critics have pointed out the many parallels between the two plots, as well as the verbal echoes and cross-references from one story to the other. But more recently the differences between them have been highlighted by critics who demonstrate the discrepancies m circumstances and themes in the separate tragedies of Lear and Gloucester. In the judgment of most modern

critics, the subplot Is much more than a repetition of the principal story. They see it as intensifying or heightening the central themes of the play, including the ingratitude of children, disorder in the family, human fallibility, the concept of individual identity, and the notion of spiritual development and rebirth.

Two scenes in the secondary plot have received the most attention: the blinding of Gloucester and his attempt to kill himself. Earlier critics found the blinding scene so vicious that they felt it ought to have taken place offstage. Modern critics, however, generally insist that audiences must experience its full horror to appreciate its implications: the evil that Lear and Gloucester struggle against is nothing short of monstrous. Commentators agree that Gloucester's physical blindness corresponds to Lear's moral blindness. The scene in which Edgar first deludes his sightless father into believing that they are not standing in a flat field but rather on the verge of a steep cliff, and then that he has miraculously survived a plunge from that cliff onto the sands below, has evoked a broad range of responses from critics. Some have interpreted it as the last step in Gloucester's progress toward spiritual renewal. Several others, acknowledging that it is a rather cheap theatrical device on Edgar's part, believe it has an allegorical significance, perhaps imitating Lear's own fall from grace into the abyss of human suffering. Many commentators have noted that the event does produce a miracle, bringing Gloucester to the realization that he must accept his suffering with a stoical or Christian patience.

There is general agreement that Gloucester is portrayed as slower-witted than Lear. Some critics argue that in early scenes he is evidently a very foolish, gullible man. Others see evidence of pride or arrogance in his make-up and emphasize his sensuality. There is a variety of opinion about Edgar's role in the play. For some commentators, he is a means of bringing about certain events and commenting on others—a poetic representation rather than a psychologically realistic figure. He has also been described as an agent of justice or retribution. Many find his chorus-like comments flat and insipid, and they condemn his moralistic speech to the dying Edmund. Gloucester's younger son is frequently associated with malevolent Nature. Edmund's vivacity and brashness in the first half of the play are frequently remarked on, and commentators point out that audiences often find him attractive, even sympathetic. As with many other aspects of the subplot, Edmund's intrigues with Goneril and Regan are not presented in detail; readers and audiences alike are left with only a few clues or hints on which to base any conclusions.

Language and Imagery

King Lear is notable for the relative plainness or simplicity of its language. Compared with other Shakespearean tragedies, the number of extended poetic speeches is meager, and there is a noticeable absence of ornate passages. Some critics believe that this naturalistic or unmannered style emphasizes the limitations of language to express the depths of human feelings. Words are inadequate in the face of the cruelty and suffering that Lear must endure. And the final image of the murdered Cordelia is truly an unspeakable horror.

Many commentators have called attention to several words that appear repeatedly in the play. Among such key-words are "nothing," "fool," and "nature." Each of these has a wide range of meaning or significance. For example, Cordelia's use of the word "nothing" is different from Edgar's. Several critics have pointed out that the word "fool" is associated, on one occasion or another, with every virtuous character in *King Lear*, Others have suggested that a principal issue in the play is the contrast—and close relation—between folly and wisdom. In the judgment of most commentators, "nature" is central to the design of *Lear*. Many critics see the world of the play as comprising several levels of nature. Others focus on the meaning of "natural" and "unnatural" in the *Lear* world, or evaluate the connection between nature and the theme of order and disorder.

Appraisals of imagery patterns in *King Lear*—the form and meaning of particular images or groups of images within the context in which they appear—often highlight recurring images from nature. These images frequently occur in ferocious or violent forms. Allusions to animals emphasize their untamed, savage, or predatory aspects. Such natural elements as the storm appear in their most extreme or turbulent state. For many critics, these associations emphasize the cruelties and unnaturalness of the *Lear* world. Another

important set of images in the play relates to sight or vision. These images help underscore the issue of moral and physical blindness in Lear and Gloucester. Yet another set of contrasts is provided by images of clothing and nakedness, which many critics see as a means of highlighting the question of essence or identity.

Love

There is almost a complete absence of passionate or romantic love in *King Lear*. The King of France speaks movingly of this kind of love when he becomes betrothed to Cordelia, but he disappears from the play at the end of the first scene. Edmund's liaisons with Goneril and Regan combine political scheming with eroticism, and they are not central to the dramatic action. Yet many critics assert that love is the principal focus of *King Lear*. The play's emphasis on family relations and love between members of a family has been pointed out by many commentators. Several have noted the importance of the Elizabethan concept of the parallels between the family and the state. This is especially relevant with respect to the issue of the bonds that hold together each of these institutions.

The value of love—its ability to console the suffering, to affirm life, to redeem evil and restore order to nature—is a chief issue in commentary on *King Lear*. The play may be seen as presenting compassion for others as the highest form of love and, indeed, as the chief virtue humanity is capable of attaining. Some have argued that in its fullest manifestation, human love becomes a reflection of divine love, as demonstrated by Cordelia. Her love may be interpreted as infinitely patient, forgiving, and the ultimate source of Lear's spiritual redemption. For some commentators, her love symbolizes God's limitless and redeeming love for erring humanity.

Lear's own conception of love is also a central issue. His use of the love test in the first scene of the play has been variously interpreted as revealing a shallow notion of love or as demonstrating a pathetic need for reassurance. His reaction to Cordelia's refusal to give him a public assurance of her love may be motivated by humiliation, egoism, or genuine dismay by her response. Several critics have seen in Lear's reaction an unnatural possessiveness, an unfatherly wish to have all of a married daughter's love, perhaps even incestuous desire.

Madness

Commentary on the topic of madness in *King Lear* frequently begins by pointing out that in none of the earlier versions of the story is there a suggestion that the king loses his sanity. Shakespeare introduced this element. His first audiences would undoubtedly include people familiar with the earlier dramatization of the Lear story or with the chronicle histories that covered the reign of this legendary king. This background would not have prepared them for the spectacle of a lunatic monarch onstage. Furthermore, madness was generally considered comical, and the image of a man—even a king—"fantastically dressed with wild flowers," as the Folio stage direction indicates, might well have evoked laughter rather than pity. Critics propose that the many references to madness by Kent and Lear himself in the first two acts of the play represent careful preparation for the events of Acts III and IV.

A central issue relating to Lear's madness is the question of when it begins. This question has drawn responses from physicians and psychologists as well as literary critics. Some earlier commentators suggested that Lear shows evidence of insanity in the first scene of the play. They contended that giving up his royal title, challenging his daughters to a love test, and banishing Kent and Cordelia are symptomatic of senile dementia. Most modern critics, however, take a different view of Lear in this scene, fixing the responsibility for his behavior on pride, arrogance, vanity, misjudgment, or some other characteristic. The majority see his madness as progressive: his moments of irrationality in the first two acts represent a prelude to his madness in the scenes on the heath. Many commentators identify Lear's abrupt encounter with Edgar as Poor Tom as the moment at which he loses his hold on sanity. There is a minority, however, who argue that his madness is not fully evident until he appears in Act IV, scene vi.

What drives Lear mad, and what is the dramatic function of his madness? Critics have suggested several causes including his daughters' ingratitude, his frustration in confronting the lack of justice in the world, and guilt when he realizes the consequences of his actions. A number of commentators have called attention to the correspondence between the storm on the heath and the storm in Lear's mind. Many have also remarked on the theme of "reason in madness," verbalized by Edgar in Act IV, scene vi. And while most critics agree that the reconciliation with Cordelia shows Lear restored to sanity, a few have suggested that he is driven mad once again by Cordelia's murder.

King Lear: Essays

Is Lear a Tragic Hero?

Prior to the twentieth century Shakespeare critics tended to interpret *King Lear* as a conventional or classic tragedy and saw Lear himself as an Elizabethan version of the "tragic hero." Like the ancient Greek character Oedipus, Lear is a majestic figure at the start of the play whose character flaw of hubris or pride compels him to initiate acts that lead to his ultimate demise. In this traditional reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the hero's downfall, however, has redemptive qualities: a lesson is taught and learned and the audience experiences a sense of moral uplift at the end.

Several facets of the traditional Lear as tragic hero thesis are plainly valid. Like all the classic figures of tragedy, Lear is a royal personage, a king and, indeed, a man who stands above the rest of the characters (albeit for only a few scenes). He is a commanding figure at the pinnacle of his powers. Lear is presented to us by Shakespeare as the majestic monarch, ushered onto the stage with the ceremonial pomp and trumpets. In short order, we learn that during his reign, Lear has proven himself to be an able ruler, adding to the commonwealth's prosperity and estate. Thus, Lear is worthy of his prospective status as a tragic hero.

But, like Oedipus, Lear has a basic character defect. He is excessively proud of his accomplishments as regent and, beyond that, of the love that he deserves from his three daughters. When his youngest daughter Cordelia refuses to openly affirm unlimited affection for him, Lear's wounded pride forces him to disown and expel her, leaving all his powers in the hands of his duplicitous daughters, Goneril and Regan. They, of course, abuse him and Lear again falls into a rage, leaving shelter and sustenance to become "unaccomodated man" on the storm-swept heath. There he curses his faithless daughters, but he never associates his downfall with his own tragic character flaw. In fact, he remains blind to the connection between his trait of excessive pride and his plunge into raw nature. Near the play's conclusion, having been purged of excessive pride by the rough redemptive power of nature, Lear realizes too late that he has been "a very foolish fond old man" and realizes that he is "not of perfect mind." Therefore, according to the customary view of Lear as a tragic hero, Lear is taught a lesson and the audience comes away from the play with a message about the fatal consequences of unbounded pride.

But in some modern readings of *King Lear*, critics have come to a far different conclusion as to what Shakespeare's play is about and "who" Lear is. In these revisionist interpretations, *King Lear* is not a tragedy about a distinguished individual; it is, rather, a black comedy about the human condition at large, in which Lear is a kind of Everyman, a "mortal worm" and no more. We note that, unlike the tight unity of classic tragedy, *King Lear* embodies a major sub-plot in Edmund's evil plans to deceive his father, Gloucester, into believing that his good son, Edgar, harbors evil intentions toward him. Gloucester's path follows the same trajectory as that of Lear: indeed, the two narrative lines even intersect. The existence of this sub-plot implies that Lear's tragedy is not special or unique in any way, and this, in turn, deprives Lear of the distinction common to true tragic heroes.

As for the lesson that Lear garners from his experience, the seeming insight that he attains on the heath has no actual bearing on the play's outcome; it is simply a crutch that Lear uses to deny the inherent absurdity of the cosmos. Even after his exposure to the cosmic elements, Lear remains blind. His ordeal on the heath does not impart wisdom to him; it leaves him completely addled. When he is reunited with Cordelia, Lear is so mad that he cannot recognize her at first, mistaking his daughter for a spirit. True, Lear does acknowledge that this spirit is his once-spurned daughter, but held captive by the forces of evil (his two older daughters and the bastard Edmund), Lear reconciles himself to the status quo. He now wants nothing more than to be imprisoned for life with his "good" daughter. Even this is withheld from him, and when he realizes that Cordelia's life has been taken, he first denies her death and then dies himself of a broken heart.

As the faithful Kent watches the distraught Lear holding Cordelia's body in his arms he expresses a sentiment that members of the audience may well share, saying "Is this the promis'd end?" (V, iii. l.264). From a revisionist standpoint, there is no lesson to be learned in *King Lear* by either its title character or the audience beyond the existence of evil in an amoral universe that is indifferent to human conceptions of justice, honor, dignity, and ennobling tragedy. There is no regenerative or redemptive dimension to the play; the evil and the good characters of the play all suffer a bad end. From this critical perspective, then, King Lear is not a tragic hero, he is a pathetic, powerless, and infirm old man whose story resembles that of all human beings, ending not with a bang but with a whimper when the mortal coil of life unwinds.

The Power of Language and the Language of Power in King Lear

King Lear is one of Shakespeare's darkest plays; darker than *Measure for Measure*, darker perhaps even than *Titus Andronicus*. So dark is it, that from 1681 to 1838 it was performed only in a tamed, even sedated version by Nahum Tate. The particular cruelty of *King Lear* is indicated in Shakespeare's alterations to his sources; in Holinshead's *Chronicles* Cordelia wins the war and restores Lear to the throne (although she does later hang herself). This darkness of tone is accompanied and indeed reinforced by a studied vagueness of time and geography.

The relationship of power and language is prominent from the beginning. Lear is at the height of his power, and plans two final acts which will settle the future of the Kingdom, of his youngest and favourite daughter Cordelia, and of himself. As might be considered typical of family events, tensions are exposed, and Lear's plan to divide the Kingdom between his daughters, marry Cordelia to the Duke of Burgundy and settle down to retirement in their third of the Kingdom is shattered. The power of language to deceive is the first and most obvious point made: Goneril and Regan are willing to say whatever they feel necessary to obtain their promised share, their empty flattery receives its reward, but Cordelia's honesty precipitates disaster.

Goneril claims to love Lear "more than eye sight", "A love that makes breath poor and speech unable, Beyond all manner of so much I love you." (1:1:62-63). Regan declares "I am alone felicitate in your dear highness' love" (1:1:77-78). In successive asides Cordelia allows the audience access to her greater integrity (or resistance) "What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent" (1:1:61), "Then poor Cordelia, And yet not so, since I am sure my love's more ponderous than my tongue" (1:1:75). Cordelia gives her own comment on the deceptive power of language: "that glib and oily art to speak and purpose not" (1:1:213-214).

Her fears are justified when her Father turns to her and asks: "What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters? Speak." Her reply is not best calculated to please him: "Nothing my Lord" (1:1:84-85). Cordelia's inability (or unwillingness) to join with her sisters in this charade so angers Lear that he disinherits and banishes her. His loyal servant Kent, who defends her, is also banished. Lear's power is total, and, as many commentators have noted, used unjustly. Part of this power is his ability to name effectively: his word is law. This power to name is expressed in his offer of Cordelia to the Duke of Burgundy: "Unfriended, new

adopted to our hate, Dowered with our curse, and strangered with our oath" (1:1:206-207). Lear combines here the authority of the father with the (similarly regarded) authority of the King. He has already delivered the "curse" to which he refers:

> Let it be so. Thy truth then be thy dower,
> For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
> The mysteries of Hecat, and the night,
> By all the operation of the orbs,
> From whom we do exist and cease to be,
> Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
> Propinquity and property of blood,
> And as a stranger to my heart and me
> Hold thee from me for ever.
> (1:1:106-114)

Lear clearly and confidently employs language to exercise power, invoking the goddess Hecat, the sun, the night and the stars in his support. At this stage, and for the last time, Lear is in control of the world through his use of language. Over the course of the play, Lear's language becomes decreasingly able to shape reality. While Lear exercises the language of power from a position of power his language can impose his will on the world. Once he abdicates power his language is powerful only in its emotional resonances. It can excite the pity of his companions and of the audience, but not direct, or even accurately describe, the course of events. When Lear says "by the power that made me, I tell you all her wealth" (1:1:205-206) he refers to "the Gods", but the power that made him could be construed as Royal, not Divine. Kent has already denied Lear's access to the Gods: "Now by Apollo, King, thou swear'st thy gods in vain" (1:1:158). Soon Regan will say "I pray you, father, being weak, seem so" (2:4:190).

As he had cursed Cordelia, so he is driven to curse Goneril (1:4:244-275). Regan is sure that he will do the same to her "when the rash mood is on" (2:4:158). By 2:4:267-275 his anger has become a futile, childish rage in the face of his daughters' resistance:

> No, you unnatural hags
> I will have such revenges on you both
> That all the world shall—I will do such things
> What they are, yet I know what; but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep
> No, I'll not weep.
> I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
> Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad.

It is during this speech that the storm begins. Lear's power of naming things as they are having been already removed or given away, he can no longer frame in words or even imagine the "revenges" he desires.

Words still exercise their power to control the perception of the world over the blinded Gloucester (who states frankly that "'tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind" (4:1:47)). Edgar, his loyal son, impersonates a madman through a series of linguistic tics which may have been recognised by the audience as parts of a hoax. Edgar convinces Gloucester that he is at the edge of a cliff through a descriptive passage which is among the most remarked in the play. This feat of linguistic power is entirely and visibly mendacious. The audience is shown the deception, and Gloucester prepares to plunge to his death in the most extraordinary of several moments in which *King Lear* veers perilously close to black comedy. Edgar still continues to deceive his father, convincing him that he has been saved miraculously. He soon adopts a ridiculous yokel accent in

order to dispatch Oswald, and does not recover his identity until he challenges his half-brother Edmund, now Earl of Gloucester:

> What's he that speaks for Edmund, Earl of Gloucester?
> Himself. What say'st thou to him?
> Draw thy sword,
> That, if my speech offend thy noble heart
> Thy arm may do thee justice; here is mine.
> (5:3:116-119)

Edmund responds in defence of his lies:

> This sword, this arm, and my best spirits are bent
> To prove upon thy heart, whereto I speak
> Thou liest.
> (5:3:131-133)

The conflict is expressed in terms of speech, it is what is said to whom and by whom that is in question, it is a matter of honour. Edgar's deceptions were forced upon him, and most critics see them as "redemptive" in their effect on his father. Edmund's, on the other hand, which start as soon as we meet him alone in 1:2, are solely the machinations of the Elizabethan/Jacobean "malcontent", directed towards his own advancement. Even Kent, who repeatedly offends through his bluntness, is forced by circumstances to disguise himself, deceive about his identity, and negotiate with the invading French forces. Perhaps the play does take place in a time of astrological upheaval as Gloucester states in 1:2:95-108, a time in which even the honest are driven to deception in order to preserve the good. For Jonathan Dollimore "*King Lear* is above all a play about power, property and inheritance." While *Lear* is about power it is also about "human nature", the influence of the "Gods", social and familial duty, sight, and renunciation. Shakespeare often works with competing imperatives, and in *Lear* the various relationships between language and power, and the use of language to do harm and to deceive seem frequently in play. In his madness, Lear realises "they are not men o' their words. They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie" (4:5:101-102).
As George Orwell wrote:

> Lear renounces his throne but expects everyone to continue treating him as a King. He does not see that if he surrenders power, other people will take advantage of his weakness: also that those who flatter him most grossly, i.e. Regan and Goneril, are exactly the ones who will turn against him.

King Lear challenges the audience's expectations of divine or poetic justice, and significantly interrogates the relationship of language with power. In Lear's last scene, mourning for Cordelia, he achieves a simplicity of expression wholly touching, and entirely lacking the bombast of previous speeches. In the final speech of the play, Edgar (in the Quarto, Albany) enunciates reaction against the false language which has poisoned the body politic. Now we must "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."

King Lear and Comedy

Strangely enough, it is G. Wilson Knight, a critic famous (not to say notorious) for a vehemently Christian interpretation of Shakespeare's plays, who notes in *The Wheel of Fire* some of the comedic aspects of *King Lear*. Whether or not the harsh moral ecology of *King Lear* fits comfortably with the Christian ethos of forgiveness, structural elements of comedy are plainly present in the plays, quite apart from the sardonic humour of the Fool. Indeed, a "happy ending" involving the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar was part of

Nahum Tate's revision of the play which was the accepted version from 1681 to 1838. Marriage is the traditional ending in Shakespearian comedy, and many critics have found the death of Cordelia to be unacceptably cruel. This is especially true in view of the fact that Shakespeare altered his sources for the story (Holinshead's *Chronicle* and the anonymous play *King Leir*). Wilson Knight sees the opening scene as being comedic, a suggestion unique in my experience, but not without foundation, in that Lear's stage-management of his abdication breaks on Cordelia's resistance, leaving his plan in chaos. It is the puncturing of pride and pomposity, the subversion of Lear's assumptions, which provides the possibility of humour, although Lear's reaction to this setback is authentically frightening. Over the course of the play Lear's power to curse—

> That thou hast sought to make us break our vows,
> Which we durst never yet, and with strained pride
> To come between our sentences and our power,
> Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,
> Our potency made good, take thy reward:
> (1:1:166-170)

—declines, to become ludicrous and ineffectual:

> No, you unnatural hags
> I will have such revenges on you both
> That all the world shall—I will do such things
> What they are, yet I know what; but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth.
> (2:4:267-271)

Where it has been traditional to see the conflict of Act I as a dispute between truth and falsehood, Katherine McLuskie identifies it as an ideological clash between a contractual and a patriarchal notion of authority in the family. This is well observed, but does not entirely account for Cordelia's behaviour, in which the idea of "chastity" in its broadest Elizabethan sense would seem to be involved. Shakespeare's stress on female chastity becomes increasingly marked in the late plays.

If laughter is restrained by fear in Act I, it is equally restricted by pity in Act III. Alexander Leggat identifies various structural elements of the play which are characteristic of comedy as a Shakesperian genre. "Every one of Shakespeare's plays makes some use of laughter, though the laughter can be grim; but none makes such pervasive use of the fundamental structures of comedy, particularly as Shakespeare practised it." Leggat cites Maynard Mack, who sees Lear's journey through the blasted heath as a parody of the forest scene in *As You Like It*, and Stephen Booth on similarities with *Love's Labours Lost*, and notes the "full and significant use of disguise" (p.3), very much a feature of Shakesperian comedy, rather than tragedy. Furthermore, I think the use of a prominent sub-plot mirroring the main action is comedic rather than tragic in normal circumstances. Shakespeare, an inveterate explorer of the emerging theatrical conventions, seems to be using the forms and techniques of comedy to produce what nearly all commentators agree are very uncomfortable dramatic effects. Wilson Knight speaks of "the demonic laughter that echoes in the Lear world."

The obvious focus of humour in *King Lear* is the Fool, whose sardonic commentary on Lear's behaviour is counter-balanced by his loyalty. Some of the Fool's jokes are funny, and perhaps more of them might have been in 1605, but his humour is mordant, and his fixed subject Lear's abdication. Where Lear blames his daughters, the Fool consistently points out that it was he who gave them power over him. The Fool's cultural materialist position is close to Jonathan Dollimore's.

As far as I know, the comic possibilities of Kent's role have been little discussed. At first he opposes Lear's banishment of Cordelia with sharply satirical observations, and is himself banished for his pains. He then

disguises himself and earns Lear's approval by attacking Oswald. His outrageous behaviour in attacking him again at Gloucester's castle gets him put in the stocks. In this struggle he delivers a series of insults of considerable comic force.

> A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue; one trunk inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch.
> (2:2:13-20)

Oswald himself is something of a figure of fun, and is eventually killed by the versatile Edgar in his role as a yokel, whilst attempting to murder the blind Gloucester. But here we touch on the most blatant and frightening example of the humour of cruelty in *King Lear*, the sub-plot involving Gloucester and his son Edgar. Before dealing with that, it is worth discussing the Gloucester/Edgar/Edmund sub-plot at its outset.

Gloucester is appallingly open to suggestion. The robust and ebullient Edmund, his illegitimate son, finds it absurdly easy to convince him that his legitimate son and heir Edgar is plotting to remove him. Gloucester supports his credulity with reference to planetary influences, a Polonius-like meditation which Edmund ridicules in a short soliloquy.

> when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeits of our own behaviour—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence;
> (1:2:110-116)

Edgar too falls prey to Edmund's scheme, and is thus forced to begin his extraordinary career of impersonations. Edmund's energy and charm might be calculated to win the audience's sympathy, although this will wanes as the play progresses.

Gloucester, blinded as a traitor by Cornwall and Regan, and thrown out of his own castle—"let him smell his way to Dover" (3:7:90-91)—is introduced to Edgar in his role of Poor Tom. As Poor Tom, Edgar has been assisting Lear's slide into madness. Much of his repertoire is derived from the cries of "Bedlam beggars", and some of it from Samuel Harsnett's debunking of a case of spirit possession. Some or all of this may have been considered amusing by its first audience; there is a weird sub-plot involving a madhouse in The Duchess of Malfi.

With a quick change of clothes, Edgar undertakes to guide his father to Dover. Although Gloucester does momentarily suspect him, he retains enough gullibility to be convinced that he is on the edge of a cliff. Seeking death, he flings himself face down onto the stage (we must presume) in what is the most frightening of comedic set-pieces. Edgar then persuades him that he has had a miraculous escape.

Lear re-enters at this point, and delivers a complete comic madman act. He criticises his flatterers: "they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie" (4:5:102). He then engages in a fairly typical contemporary diatribe against woman, which turns darkly misogynistic. He then proceeds to make a series of jokes at the expense of Gloucester's lack of eyes.

> I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid, I'll not love. Read thou this challenge. Mark but the penning of it.
> (4:6:131-133)

He turns from Gloucester's blindness, and begins to berate the hypocrisy of wealth and power in terms reminiscent of the manner of Puritan satire from Hugh Latimer on.

I do not intend to suggest that *King Lear* is anything other than a tragedy. It does seem, however, that the play makes use of the techniques and structures of comedy. Perhaps this is one of the factors that makes *Lear* seem so harsh, a sense of repressed laughter. *King Lear* interrogates the structures of power through the frame of comedic structures, and with the satirical commentary of first the Fool and later Lear himself. *Lear* thus throws into question not only the basis of power, but the emerging conventions of theatrical practice.

A Brief Critical History of King Lear

King Lear was written in 1604 or 1605, as far as can be established. It certainly incorporates material from Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Several Popish Impostures*, London, (1603), an exposure of a fraudulent case of spirit possession, and it was registered with the Company of Stationers on 26th November 1607. The Quarto was published by Nathaniel Butler at the sign of the Pied Bull in 1608, and a significantly different version included in the Folio of 1623.

King Lear was rewritten in 1681, twenty-one years after the re-introduction of the Monarchy. The play was no longer considered suitable in Shakespeare's version, and Nahum Tate rewrote it in line with Restoration notions of 'decorum'. Although Tate's version is justly reviled, it is in some ways truer to its sources (Raphael Holinshed's *The Third Volume of Chronicles* (1587) and an anonymous play *King Leir*) in allowing Cordelia and Lear to survive. However, in the Holinshed version, Cordelia does eventually hang herself in prison. *King Lear* was undoubtedly too uncomfortable for Restoration tastes, and it remains a troubling and harrowing play. Shakespeare's version was not restored in performance until 1838.

The range of critical opinion expressed on *King Lear* in nearly four hundred years is obviously too extensive and varied to detail here. In particular the vast expansion of literary criticism in the Twentieth Century renders an inclusive review impossible. As usual, there are no contemporary accounts of Shakespearean performances, and the first critical response is implied, therefore, in a wholesale rewriting of the play by Nahum Tate in 1681. Although the critical response is varied almost all critics agree on three points; *King Lear* is 'great'; *King Lear* is bleak; as Maynard Mack says, '*King Lear* is a problem.'[1]

Tate's 'Dedication' to *The History of King Lear* states:

> Twas my good Fortune to light on one Expedient to rectify what was wanting in the Regularity and Probability of the Tale.

Tate's 'expedient' was to invent a romance between Cordelia and Edgar. The terms Tate uses throw some light on Restoration critical theory. 'Regularity' is a matter of form, of adherence to a set of dramatic and aesthetic rules, although questions of 'decorum' have a moral dimension. More modern interpretations find a high degree of integration in the form of *King Lear*; although the play deals with chaos it is a highly wrought artefact, both linguistically and dramatically.[2]

Tate's 'probability' has remained a concern for critics, notably A. C. Bradley, but there is a third and perhaps more significant factor Tate does not explicitly address here, although it clearly concerned him: *King Lear* seems to lack a comfortable moral overview, a position from which the events of the play can be seen to uphold some over-arching moral position, or postulate a moral direction in the world. The moral interpretation of the play depends on the 'fitness', or justice of the outcome for each individual and of the play as a whole. The judgement of 'fitness' may be based, as for S. T. Coleridge, on the predominant characteristic of each character, or on an Old Testament view in which God punishes the characters for their sins. Other Christian

interpretations, such as G. Wilson Knight, see renunciation of the world as the moral lesson to be drawn.

For Samuel Johnson the play was too much to bear. 'There is no scene which does not add to the aggravation of distress. . . .' The pressure mounts relentlessly throughout, and the tragic conclusion seems 'contrary to the natural ideas of justice'.

> I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.[3]

In 1811, A. W. Schlegel disagreed with the verdict that there was an improper conclusion to the play, feeling that 'After so many sufferings, Lear can only die.' (*Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*). The poet John Keats wrote a sonnet on *Lear*, not one of his finest works, (Jan. 1818), and had previously (Dec. 1817) commented on the play in a letter, praising its

> Intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.[4]

A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) includes an influential chapter on *Lear* which sees the play as the story of Lear's education and redemption. Bradley also notes the play's size; '*King Lear* is too huge for the stage'; '*King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me not his best play'. Bradley goes on to enumerate a large number of instances in which he finds the plot and character motivation faulty. These are too numerous to reproduce here, but most are at least arguably accurate. Bradley's chapter on *King Lear* is often cited; Jonathan Dollimore mentions him with approval in *Radical Tragedy* (1989). Bradley does however criticise the blinding of Gloucester as 'revolting or shocking' (neither of which could be considered objections in the age of Quentin Tarantino). Bradley concludes that 'Shakespeare, set upon the dramatic effect of the great scenes . . . was exceptionally careless of probability, clearness and consistency. . . .'

G. Wilson Knight, in his highly Christian interpretation of Shakespeare's Tragedies, *The Wheel of Fire,* tries to justify the cruelties of the play by reference to an overarching Christian redemption. His chapter on *Lear* draws valuable connections with comedy (Alexander Leggatt points out some of the structural elements of *Lear* which parallel Shakespeare's Comedies[5]) but follows Bradley in seeing the play as primarily the story of Lear's education and redemption. This is the only way, it seems, that a positive message can be extracted from the tragedy. Much of the critical history of *King Lear* is an attempt to ameliorate the bleakness and cruelty of the play by reading a religious moral into it.

In an influential essay which refuses this interpretation and compares *King Le*ar with Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* [6], Jan Kott finds that

> *King Lear* makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies: of the heaven promised on earth, and the Heaven promised after death . . . of cosmogony and of the rational view of history; of the gods and good nature, of man made in 'image and likeness'. In *King Lear* both the medieval and Renaissance orders of established values disintegrate. All that remains at the end of this gigantic pantomime is the earth—empty and bleeding.

Kott's bleak view seems close to the moral universe of *King Lear*; despite the efforts of Wilson Knight, J. F. Danby and others, *Lear* seems nihilistic. To take the view that the sufferings of Gloucester and Lear, and the death of Cordelia are justified by their behaviour seems ruthless and brutal, the product of an evil morality.

If *King Lear* is not morally Christian, some critics have taken the view that it is about power. This is certainly Jonathan Dollimore's view in *Radical Tragedy*: '*King Lear* is above all a play about power, property and

inheritance.'[7] This view sees the play as being merely realistic in its view of society as a ruthless struggle for power.

Lear remains, then, 'great', 'bleak', and 'a problem', not easily reduced to one theme or interpretation; like much of Shakespeare's late work it provokes many and varied critical responses. It can be 'Christian', 'Patriarchal', 'Nihilistic', about redemption , power, loyalty or renunciation; it is both tragic and comedic.[8] Shakespeare's flexibility and adaptability, what Frank Kermode calls the 'patience' of the play, allow a variety of interpretations in line with whatever cultural assumptions are current. This is Shakespeare's great strength, and it springs from his ability to present the viewpoint of each character as independently justifiable, an inherently dramatic talent which resists final closure and definitive interpretation.

NOTES

1. Maynard Mack, *King Lear in our Time*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, (1965).

2. On the linguistic aspects see for example Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*, Allen Lane, London, (2000), pp. 183-200. For Alexander Leggatt, in *King Lear*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, (1988) 'the last scene repeats with terrible exactness the action begun in the first', pp.7-8.

3. 'General Observations on *King Lear* (1765)'. In *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, (1960) p.98.

4. In Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Tradition*, (1989), p.168.

5. Alexander Leggatt, *King Lear*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, (1988), pp.3-4.

6. Jan Kott, '*King Lear* or *Endgame*' in *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, (1964).

7. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York and London, (1989), p.197.

8. For a good discussion of patriarchal authority in the play, see Kathleen McLuskie, 'The Patriarchal Bard', in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, (eds) Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Manchester University Press, Manchester, (1996), pp. 88-108.

King Lear: Saints and Sinners

The setting of *King Lear* is decidedly pre-Christian, and yet despite the many references to the pagan world, and an undefined pantheon of 'gods', the pervading view of the play is one of redemption through suffering. This is a clearly Christian perspective of life and death.

Lear declares that he is 'more sinn'd against than sinning' (III, ii, 59-60)[1], and Cordelia is seen very much as a figure of sacrifice. Both Lear and Gloucester must suffer to an extreme degree before they can come to terms with their lives, and their faults; and through their suffering, they gain understanding, and ultimately forgiveness—from Cordelia (for Lear) and Edgar (for Gloucester).

In examining this view of the play, we cannot separate the parallel Gloucester plot from the main Lear plot. Edgar may well say that Lear 'childed as I fathered' (III, vi, 108), but both men have committed sins against their own children, and against the bonds and duties which are interdependent. Cordelia talks about those bonds and duties in I,i ('I love your Majesty/According to my bond': lines 91-92), and Lear harps on about

them throughout the play, linking them with the responsibilities of children. Gloucester too alludes to them when he hears of Edgar's supposedly traitorous plots to have him killed (I, ii, 105). The 'unnatural' acts of the two loving children ironically set off the heinous acts of the truly unkind children (Goneril, Regan and Edmund), and bring the focus of the audience onto the various meanings of the words 'natural' and 'Nature'.

Edmund's (and Goneril and Regan's) self-interest and concern exist at the expense of all others. They possess a deep and black Nature which is opposed to all things of beauty and light. Lear's and Cordelia's (and Edgar's) Nature is the force that keeps the Universe in harmony, and which provides the bonds and responsibilities between Sovereign and kingdom; father and children; children and father. As the one Nature seems to grow dominant at the expense of the other, Gloucester highlights the effects (despite his superstitious accounting of them):

> Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces treason; and the bond twixt son and father . . .
> (I, ii, 103-106)

Lear's view of Nature has, of course been perverted; he cannot recognise that the 'empty hearted . . . reverb . . . hollowness' (I, i, 152-153). He is beguiled by the rhetorical flattery of the evil sisters (whose qualities both Cordelia and Kent know, but who refuse to name them in public); in the same way as Gloucester is fooled by the manipulative schemes of Edmund (whose tactics, of course, resemble closely those of that other arch-evil Shakespearean villain, Iago). Neither 'good' child is able to speak in his or her defence, but must, like Kent, abide the fall of the arrow once the dragon's wrath is loosed. (An interesting pagan image, the dragon is ultimately killed by St George. King Edgar, historically, eventually freed England of a plague of wolves!)

Both Lear and Gloucester at first seem idiotic and blinded old men. In part, Regan is correct in her description of Lear (II, iv, 143-147):

> O sir, you are old;
> Nature in you stands on the very verge
> Of his confine. You should be rules and led
> By some discretion that discerns your state
> Better than yourself.

And later : 'I pray you father, being weak, seem so' (II, iv, 199).

They echo Edmund's (supposedly Edgar's) views in that letter: 'aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffered' (I, ii, 47-49) which Edmund later expounds as 'sons at perfect age, and fathers declined, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue' (lines 69-70).

They make bad choices (banishing Cordelia, Kent and Edgar), make themselves both dependant and vulnerable to those who despise and hate them, and they reap the rewards of their own initial foolishness. They can, indeed, be said to have sinned against their own natures, against the duty they should have followed, and against their own dutiful children. In a Christian perspective, they have sinned against the commands of God, showing uncharitableness, pride, anger and a host of other venal sins. Yet the door for redemption does lie open for each of them—after prolonged and extreme suffering. Each must learn, and each must experience the inversion of his experiences, before redemption can be achieved. Lear must descend into abject madness, his tempest of the mind echoing the physical tempest which he 'Strives in this little world of man to out-storm' (III, i, 10). His loss of sanity in IV,vi reflects the gradual understanding he is reaching of the world as he knew it—the lies and deception; the power of the rich to pervert justice; the evils of flattery (ll. 96-100; 149-152; 161-165). It is only through both physical and mental suffering that Lear reaches knowledge and understanding, and it is only then that he can seek both forgiveness and redemption.

The imagery in the reconciliation scene with Cordelia is perhaps the most heavily Christian in the play. It is precursored by her biblical echo (IV, v, 24), 'O dear father/It is thy business that I go about.' When they are reunited, and Lear's madness has calmed through rest, the Christ-like Cordelia is described as a 'soul in bliss' (IV, vii, 46) and a 'spirit' (line 49), while Lear is taken 'out o' th' grave' (line 46) and feels he is 'bound upon a wheel of fire' (line 47). Lear seeks to kneel in front of Cordelia and seek forgiveness while she too kneels in front of him seeking 'benediction' (line 58). The image is repeated in the pathos-laden scene of their capture in V, iii, 10-11; and then they are transformed into figures beyond and above the world as Lear declares,

> Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
> The gods themselves through incense.
> (V, iii, 20-21)

Even Lear's death, struggling as he is with the knowledge of Cordelia's death, has strong overtones of a Christian ending. He has been forgiven by Cordelia, reconciled to her, and he has understood most of what has happened to him. He has gained knowledge of 'poor unaccommodated man' (III, iv, 105) and seen what is 'the thing itself'. He knows that he has 'taken too little care of this' (III, iv, 32-33) and is able to understand better his failure to uphold his end of the lines of duty and responsibility. He has had to learn patience (not just a pagan Stoicism) and endurance—both strong Christian virtues. As he dies, freed at last from the 'rack of this tough world' (V, iii, 313), he believes he is moving to paradise with Cordelia who breathes a welcome to him. There is no agony in his last moments, only a sense of freedom and bliss.

The sense of release is also experienced by Gloucester, who has been kept in the dark by Edgar about his identity, so that Gloucester can learn better his lesson, and be recovered from despair (the worst of Christian failings) to learn patience and understanding. Edgar is able to advise that 'Men must endure/Their going hence, even as their coming hither/The ripeness is all' (V, ii, 10-11), but it takes several attempts before the despairing Gloucester can learn this. He first must be robbed of his rather pagan perspective: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods/They kill us for their sport' (IV, i, 36-37). After his failed suicide, he recognises that he must

> . . . bear
> Affliction till it do cry out itself
> 'Enough, enough,' and die . . .
> (IV, vi, 76-77)

The mad scene with Lear (IV,vi) reinforces this, though the pathos with which Gloucester reacts to the King's madness comes close to driving him into further despair. The loss of Lear and Cordelia's army does do this :'A man may rot even here' (V, ii, 8), but Edgar again is able to salvage him. Edgar admits he has 'saved him from despair' (V, iii, 190), and then asks for his 'blessing' (line 194) after telling him of their 'pilgrimage' (line 195), an image again with strong Christian overtones. Like Lear, Gloucester is finally brought to knowledge—though his metaphor is different. He 'stumbled when I saw' (IV, i, 19), but in his blindness is able to see more clearly, and gain understanding. Like Lear the knowledge is overwhelming, and he dies 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief' (V, iii, 197-198).

While Lear and Gloucester are 'saved', it has taken the sacrifice of the three true 'saints' to effect the process. Cordelia is surrounded by symbols of her goodness and Christian charity; but Edgar and Kent have in some ways harder roads to travel. They have the same purpose, but each must endure a disguise, and suffer themselves as they seek to serve the one who has cast them off. Kent did Lear 'service/Improper for a slave' (V, iii, 219-220) while Edgar had to assume 'a semblance/That the very dogs disdained' (ll. 186-187). Cordelia dies; Kent is about to undergo another 'journey' in response to his master's call (line 320); and Edgar is left to obey the 'weight of this sad time' (line 322). Redemption truly comes at a cost.

As foils to the brilliance of the saints, the sinners form a relatively ugly crew. Goneril and Regan are unredeemed and unredeemable. They become associated more and more with animal imagery as monsters, serpents, wolves and dogs.[2] Their Nature is Edmund's, and revolves around their self-indulgence and greed. Not content with receiving half the kingdom each, they need to get rid of Lear, and then each other. Not content with their own husbands, they lust after Edmund fulfilling Lear's 'mad' observation: 'But to the girdle to the gods inherit/Below is all the fiends' (IV, vi, 125-126). Ultimately Goneril poisons Regan and kills herself. Excess, superfluity and the imbalance of nature cause this. Their viciousness and un-Christian tendencies leave them as the true monsters of the play—those who sin far more than are sinned against.

Edmund requires a much fuller treatment than can be offered in this essay. He is more complicated because of the disadvantage of his birth and the way that he is treated by Gloucester. But the sympathy we have for him is quickly eroded in I,ii when he uses those disadvantages to rationalise his own greed and maliciousness. We can trace his vicious actions throughout the play but note that in the end he may be partially redeemed when he knows he is dying and tries to save Lear and Cordelia.

The suffering in the play is painful, and the lessons learnt are hard ones. In the end, however, Shakespeare paints a picture for us which is not as gloomy and comfortless as it at first appears. He shows the power of redemption and suffering and indicates that there are rewards for those who can learn lessons and find both self-knowledge and true humility. The rewards may not be of this world, but then, that is why we must look at the pagan situation through Christian eyes.

Notes

1. All references to the play are from 'The Arden Shakespeare' edition of 'King Lear', Ed. Kenneth Muir, (Methuen, London), 1982.

2. For excellent studies of the imagery in all of Shakespeare's plays, consult Clemen, W. H., *The Development of Shakespeare's Image*ry (1951) and Spurgeon, C. F. E., *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (CUP, 1935).

The Tragic Ending of King Lear

The story of King Lear is a mythic one which existed in the folklore of England long before Shakespeare was born. It seems that only Shakespeare, however, imbued the story with its tragic ending. Even Shakespeare's followers resorted to the optimistic resolve of the Lear tale. In a 1680 adaptation of *King Lear*, Nahum Tate not only allows Lear and his most-loving daughter Cordelia to live, but restores Lear to his throne. He also abolishes the character of the Fool from his adaptation altogether. The hopeful ending of Tate's adaptation ignores what Shakespeare interpreted as the tragedy of the Lear story. In order to reveal the poetic truths of life, including its negative aspects—betrayal, filial hatred, deception, and death—*King Lear* must be a tragedy. Moreover, by definition of a tragedy, the death of King Lear and his devoted Cordelia must be understood as a sacrifice to truth that is inevitable from the beginning of the play.

Lear's death is foreshadowed in the play even before he performs the fatal error of assigning all his kingdom's territories to his greedy daughters Goneril and Regan. When Lear prepares to ask of each of his daughters to express her love for him, he states his purpose in doing so:

> . . . and 'tis our fast intent
> To shake all cares and business from our age.
> Conferring them on younger strengths while we
> Unburdened crawl toward death.

(*King Lear* Act 1.Scene 1.Lines 38-41)

The irony of these lines is revealed as their literal truth becomes apparent. Lear has made the decision to donate as a form of dowry the three parts of his kingdom to each of his daughters: Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan. The size of their share depends on how much they love their father and, moreover, how well they can express it. The fact that the words of Goneril and Regan are infused with their own greed as well as that of their suitors, the receivers of the dowry, is apparent to the audience of the play from the beginning; however, Lear believes them and thus appears gullible. Moreover, Lear does not perceive the true love of Cordelia, who replies "Nothing" when it is her turn to articulate her love to her father. The audience, on the other hand, is immediately clued in to the truth behind Cordelia's reticence by the use of asides. In her first aside to the audience, as she struggles over how to fulfill her father's demand to speak her love, Cordelia says: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent." (1.1.62) The audience begins to pity her plight with Cordelia's second aside, after Regan and Goneril have spoken: "Then poor Cordelia; And yet not so, since I am sure my love's more ponderous than my tongue." (1.1.76-78) Herein lies the principal tragedy of the play that Cordelia, who is moral and good in the purest sense, is destined to be sacrificed from the very start. The second tragedy of the play is Lear's fatal error in falling for his daughters' lying words while being blind to the radiance of Cordelia's unspoiled devotion. The brilliance of the play is that Lear's tragedy moves the audience to extremes of fear and pity, rather than judgment. Thus, the tension between Lear's doom and his struggling blindness to that fact until the very end is introduced in the first scene of the play and developed throughout.

There are several rhetorical devices used throughout the play to comment upon the inevitable death of Lear. One is the continual appeals and references to Nature and the gods, external and all-powerful forces which seem to seal the fate of men. For example, when Lear disclaims Cordelia, he appeals to "the sacred radiance of the sun" (1.1.109), "the mysteries of Hecate and the night" (1.1.110), and "all the operations of the orbs from whom we do exist and cease to be." (1.1.111) And when Gloucester reflects on the twisted goings-on in the kingdom, including the banishment of the "noble and true-hearted Kent" (1.2.113), he begins: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us" (1.2.101). Edmund, Gloucester's bastard son, mocks Gloucester's belief that the evils in the world are pre-ordained by the gods as man's excuse for bad behavior. Yet Edmund's sarcasm is articulated in twisted words which reflect on his sacrilegious character. Later in the play, when Lear is caught in the storm, the discrepancy between man's vulnerability and the power of the gods is made clear. It is during this scene when Lear enacts his most heart-wrenching struggle with his fate. He appeals to the gods as follows:

> Let the great gods
> That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads
> Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch.
> That hast within thee undivulged crimes
> Unwhipped of justice.
> (3.2.49-53)

Just as the rain cannot be stopped, Lear's fate seems inevitable.

Another rhetorical device is the use of irony to foreshadow Lear's death. For example, when Kent appears in disguise to join Lear on his journey to Cornwall, Lear confronts him and questions his identity to which Kent replies, "A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the king" (1.3.17). Lear responds with an added ironic twist, "If thou be'st as poor for a subject as he's for a king, thou art poor enough. What would's thou?" (1.3.18). In third-person rhetoric, Lear mocks his own predicament. Furthermore, the phrase "poor enough" carries the weight of death.

A third rhetorical device Shakespeare uses to indicate the tragedy of Lear to which he himself is blind is in the figure of the Fool. It is interesting to note that many of the "optimistic" versions of the Lear tale omit the Fool

completely. But this excises the content of the Fool's crudely poetic and mocking words which usually hide a wise commentary on the action of the play. For example, when Goneril rejects Lear from her division of the kingdom, the Fool interjects:

> For you know, nuncle.
> The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long
> That it's had it head bit off by it young.
> So out went the candle, and we were left darkling.
> (1.4.205-208)

Lear's threatening danger, presented by the initial banishment to wander through his own kingdom, is compared to the fate of the hedge-sparrow. The Fool's common, almost folkloric, analogy ironically carries huge weight and foreboding for the rest of the play. It is no wonder that the Fool is so despised by the play's deceitful characters. Filial betrayal is the Fool's favorite subject. His attempts to warn the King of the evils of Goneril and Regan often assume the form of brutal comedy. When Lear "casts off forever" (1.4.300) away from Goneril, the Fool runs after him, calling out: "A fox, when one has caught her, And such a daughter, Should sure to the slaughter, If my cap would buy a halter. So the fool follows after" (1.4.308-312). Caught up in his own self-mockery (he is foolish for following, yet he follows anyway, because he wears the cap of the fool—hence, it is inevitable), the Fool embeds within his words the foreboding of betrayal.

In the final act of *King Lear*, the King is reunited with his daughter Cordelia, yet in tragic ironic fashion they are being lead in captivity towards death. Lear takes the opportunity to reflect on Cordelia's endearment and his own unkindness. He is at once deluded with dreams of their living on together: "So we'll live, and pray, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies . . ." (5.2.11-13) and resigned to their fate: "Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense" (5.3.20-21). With these words, their tragedy is sealed, just as it was foretold in the first scene of the play and foreshadowed throughout. The inevitability of Cordelia's "sacrifice" was ruled by the gods and hence all the more moving. In this final scene Cordelia, as the sacrifice, represents pure good. And Lear, who must fall along with her, is finally in a state of appreciating her honest goodness and feeling for her fate.

Good and Evil Children in King Lear and Henry IV

William Shakespeare takes his attack on the notion of the divine right of kings one step further in *King Lear*, as he shows that even kings are infallible when it comes to judging their children. Lear's banishment of Cordelia is the prime illustration of the notion that parents tend to project their own expectations on to their children, sometimes with dire results. While Shakespeare may have imbued his royal tragedies with themes of history and duty and divine right (or lack of it), his characters, like Lear, and Henry IV, were above all individuals, with individual choices to make about the course of their lives. That these choices, through accident of birth, might significantly affect the actions of an entire nation is at the core of the tragedies which have satirical and universal undertones, especially for the reader of Shakespeare.

If Lear, as a monarch and father, is the role model for other fathers and "domestic monarchs," then perhaps Shakespeare is having a very big laugh on his readers. Hoping at last in his old age to enjoy the benevolent care and love which he feels is owed to him by the virtue of his parentage, he is easily flattered by the pumped up expressions of devotion that Regan and Goneril hand him, merely to take advantage of a "ripe situation." Cordelia, on the other hand is berated and punished for expressing the truth about the limits of her abilities to love responsibly. Muir notes that ". . . To a child, the father may be both loved protecter and unjustly obstructing tyrant; and to a parent the child may be both loving supporter of age and ruthless usurper and rival" (pg. xivi). These are the attitudes that are spread among the benevolent and wicked children of Lear, Gloucester, Henry IV and Henry Percy (by wicked here, we can also mean useless and ill cast, for that is the

description that typifies Henry IV's son Hal). While the parent goes on with his own expectations and ambitions, which include his perceptions of how his children will behave, the children are busy with expectations of their own. We see this in Gloucester's illegitimate son, Edmund, whose aspirations to legitimacy will stop at nothing, especially fratricide. While it is clear that Gloucester loves both his sons well, and is not averse to helping Edmund gain favor with persons like Kent, it is clear that the disparity in Edgar and Edmund's lineage has embittered the latter, and this bitterness has turned his manipulation of his father's favor into a powerful tool indeed.

And the same can be said for Goneril and Regan, Lear's less than dutiful daughters. Muir tells us that although Lear is ostensibly rejecting love in order to get on with the business of dying, it is obvious that he still "retains the desire for love, and his actions . . . reveal only too plainly that he wishes to retain the authority he is ostensibly renouncing." Goneril knows this and plays on Lear's ego with her protestations of love, as does Regan. We see also that Edmund does the same thing with Gloucester, though in a more subtle manner (perhaps because he is a more skilled flatterer). Thrown upon the framework of a regent, such common themes as parent-child relationships can be magnified. Says Muir, ". . . The selfishness and ingratitude of children, no longer trammelled by the restraints of morality or modified by filial affection, are projected into the monstrous figures of Goneril and Regan. . ."; the result of this family's bickering on a grand scale is ". . . enlarged into an internecine struggle, destroying the peace of Britain" (Muir, pg. xivii).

Children have not only the capacity for selfishness and hate, and in Cordelia, Edgar and *Henry IV*'s Hotspur, we have qualities which expanded from the simple domestic setting to the realm of kings and wars, to become noble, heroic and also tragic. Goddard tells us that Henry IV's son Hal, at least to his father is "unthrifty" and pretty much a scoundrel. Whatever else he may have possibilities for, he often gives the readers clues to his dual identity. Hotspur, son of Henry Percy, on the other hand, is almost the antithesis of his father and uncle, whom Goddard has characterized as cowardly, jealous, and suspicious. Says Goddard, "One cannot help loving Hotspur for his blunt honesty." Similarly, Lear's Cordelia is equally admired for her adherence to honesty. In both, though we note that insecurity and/or humility restrains the most lucid expression of the character. Hotspur, through his fanaticism to honour, shows his insecurities. Goddard says: "The fact that Hotspur talks so incessantly and extravagantly about 'honour' shows that he distrusts his own faith in it" (Goddard, pg. 62). And Fraser leaves us to wonder of Cordelia, "Why does she love, and yet remain silent?" (pg. xxx). Perhaps this fatal reserve of Cordelia's, which helps set the stage for the tragedies later to come, can be seen as a magnification of what happens when even a good person lets others take responsibility for their personal destiny. Of all the children, Cordelia seems to harbor the least in aspirations, she is cast adrift by her own ingenuousness, and is picked up by the gracious and admiring France. But even these seemingly fortuitous events can't save Cordelia and her family from the ultimate fate which their vicissitudes bring them.

However Shakespeare may paint the children of *King Lear*, and *Henry IV*, one thing is certain. They are not stereotypes of heroes and villains that are found in fairytales and epic poetry. King Lear and Henry IV, are, after all, only men, with faults which through association and heredity are evident in their children. And the children, though monstrous or mild, chivalric or dissolute, have qualities that make us admire them more as in Lear's daughters, or less, as in Hotspur, for their failings or strengths. It is not by accident that we wished for Cordelia to be more demonstrative, and are disappointed when she is not, as is her father. Shakespeare allows his reader to see the possibilities for good and evil and baseness or moderation which exist in all of us, by magnifying them through the privilege of royalty. In Henry IV, the reader can feel the depth of a father's disappointment in his son and also, Goddard tells us, his own regret at a youth lost when he says of Hal: "Most subject is the fattest soil to weeds;/ And he, the noble image of my youth,/ Is overspread with them: therefore my grief/ Stretches itself beyond the hour of death" (Goddard, pg. 64). Above all in Shakespeare's *Lear* is the notion that, even though we may have truly learned our lesson about something, we still might have to pay the price for our former mistakes. We see this as Lear, the transformed King, wishes most of all to be reunited with his Cordelia whom he has cast away from favor, only to find out that the gods are not always on our side, and she is dead anyway. Reality intrudes its often ugly head into the dealings of kings and

commoners alike.

For the children of Lear, Gloucester, Henry IV, and Henry Percy we find that familial duty does not always come first, or well. What we find, and what Shakespeare may be trying to tell us by the strife and unhappiness that comes from wilfull figures trying to impress that will on others is that an individual's expectations apply only to him.

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Textual and Contextual Analysis of the Opening Scene in Shakespeare's King Lear

Since the early seventeenth century, the opening scene of *King Lear* has been the subject of extensive literary interpretation and the object of intense critical debate. This is, of course, the scene in *Lear* in which the aged monarch's youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to follow her older siblings' suit by professing an unbounded love to Lear, and as such, it is both the wellspring of the plot and the herald of its thematic contents. As William Martin (1987) has recently stated, critical opinion remains sharply divided on the salient matter of whether Shakespeare's *Lear* is "a 'Christian' play with optimistic overtones or a pessimistic 'pagan' play affording little or no hope for man in a relentlessly indifferent world" (p.5). In the present writer's view, this dichotomy can be recast as a divide between those "traditional" readers who interpret *Lear* and its opening scene in context, and those "new criticism" readers who scrutinize the text itself and find meaning outside of its context. In essence, the former interpret a work like *Lear* by imputing certain explicit intentions to the author (here Shakespeare) on the basis of biographical and source data, the author's historical circumstances, and the work's conformity to norms and dramatic conventions of its day. On the other hand, those following a new critical approach effectively discard all this "background" data from their analyses, jettison the quest to discern the author's singularly purpose, and focus upon the formal, structural and linguistic elements of the text, through "close" reading aimed at the "discovery" of the text.

In the essay at hand, the present writer will first analyze Act I, scene i of Shakespeare's *King Lear* within context. This will require some preliminary identification of seemingly pertinent contextual dimensions to Shakespeare's composition, and in the subsequent analysis, the present writer will use Irving Ribner's (1960) reading as a "guide" to this approach. The present writer will then investigate the same scene, utilizing the perspective and the techniques of the "new" or "modern" critical approach. While this portion of the analysis will make reference to readings of *Lear* by Elias Schwartz (1977) and by Martin (1987), the present writer will "parse" the text chiefly through original analysis.

The "traditional" approach to the analysis of literary works attempts to discern "facts" about the composition of a given piece that can then be used to construct an understanding of the author's underling intentions and purposes. In this instance, we can go back to Shakespeare's life in search of such clues; but while the Bard left behind substantial vestiges of his life, e.g., baptismal certificates, marriage and death records, playbills, etc.,

these fragments and shards provide us with no "insights" into what Shakespeare may have been about in writing *King Lear*, aside from his desire to compose a work that would be a commercial success in the Elizabethan theater.

Another preliminary step in this approach to the analysis of *Lear* rests upon a search for Shakespeare's source materials. According to Frank Kermode (1974) Shakespeare was probably familiar with a folk tale that dated back to at least the 12th century (a version of which can be found in the *Histories* of Geoffrey of Monmouth) in which "a daughter tells her father she loves him as much as salt and dissipates his anger by demonstrating that this means he is essential to her" (p.1250). This same story was re-told in 1574 by John Higgins in *A Mirror for Magistrates*; a version of it appears in Holinshed's *Chronicles*; still another surfaces in Book II of Spenser's *The Fairie Oueene* (Id.). Yet when we set Shakespeare's *Lear* beside these probable sources, it is plain that the Elizabethan playwright did not simply "copy" and "transpose" his "story" from them; *King Lear* is radically different in structure and in thematic thrust.

Having followed these two paths toward the discovery of *King Lear*'s context and found them wanting, we note that *Lear* appears to concern the human condition in some sort of universal or cosmic frame. Admittedly, this is a broad topical designation and there are innumerable works that would fit this same bill. Nevertheless, we can plausibly learn more about what Shakespeare "meant" in *Lear* by inquiring into his world-view. As Harry Levin (1974) has written: "Shakespeare, of course, was a playwright not a philosopher. Yet drama is dialectic in concrete form: the attitudes and the actions of his characters would have little value or meaning if they were not based on certain philosophical premises" (p.7). Of these, according to Levin, the overarching premise that can be construed from Shakespeare's works and the intellectual currents of his time is that of an orderly cosmos grounded in a Ptolemaic universe, that is recapitulated in the microcosm within individual human nature (Id.).

There is, however, still further work to be done before we can approach the opening scene of *Lear* from this contextual perspective. We know from a "broader" reading of Shakespeare (and a "peek" at *Lear* itself), that a father's relationship with a son or daughter serves as a focal point in several of his plays, "fatherhood" or "patriarchy" performing both dramatic functions and also serving as a primary thematic subject in many of Shakespeare's works. At the same time, Shakespeare's concept of "patriarchy," according to such critics as Ericson (1985), Max (1989) and Sundelson (1983), embodied a parallel between the father as head of household and the monarch as the "father" of the realm, these tandem relationships being part of a larger, moral order in a divinely-ordained universe. At the same time, Shakespeare's audiences shared this view of the cosmos. Here we note with Kermode (1974) "that Jacobean audiences would instantly observe that (Lear's) plan to divide the kingdom was liable to breed disaster; many plays had made that point, especially during the previous reign, when succession was a perennial political worry" (p.1251). With this sense of "how" Shakespeare probably viewed Lear's situation, we need only specify how he sought to express this view. Based on evidence available from Shakespeare's cannon at large, we can reasonably assume that he would follow the conventions of the day in producing a tragic play based on a Senecan model and therefore conforming closely to Aristotelian principles.

It is with all of this behind us that we can begin to interpret *Lear* and its first scene from a "traditional" or "contextual" viewpoint. As an example of this approach, we can follow Irving Ribner's analysis of *Lear* as it appears in his *Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy* (1960). From Ribner's standpoint, "all of the elements in *King Lear* are shaped by the theme of regeneration which dominates the whole," and as we shall soon see, Ribner's reading of *Lear* is based on his assumption that Shakespeare's intention was to tell a tale about moral regeneration.

In support of this conclusion about Shakespeare's "meaning" in *Lear*, Ribner identifies Cordelia's refusal to extend a profession of unadulterated love to her father as a product of her adherence to a natural order of things, a position that Shakespeare and his audiences would have endorsed. Thus, her assertion that, "I love

your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less" (1.93), reflects a natural reciprocation of familial duties that were seen by Shakespeare as "right" and fit." The "bond" to which Cordelia refers in justifying her qualification of duty is identified by Ribner as "the bond of nature . . . which ties the child to its parent in God's harmonious world" (Ribner 1960, p.120). Indeed, when Cordelia later states that, since she intends to marry, she will therefore share her love between husband and father, this also resonates with the proper and natural state of human affairs as viewed by Shakespeare and his contemporaries (Ribner 1960, p.117).

Continuing forward with this approach, it is Lear who introduces the dramatic complication that will ultimately yield the play's tragedy. According to Virgil Whitaker, in the world-view of *Lear*'s Elizabethan audiences, "Lear's abdication of his kingship and his treatment of Cordelia are false to three obligations which he owes in nature: a king should rule; a father should guide and cherish children, even when they do astray . . . and an old man should be wise" (1965, p.212). Indeed, in Ribner's critical account of Lear's downfall, it stems from an Aristotelian tragic flaw, his blindness to the moral order or nature connoted in Cordelia's response to his inquiry about the extent of her filial devotion. In fact, Lear explicitly violates the natural order, for in his rage, he speaks an oath by the radiance of the sun, Hecate and the night "by all the operation of the orbs" (l.110), thereby invoking cosmic forces and disturbance well past his natural and proper ken. Indeed, Lear himself points our attention to this very cycle when he announces his intention to "unburthened crawl toward death." In Ribner's interpretation, Lear not only fails to grasp Cordelia's "moral" viewpoint, he creates the preconditions for his own demise through his premature abdication of his throne, by turning his back on his natural progeny, and above all, by muttering a curse upon his faithful daughter in which he unnaturally attempts to bend nature to his will, calling upon the sun and pagan goddesses to eradicate his natural bond with Cordelia.

We shall return to the consequences of this act as seen from a "contextual" standpoint at the end of our analysis. Before doing so, however, an alternative approach to the analysis of Lear can be pursued through the interpretive methods of "textual" or "close textual" reading. Unlike the "contextual" approach, this method does not require that we delve into Shakespeare's background, his motive, his world-view of any other "implicit" templates. Instead, it seeks to explicate the text on its own terms, i.e., apart from any authorial intention.

As an example of what this approach might yield, we first turn to Elias Schwartz (1977) and to his summary comment that "what emerges," from a close reading of *King Lear*, "is a vision of blind and confused morals snatching at pious and empty catch-phrases in order to bring some meaning into a world which has utterly lost it" (p.61). As to the play's opening scene, Schwartz interprets Cordelia's refusal not as an endorsement of a natural order, but rather, as an ironic refutation of her father's view that nature and reason are compatible. He elaborates on this point:

> She sees that his (Lear's) attempt to deal with love in terms of the traditional, rational order is absurd. And so she replies with strict rationality. . . . Those critics are right who regard her speeches at this point as embodying a traditional view of the relations between father and child. But what they miss is the irony: Cordelia is pointing out the inadequacy of this view in dealing with love. In a way, she is reducing that view to absurdity (Schwartz 1977, p.61).

To get at this view, which cannot be derived from looking at context as a field of clues to Shakespeare's explicit purpose, we must "get down" to the language of the text, and in what follows, the present author will explicate Act I, scene i of *Lear* by adopting a "new criticism" perspective on Shakespeare's language rather than attempting to determine what his "message" might be (or have been).

In its opening scene alone, there is much to support Schwartz's view of *Lear* as an absurd, ironic, dark comedy in which the meanings embedded within and among the speeches of its characters conflict and collide at random. At the opening of the scene, Kent and Gloucester are discussing the matter at hand, i.e., Lear's

intention to leave the realm to his daughters and their son-in-laws, but this dialogue is immediately interrupted by the intrusion of Edmund, with Kent saying: "Is not this your son, my lord!" (l.8). Learning that Edmund is, in fact, a bastard, the "honest" Kent nonetheless resorts to the vapid salutation "I cannot wish the fault undone the issue of it being so proper" (l.17). This is, of course, ironic since Edmund is not only a bastard but an inveterate villain, but even more importantly, language is seen to devolve from matters of substance to sheer and empty formalities. The sennet then sounds, Lear and his retinue appear, and the King announces to his court that he is about to get to "our darker purpose." Here we observe that by "darker," Lear denoted to Elizabethans that he means "secret." If that is so, language is again in conflict with reality, for clearly Gloucester and Kent already know something about the King's "darker purpose."

Lear then asks each of his three daughters to express their love for him. Goneril is given the first opportunity to speak, and she tells her father that he is dearer to her than "eyesight, space and liberty" (l.56). While this is certainly effusive, one wonders: what logical association do "eyesight, space and liberty" bear in common? From a "new criticism" standpoint, one valid reply to this inquiry is that these things have nothing in common, forming a sort of logical *non sequitur*. Moreover, when Goneril tells Lear that she has a love toward him "that makes breath poor, and speech unable" (l.60), the reader might reasonably observe that despite all this she is entirely ready and able to express her feelings in words. As for Regan, in an effort to outdo or at least equal Goneril, she tells Lear that "I profess myself any enemy of all other joys" (l.73). Again, this seems to an effusive expression of flattery, but it is also patently absurd given that her purpose in being on the scene is to receive "other joys," i.e., her inheritance, from Lear. It is then that Cordelia responds to Lear's questions with the line "Nothing, my lord" (l.87). When re reacts to her statement, "So young and so untender," Cordelia replies, "So young, my lord, and true" (ll.106-107). This coupled remark underscores that what is occurring here is not a clash of viewpoints through language, but one linguistic system, i.e., Lear's, that is completely out of sync with that of another, i.e., that of Cordelia.

Now enraged, Lear launches into his disownment of Cordelia in a speech that culminates:

> The Barbarous Scythian,
> Or he that makes his generation messes,
> To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
> Be as well neighbor'd, pitied, and reliev'd
> As thou my sometime daughter
> (ll.116-119).

While we understand that Lear is disowning Cordelia, yet another question arises: What does Lear's projected compassion for brutal fathers "say" about his perception of Cordelia's value? The answer, again, is nothing that is logically cohesive. Similarly, when Kent intercede, and Lear admonishes "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (l.122), we are puzzled by how anything can come "between" a creature and his emotions. Once more, a close reading of the text indicates that it is not that Lear's words violate some sort of a moral universe or break natural bonds, it is that his words are absurd, even irrelevant to his circumstances. Indeed, as a rival to Cordelia's line about "according to my bond," from a "new criticism" standpoint, the "key" to Act I, scene i of *King Lear* might well be France's offhand comment to Burgundy: "Love's not love/When it is mingled with regard that stands/Aloof from the entire point" (ll.238-240), for to this juncture, it can be asserted that the language of the characters is distinguished by missing "the entire point."

Returning to Ribner's "contextual" approach to *Lear*, drawing upon the world-view that is customarily ascribed to Shakespeare, he interprets the destructive elements which oppress the naked Lear upon the heath as a reflection of the king's own morally disordered worldview, telling us that "the discord unleashed by Lear's wrong moral choice (in Act I, scene i) is to be most effectively symbolized in the storm scenes which show the extension of man's corruption to the plane of physical nature" (1960, p.121). in Ribner's view of how Shakespeare employed nature in Lear, the natural powers which Lear errantly tries to bend to his will are also

purifying forces. Indeed, Lear, ultimately tries to fuse with nature by rendering his garments to become "unaccommodated man." Lear is then transformed by his experience in raw nature and accepts his own natural limitations, finding that his place is within, and not above, the natural world. Thus, in his reconciliation with Cordelia, Lear perceives that he is "a very foolish fond old man" who now realizes that he is "not of perfect mind." In Ribner's interpretation then, Lear's exposure to the elements of nature "purifies" the erstwhile monarch, regenerating him as a new Lear, now aware of his position in a natural order which he cannot control. The play, then, is a "tragedy" in which Shakespeare has made due accommodation to the Christian sensibilities of his audiences.

By contrast, Schwartz's "new criticism" approach to the play yields the conclusion that Lear's experience on the heath does not impart wisdom to the king; rather, it simply renders him addled as indicated by Lear's counter-factual efforts to deny Cordelia's death. Hence, the conclusion of *King Lea*r is not an affirmation of a normative order, but a depiction of an individual who remains deluded by the errant hope that some sort of cosmos lies at the bottom of a relentlessly chaotic world. This being so, *King Lear* cannot be classified as a "tragedy" or a "Christian play." Here we would note with William Martin that:

> The absurd anguish of both protagonists and the multiple incongruities that blatantly contradict the conventions of classical or even Elizabethan tragedy require a unique dramatic approach. Furthermore, the confusion of generic elements alien to conventional tragedy militates that one either dispense with orthodox views concerning the nature of tragedy or else re-define the genre (1987, p.7).

Seen in this light and interpreted through the techniques of "new criticism" then, *King Lear* can be read as an absurdist "black comedy" (Ibid., p.8).

Each of these alternative approaches has its limitations. The contextual or "traditional" approach is predisposed toward finding order and unity in a dramatic work and to attempt the impositions of Aristotelian poetics on a work which resists their application. On the other hand, the alternative close-reading perspective wrenches *Lear* from the context of its composition, updates the play to conform with a modern sensibility and an existentialist world-view, and thereby threatens to deprive the work of any explicit meaning altogether.

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Contrast in Character in The Tragedy of King Lear

King Lear is one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, but it is also a carefully constructed arrangement of deliberately contrasting characters and human qualities; these contrasting elements make the tragic outcomes inevitable and heighten the emotional involvement of the reader, or playgoer, in what might otherwise be seen as a story that depends upon coincidence and misunderstandings to the point where credibility could be undermined.

The most obvious contrasts in moral character are among the younger people of the play. Cordelia, in her true love for her father, which at the same time refuses to pander to his vanity and degenerate into self-serving flattery, could not be more starkly delineated in contrast to her selfish, hypocritical and amoral sisters, Goneril and Regan. Where Goneril boasts of "A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable" and Regan states that she is "alone felicitate in [her] dear Highness' love", Cordelia tells Lear that "I love your Majesty according to my bond, no more nor less". (I, i, 60, 75-76, 92-93)

The subsequent actions of all three daughters, of course, fulfill what the reader suspects from the moment that the three have spoken of their love for Lear. The elder two daughters proceed to humiliate him whenever possible, attempting to reduce him to a state of utter dependency upon such crumbs of his own largesse that they are willing to bestow back upon him. If anything, they degenerate into almost stock figures of evil as they conspire to betray and even murder each other in their efforts to win Edmund for themselves. Cordelia, of course, remains loving and loyal to her father, no matter how abominably he has treated her through his foolish vanity.

Edgar and Edmund represent the male converse of this relationship, with the good and guileless Edgar as the "Cordelia" of Gloucester's sons and the bastard Edmund as the hypocritical and evil plotter who is ready to betray any and all in his drive to supplant his "legitimate" brother and succeed in life at any cost.

> Well then.
> Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
> Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund
> As to the legitimate. Fine word, 'legitimate'!
> (I, ii, 16-19)

In such lines, Shakespeare allows his male villain a certain flair that he denies to the more banally evil Goneril and Regan. Near the conclusion of the play the mortally wounded Edmund, who has set in motion a plot to murder the captured Cordelia and Lear, repents enough to confess what he has done to provide Albany with a chance to attempt to prevent the crime; it comes too late to save Cordelia. Neither of the older sisters is allowed even such limited redeeming features.

The faithful Kent is contrasted with Goneril's unprincipled steward, Oswald, in terms of loyalty to a master (or mistress). Oswald proves himself to be loyal in his own way, although he may be willing near the end of the play to switch his fealty from Goneril to Regan, but it is a perverted sort of loyalty that seems ensured by fulfilling a natural talent for evil-doing.

Kent, almost certainly the strongest and most sympathetic character in the play, is contrasted by Shakespeare in another way and to another person, the Earl of Gloucester. Gloucester, although loyal to Lear, is more of a temporizer, more of a compromiser, than the blunt and outspoken Kent. Gloucester shares with Lear a tragic gullibility as far as his children are concerned, and he pays a terrible price for both the errors of trust and confidence that he makes and his futile attempts to bring about a rapprochement between his royal master and Lear's daughters and their husbands.

When Kent protests Lear's treatment of Cordelia, he is warned by the king to be silent. When the enraged Lear moves to draw his sword, Kent says:

> Kill thy physician, and the fee bestow
> Upon the foul disease. Revoke thy gift,
> Or, whilst I can vent clamour from my throat,
> I'll tell thee thou dost evil.
> (I, i, 162-165)

As honest as Kent is, he is too out-spoken for his own good and sometimes for the good of those he is attempting to help. This bluntness is at times almost indistinguishable from rudeness and perhaps unnecessarily alienates people before it is necessary. Cornwall, at a time before he reveals his true colors, notes that the disguised Kent is one of those who prides himself on being blunt and honest as an excuse for being rude and insensitive. Since most people have had the experience of knowing people similar to those whom Cornwall describes, it is difficult at that moment not to have some sympathy with him.

> This is some fellow,
> Who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect
> A saucy roughness, and constrains the garb
> Quite from his nature. He cannot flatter, he!
> An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth!
> An they will take it, so; if not, he's plain.
> These kind of knaves I know which in this plainness
> Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends
> Than twenty silly-duckling observants
> What stretch their duties nicely.
> (II, ii, 96-104)

These remarks, of course, provoke Kent to utter sarcastic expressions of respect which infuriate Cornwall, giving the reader a first true idea of his violent nature as he orders Kent to be placed in the stocks.

Gloucester says nothing to Lear at the time when Kent is banished after Cordelia's disinheritance, although he indicates to Edmund in the following scene that he finds it difficult to believe what has occurred. The blunt and almost painfully honest Kent is banished upon pain of death, while Gloucester temporizes, mentally wrings his hands, and pays horribly at the hands of Cornwall for his behind-the-scenes efforts to rectify things.

A distinct contrast, not readily apparent at the beginning of the play, is also provided by the differing characters of the royal sons-in-law, Albany and Gloucester. Both, for example, intervene in the first scene of

the play to prevent Lear from drawing his sword upon Kent .

In time, however, Cornwall reveals himself first to be someone of violent rages in his treatment of Kent and later to be a monster of cruelty as he gouges out Gloucester's eyes. When the old Earl says that he will see vengeance overtake Goneril and Regan for their cruelty to Lear, Cornwall replies that

> See 't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.
> Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.

So brutal is Cornwall that he occasions something very rare in Shakespeare's plays, a sympathetic treatment of the lower classes in revolt against a nobleman. When the enraged duke has blinded Gloucester in one eye, one of Cornwall's servants tells him not to torment him further. When Cornwall contemptuously dismisses his protest and completes the blinding of Gloucester, the servant rushes at him with a drawn sword and, although stabbed from behind by Regan, mortally wounds the duke. The other servants in the room then resolve to leave Cornwall's service and follow Gloucester.

Albany, on the other hand, appears to be something of a nonentity at first, very much in his wife's shadow where Cornwall and Regan have proven themselves to be true partners in villainy. He shows himself to be human in his revulsion when he hears what Cornwall has done to Gloucester, and, although he leads the English army that defeats that of France, he appears to act more from patriotism than ambition. The reader becomes gradually aware that Albany is despised by Goneril, who plans to replace him as her husband with Edmund. In the final act of the play his actions confirm that he is an honorable, if not an appreciably imaginative, man. He allows Edgar to challenge Edmund to trial by combat, vainly attempts to prevent the murder of Cordelia and is outraged by the perfidy of his wife and her sister, shedding no tears at the news of their deaths. To Kent and Edgar, he says:

> Friends of my soul, you twain
> Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.
> (V, ii, 319-320)

This balance of good and evil, positive and negative, is sustained by the juxtaposition of even minor characters in the play. After Lear in his rage declares Cordelia to be dowerless and penniless, her suitors, Burgundy and France, are brought upon the scene. Burgundy is the epitome of the noble suitor in so many folk and fairy tales, the man who is interested not in the woman but in the riches, land and power that she can bring to him. Somewhat slow on the uptake, it takes him a while to truly apprehend what has happened, and it brings about the following exchange with Cordelia:

> *Burgundy*. I am sorry then you have so lost a father that you must lose a husband.
> *Cordelia*: Peace be with Burgundy!
> Since that respect and fortunes are his love,
> I shall not be his wife.
> (I, i, 246-249)

The sincere and logical King of France, however, reacts very differently.

> Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
> Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised;
> Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon.
> (I, i, 250-252)

And what of the title character, King Lear? With whom is he compared and contrasted? Shakespeare contrasts Lear with himself, the vain and foolish king of the first act with the chastened and wiser deposed monarch of the latter part of the play. The early Lear is so relentlessly foolish and obtuse that the reader tends to feel to some extent that he gets what he deserves, that "there is no fool like an old fool." One reader, at least, tends to harbor vestiges of this feeling even at the end of the play. Although what happens to Lear is without doubt a tragedy, the even greater tragedy is what happens to so many good people because of the dotard king's reckless and selfish earlier actions. Cordelia is dead, Gloucester blinded, Kent has been humiliated and physically abused in the stocks, and Edgar has been hunted like a wild animal. Although the natures of Lear's older daughters, Cornwall, and Edmund are such that it is probable that they would have caused problems, perhaps very serious problems, at some point, one cannot be sure of it. Lear's vanity establishes a situation which unleashes that which is worst within them, eventually resulting in their own deaths as well as the evils that they have done to others.

Lear's imperious nature and his compulsive need for adulation are baldly revealed in his early exchanges with Cordelia.

> Now, our joy,
> Although our last and least, to whose young love
> The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
> Strive to be interested, what can you say to draw
> A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
> (I, i, 82-86)

When she answers that her affection is according to her bond of natural affection to him,

> *Lear*. So young, and so untender?
> *Cordelia*. So young, my lord, and true.
> *Lear*. Let it be so; thy truth then be thy dower!
> (I, i, 107-109)

With adversity comes wisdom, however, before madness overtakes it. Forced out by his daughters unless he accepts shelter on their terms, the king is buffeted by a horrendous storm before he and the Fool are led to an apparently abandoned hovel by the disguised Kent. The experience has opened Lear's eyes to some of what the less fortunate have to bear.

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your homeless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just.
> (III, iv, 28-36)

The one major character of the play who cannot be contrasted or compared is the Fool. He is important to the early part of the play because he can comment on Lear's foolish and destructive behavior without risking punishment or banishment because he is the Fool, and fools are really not responsible for what they say. And then he suddenly vanishes from the action! Did Shakespeare grow tired of him or merely forget about him? Was he no longer necessary, or did the playwright consider him to be one "odd" role too many when the

feigned madness of Edgar and true madness of Lear take center stage? At any event, it does seem poor dramaturgy on Shakespeare's part to just suddenly drop what has been an important and interesting character without any explanation at all. The successful contrasts of character and characteristics that the author has used so well to give strength and emphasis to the tragedy that he relates seem only to have abandoned him in this one instance.

Kingship and the Themes of Shakespeare's Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth

The manner in which Shakespeare treats the nature of kingship in *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* reflects the essential tone and themes of these works. In *Hamlet*, a play in no small part pervaded by abstractions, paradoxes and conscious role playing, the kingship is described in terms of abstractions, paradoxes and the self-conscious "playing" of the king. In *King Lear*, a play which contrasts natural relations with the power of real politic, we find that a duality characterizes Lear's kingship. Finally, in *Macbeth*, a work of dark and supernatural phenomena, the kingship is described, in similar fashion, as dark and mystical. The unifying strand which all of these respective treatments of kingship have in common is found in the correspondence between the state of the kingship and the state of the kingdom, and in the state of the universe of nature itself. In this paper we shall observe the manner in which Shakespeare's treatment of the kingship mirrors the primary concerns of these three plays and identify the common thread which runs throughout them.

Hamlet is a work filled with abstractions, paradoxes, ironies and the conscious playing of roles, and it is in these terms that Shakespeare characterizes the kingship in this work. As epitomized by the ghost of ur-Hamlet, the king in *Hamlet* is an abstract and insubstantial role, or, as Hamlet remarks, "a king of shreds and patches." The specter of ur-Hamlet serves as a continual reminder of the abstract nature of kingship, a role pervaded by paradox and irony.

Hamlet's references to the kingship reveal the paradoxical treatment which Shakespeare attributes to the role of sovereign. Hamlet states to Rosencrantz:

> Ay, sir, that soaks up the King's countenance, his rewards, his authorities. But such officers do the King best service in the end. He keeps them, like an ape in the corner of his jaw, first mouthed, to be last swallowed. When he needs what you have gleaned, it is but squeezing you and, sponge, you shall be dry again.

And later, in discourse with Horatio:

> Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
> Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.
> O' that that earth which kept the world in awe
> Should patch a wall t'expel the winter’s flaw!

These two passages illustrate the curious and abstract nature of the kingship in *Hamlet*, for what the kingship is, like so much in this play, is a matter of question.

That the nature of the kingship is in question in *Hamlet* is brought to light in the commentary of Polonious on the Norwegian affair, as the minister relates:

> My liege and madam, to expostulate
> What majesty should be, what duty is,
> Why day is day, night night, and time is time,

Were nothing but to waste night, day and time.

Rather unwittingly, Polonious is describing kingship as an abstraction, infinitely debatable in nature. This point is reinforced by Rosencrantz as he responds to Claudius's request for help in gleaning Hamlet's mind:

Might by the sovereign power you have of us
Put your dread pleasures more into command
Than to entreaty.

Rosencrantz, in fact, is reminding Claudius that there are several ways in which he may play the role of king. He could merely ordain the use of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or he could, as he does, request their aid. Neither course of action is required of the king, for the kingship is, by nature, a role pervaded with options, and therefore, doubts.

Then there is the matter of the play within a play which Hamlet uses to discern the guilt of Claudius. Once again we find the kingship treated as a role to be played. Indeed, throughout the work Claudius is, in fact, playing the king. This is most apparent in the ceremony before the duel between Hamlet and Laertes as Claudius is found reiterating directions for the playing of the king:

The king shall drink to Hamlet’s better health . . .
Now the King drinks to it. . . .

The repetition here indicates a certain forced and staged character to Claudius' playing of the king, a certain self-conscious quality involved in this role.

The paradoxes which surround the role of kingship in *Hamlet* results in a number of ironies. The question of why Hamlet does not act, why he simply does not kill Claudius, is often put, but, perhaps more interestingly, there is the question of why Claudius does not act. As sovereign he could, presumably, order Hamlet's execution. The reason why he does not, to our mind, is that he is uncertain of his power as king, uncertain of the dimensions of the role which he is playing. Ironically, it is the uncertainty of Claudius which determines his eventual demise.

Another irony which relates to the nature of kingship in *Hamlet* is found in the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In their first audience with the King and Queen Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are told by Gertrude:

Your visitation shall receive such thanks
As fits a king's rememberance.

The thanks which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do, in fact, ultimately receive is death. This fate is highly ironical, firstly in light of the Player King's comment that, "purpose is but the slave to memory," and, more significantly, in the fact that their deaths are brought about through the "king-playing" of Hamlet, who forges the seal of Denmark and thereby ensures the death of his former schoolmates.

One further aspect of the treatment of kingship in *Hamlet* which deserves our attention is found in the reflection of the state of the kingship in the state of the kingdom and in nature. As the oft-cited line, "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," suggests, the sullied nature of the kingship is reflected in the morose atmosphere which is found in the kingdom. In terms of the kingship's relation to the state of the kingdom we note the remarks to Rosencrantz:

The cease of majesty
Dies not alone; but like a gulf doth draw
What's near it with it: it is a massy wheel,
Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortis'd and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh, but with a general groan.

The character and fate of the king, as Rosencrantz asserts, is mirrored in the character and fate of his kingdom. Indeed, the influence of the fate of the king extends even to the stars themselves, as Horatio details:

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets;
As, stars with trains of fire and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star,
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands,
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse:
And even the like precurse of fierce events,—
As harbingers preceding still the fates,
And prologue to the omen coming on,—
Have heaven and earth together demonstrated
Unto our climature and countrymen.

Thus, as we shall also find in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, the state of the kingship in *Hamlet* is intimately and inextricably connected to the condition of the kingdom and that of nature itself.

In *King Lear* there is an essential conflict between natural order and political power. Indeed, *King Lear* is centrally concerned with unnatural relationships as exemplified in the character, and the philosophy, of the bastard Edmund. It is the theme of unnatural relations which informs Shakespeare’s treatment of the kingship in *King Lear*. At the outset of the play we find Lear caught in a duality involving his natural kingship and his political decision to divide his kingdom amongst his daughters. On the one hand, Lear chooses to, "divest us both of rule/ Interest of territory, cares of state," and on the other he asserts, "only we shall retain/ The name and all th' addition to a king." There is a duality present here which is reinforced by Kent's remark to Lear that, "you have that in your countenance/ Which I would fain call master," in a word, "authority." Although Lear may divest himself through a political action of the powers of kingship, he cannot divest himself of his natural role as king. There is, then, a conflict between the political aspect of kingship and the natural facet of kingship.

This conflict is given direct expression in Lear's later contention that it is within his power to mint coins. Lear maintains, "No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the King himself," for even though he has divested himself of political power, "Nature’s above art in that respect." This duality is presented in Lear's demand that: "The King would speak with Cornwall. The dear father/ Would with his daughter speak." Significantly, Lear refers to himself both as king and as father, illustrating the inherent duality between the political and the natural aspect of the kingship. This duality is similarly embodied in the alternative postures which Lear assumes toward the heavens in his rage. On the one hand, we sometimes find Lear commanding the forces of nature to uproar, demanding that the hurricanes spout with the imperious authority of a sovereign. On the other hand, we sometimes find Lear in an attitude of supplication, begging the universal powers to take pity

on an old man. Once again an unnatural duality is present.

The unnatural conflict between political power and the natural authority of the king is consistently portrayed in the unnatural acts which occur throughout the work. The Fool, for example, observes that Lear's troubles began "since thou mad'st thy daughters they mothers." The Fool's remark here infers that the abdication of political power by Lear is an act which contravenes his natural role as king. Lear, through political decision has acted against nature, and this fact is underscored in the Fool's pronouncement, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise." Later Gloucester will remark of Goneril and Regan and their degrading of Lear, "I like not this unnatural dealing." The entire play is filled with unnatural acts, including the activities of Edmund, who defies nature, and the blinding of Gloucester. For instance, Goneril remarks of Albany's reluctance to meet the forces of France: "I must change names at home and give the distaff/ Inte my husband's hands." What all of these unnatural relations underscore is the basic conflict between political power and natural right, the duality which is of such salient importance to Shakespeare's treatment of kingship in *King Lear*.

One additional aspect of the handling of kingship in *King Lear* which deserves our notice is the fact that Lear's former station as king makes his fall into the madman of the heaths of even greater pathos than would have been the case were he a mere subject. As a Gentleman remarks of Lear's appearance, "A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch/ Past speaking in a king." We find then that the fact that Lear is a king increases our sympathy with his fallen state.

Finally, Lear's fallen state is reflected in the turbulent conditions of nature found at the nadir of his fortunes on the heath. The atmosphere is unnaturally disturbed by Lear's unnatural degradation. As Kent remarks:

> Things that love night
> Love not such nights as these; the wrathful skies
> Gallow the very wanderers of the dark,
> And make them keep their caves; since I was man,
> Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
> Such groans of roaring wind and rain I never
> Remember to have heard: man's nature cannot carry
> Th' affliction nor the fear.

The unique turbulence found in nature is, in fact, a reflection of the unnatural state into which Lear has fallen through the conflict between political authority and natural sovereignty.

As is the case in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the circumstances of the king in *King Lear* serve as a microcosm for the conditions which prevail in nature. Lear's wrath at his mistreatment finds its most vehement expression, therefore, in the unnaturally disturbed character of nature.

As has been observed, *Macbeth* is a work in which the supernatural plays a major part. In fact, unless we are willing to admit the possibility of a supernatural activity, the narrative machinery of *Macbeth* is completely undermined. The presence of the three witches, as well as Hecate herself, is ample demonstration of the centrality of the supernatural in *Macbeth*. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the kingship in *Macbeth* is treated as a supernatural phenomena.

The pronouncement of the three witches on Macbeth's fortune are so intimately connected with the supernatural that a discussion of their edicts leads to a tautology. Consequently, we initiate our discussion of the supernatural treatment of the kingship with the remarks of Malcolm concerning the supernatural power of sovereigns in treating the "king's evil":

'Tis call'd the evil:
A most miraculous work in this good king;
Which often, since my here-remain in England,
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven,
Himself best knows: but strangely-visited people,
All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures;
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers: and 'tis spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy;
And sundry blessings hang about his throne,
That speak him full of grace.

Although Malcolm's remarks here concern the English king, not Duncan or Macbeth, it is apparent that Shakespeare is treating the kingship as more than a natural office, as a supernatural station, in fact, directly in line with the supernatural tenure of Macbeth in general.

The kingship presented as supernatural is surrounded by symbolism. In speaking of the prophecy of the three witches concerning Macbeth's kingship and that of Banquo's descendants, Macbeth transforms the accoutrements of sovereignty into the symbols of unfulfillment:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren scepter in my grips,
Thence to be wrenched with an unilineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding.

Symbolism surrounding the kingship is similarly transformed in Macbeth's second visit to the three witches in which he is met with a vision of Banquo's succession of kings. Here the transformation is from the images of royalty to an augury of Macbeth's personal fate. Once again, with the vestiges of kingship used in this symbolic manner, the supernatural nature of that office is underscored.

Much is made during Banquo's reign of the king's schedule. Indeed, when the king sleeps, all of the kingdom is expected to follow suit as Banquo inquires: "What, sir, not yet at rest? The King's a-bed." Indeed, the supernatural power of the king’s condition in determining the hours of the day is alluded to by Ross in his commentary upon Duncan's murder:

Ah, good father,
Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp;
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it?

Once again we find that the condition of the kingship is reflected in nature, as we shall further find in our discussion of this common thread. Here we note that the king is assumed to have some function in ordering the hours, once again attesting to the supernatural character of the kingship.

The character of the kingship is not merely supernatural in *Macbeth*, but also dark in character. When Macbeth gains the throne he finds that his woes have just begun. Almost immediately after Duncan's murder Macbeth regrets his action in terms which relate specifically to the office of the king:

> . . . better be with the dead,
> Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
> Than on the torture of the mind to lie
> In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
> After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
> Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
> Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
> Can touch him further.

The inclusion of the worries which beset kings in general along with Macbeth's particular pangs of conscience underscores the ironically dark nature of the kingship, the highest office brings the most varied and onerous cares.

As was the case in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, the state of the kingship is mirrored in the state of the kingdom. The vicious and tyrannical nature of Macbeth is transposed upon the countryside as Malcolm remarks:

> I think our country sinks beneath the yoke;
> It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash
> Is added to her wounds. I think, withal,
> There would be hands uplifted in my right;
> And here, from gracious England, have I offer
> Of goodly thousands: but, for all this,
> When I shall tread upon the tyrant's head,
> Or wear it on my sword, yet my poor country
> Shall have more vices than it had before;
> More suffer, and more sundry ways than ever,
> By him that shall succeed.

Here we find that the state of the kingdom reflects both the condition of Duncan in the "gashes" exhibited by it, and of Macbeth, in the vices which are to follow. Therefore, as we saw in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, there is a direct correspondence between the state and the kingship and the condition of the kingdom, as shown here, and nature, as previously shown in the commentary regarding the confusion of night and day.

In summary and conclusion, we have seen that the manner in which the kingship is treated respectively in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* correlates with the tone and the themes of these works. In *Hamlet*, as we have demonstrated, the doubts, paradoxes, ironies, and playing of roles which pervade the play are central to our understanding of the kingship. In *King Lear* the duality between the natural and the legal aspects of sovereignty create the unnatural relationships which are the work's chief concern. Finally, in *Macbeth*, the dark and supernatural occurrences of the play are mirrored in the dark and supernatural character in Shakespeare's depiction of the kingship here.

There is, despite the prevailing tendency of the treatments of kingship in each of these plays to reflect the particular concerns of these works, a unifying strand which can be found in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* in regard to the kingship. The condition of kingship reflects the condition of the kingdom, and, the condition of nature itself. It is not merely because of the power wielded by the king, nor simply are the conditions of nature an omen of the king's fortune. Rather, as shown in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, the fortune of king and kingdom are part of a larger and more universal fate which determines both simultaneously.

Madness in King Lear

The Lear that is presented at the beginning of Shakespeare's play is a man subject to "unruly waywardness" (I.i.298) and "unconstant starts." (I.i.300) He casts off the daughter who is most faithful to him because she refuses to match the exaggerated claims of love that her sisters profess for their father. Similarly, he casts off his most loyal subject, Kent, when he defends Cordelia, whom Kent knows to be true to the King. Ill-used by Regan and Goneril once he has relinquished his power to them, madness overcomes him. He is only restored from this madness when he is re-united with Cordelia. His experience of madness teaches him wisdom and he corrects all his previous faults as a result.

Several things attribute to Lear's eventual madness. The Fool, initially, plays a large part in pointing out to the King his foolish mistakes. Even before the onset of Lear's madness, the Fool is anticipating it:

> thou hast pared thy wit o'both sides, and left nothing i' the middle.
> (I.iv.194-95)

Lear's gradual realization of the disloyalty of his two elder daughters also leads him to anticipate his oncoming madness. Reproaching himself for his blindness, he says of himself, "Either his notion weakens, his discernings/ Are lethargied," (I.iv.236-37) and later, ". . . let thy folly in,/ And thy dear judgement out!" (I.iv.280-81) It is Lear's reaction to Goneril's refusal to house him together with his whole retinue that marks the first real premonition of his madness, and the Fool suggests that it is his lack of wisdom, which accompanied his old age, that will be the cause of it.

Corresponding with Lear's madness, which is real, the play presents apparent, or feigned, madness in other characters. The disguised Kent challenges Oswald, for reasons Cornwall cannot understand, for he is not aware of the former's disguise. He puts Kent's provocation down to madness, for want of an explanation.

Edgar, also disguised to escape detection, takes on the aspect of madness. Edgar has been falsely rejected by his father, just as Cordelia has been rejected by hers. But Edgar's resulting madness, unlike Lear's, is only assumed. And it is this assumed madness which instills the real one in Lear. His meeting with Edgar as Old Tom completes the King's fall into madness, which Kent perceives. He urges that Lear be led away, for "His wits begin t'unsettle." (III. iv.166)

Gloucester is present at the meeting between Lear and Edgar, and compares his situation with that of Lear. He, too, has unjustly rejected a loyal son, and, noting the King's state, which has been caused by the disloyalty of his daughters, he remarks, "I am almost mad myself. I had a son/ Now outlawed from my blood; he sought my life,/ . . . The grief hath crazed my wits." (III.iv.170-74) But, his madness is rather rage and sorrow. Lear's madness begins in such rage and sorrow at the way he has been used, and he equates his condition with that of the storms and tempests that are taking place, as a parallel in nature, to the condition of his mind.

The Fool continues to allude to madness following Lear's departure into that state, calling it madness to have trust in those whose words and deeds obviously cannot be relied on. The Fool offers no relief to Lear's condition. The King's trial of his two daughters in which he, fallen into madness; the Fool; and Edgar, who is feigning madness, sit in judgment, illustrates the wisdom that his madness is instilling. He comes to a full realization of the lack of insight that characterized his previous behavior. His display of madness makes it difficult for Edgar to maintain his role as a madman, for the latter feels pity for Lear's condition, comparing it to his own pretense, which he can cast off at any time.

Like Gloucester, Edgar compares his condition to that of Lear. But like Gloucester, also, madness is not a reality for Edgar. Though he can compare experiences with the King, Lear's grief has reached greater depths.

In his madness, Lear makes many rational judgments concerning the ills of society, showing a greater awareness than he previously possessed. His identification with Edgar, disguised as Old Tom, makes him aware that the greatness attributed to the role of king still leaves the man underneath, who is no different from all other men. He comes to see, too, the ineffectiveness of justice in the face of sin and evil, and the falsity of the trickster who profits from pretence. His newfound wisdom leads Edgar to remark:

> 0! matter and impertinency mix'd;
> Reason in madness.
> (IV.vi.176-77)

Gloucester envies Lear's madness because he believes it brings forgetfulness of the evils that caused it. He, aware of his sorrows and their cause, cannot separate his thoughts from then.

Lear is restored from his madness when he is re-united with Cordelia, and admits his former foolishness. Love and sanity return together, just as lack of love from the two daughters who he had favored, marked his lapse into insanity.

Madness has taught Lear humility and given him a new concept of justice. He recognizes that flattery is worthless and accepts the simplicity of love and affection represented by Cordelia. His progress throughout the play strips him of the inner, as well as the outer, trappings of the role of monarch, and thus, through madness, brings him to a better understanding of human nature. The fact that the realization comes too late does not lessen the relevance of Lear's entry into a more human state.

Two Critical Episodes in Shakespeare's King Lear

In Act III of *King Lear* the crucial event is the king's breakdown into madness. The episode in which the event occurs is based upon the storms that rage inside and outside the king. The substance of the play is that Lear, in a mighty fashion, must suffer emotionally, physically and finally in madness before he can see clearly the error of his ways. After banishing his faithful daughter Cordelia, and being turned out by his two evil daughters, Lear’s emotional journey downwards follows a physical path. In like fashion, the sub-plot of Gloucester in Act IV serves to reinforce Lear’s suffering.

As the episode begins, the scene is a heath in the midst of a storm. Instead of having Lear appear in the opening scene, he is described as "contending with the fretful elements . . ."; he "strives in his little world of man to outscorn . . . the wind and rain." The episode’s theme of the two storms meeting through one man is presented before it is experienced by the audience. The stage is cleared, and Lear enters alone, but for his Fool, raging at the storm and at himself. This is the moment at which he is alone with himself, for the Fool is his mirror. Before he can reach the lowest point of his journey, he must expel his energy in anger at his foul condition. Kent enters, and warns Lear of the danger of the storm, "Man's nature cannot carry the affliction nor the fear." As Kent directs Lear towards shelter in a hovel, the basest dwelling, Lear responds to his compassion, and in moving to seek shelter is still unbroken by his inner raging. The Fool following makes a prophecy, that when everything is upside down, "than shall the realm of Albion [England] come to great confusion." Although the episode of the storm is broken by a return to a sub-plot concerning Gloucester, it is that sub-plot that will reinforce the episode upon the heath.

Lear, in the care of Kant and the Fool, arrives outside the hovel. The stage direction says, "storm still." Lear asks to remain alone in the storm. "The tempest in my mind/ Doth from my senses take all feeling else/ Save what beats there." As he will not leave the storm, he will not leave tormenting himself with his suffering. The theme of ungrateful daughters repeats itself in every speech, with every step of his passage through the storm. It is an obsession.

Kent attempts to persuade Lear into the hovel. Lear responds, "No I will be the pattern of all patience." Kent: "Here is a hovel, . . . repose you there." Lear, about his obsession, ". . . that way madness lies; let me shun that." Before entering the hovel, the Fool is sent in first, only to come out again frightened at the role of madman Edgar must play. The madman's entrance occurs with the arrival of Lear's madness. Lear asks Mad Tom, "Didst thou give all to thy two daughters?" After another outburst from the madman comes the stage direction, "storm still." Lear says, "What! Have his daughters brought him to this pass?" This double madness is like the double storm, for Lear attributes the sorrow that is making him mad to the man he perceives to be mad. This time when Kent intervenes to bring him back to reality, Lear refuses him violently, "Death, traitor!"

As Edgar continues his bedlam role, it is obvious why Lear cannot yet enter the hovel, and why Mad Tom had to come out. Lear must remain in the storm, for at this moment occurs the nadir of his breakdown: "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." He tears at his clothes, that he also will be reduced to nothing. Gloucester comes to offer food and fire, but Lear prefers to remain in the storm conversing with the madman; he will move into shelter only in the company of the madman. Here the foreshadowing of the future episode that will reinforce this episode occurs, for Gloucester, aiding Lear, suddenly cries out with his own grief at the loss of his son, "The grief hath crazed my wits." Thus the episode of Lear and his companions working their way through the storm on the heath, with the horror of the tragedy that has come upon the king, becoming the form through which the event of Lear's madness can be experienced by the audience.

The episode that in dramatic meaning works as a verification of Lear's suffering on the heath, is the parallel plot of Gloucester in Act IV. The Earl of Gloucester had two sons, Edgar, his rightful heir, and a bastard son, Edmund, who tricked Gloucester into the false belief that Edgar was involved in a plot to kill his father. The old man banished his rightful son under threat of death if he should appear in the kingdom. The bastard son, in order to win his father's title, contrived to accuse him of treason with France. While pleading for Lear's plight, the Earl of Gloucester has his eyes plucked out by Lear's ambitious son-in-law, while Lear's daughter urges him on. Gloucester, thrust into the same storm that rages around Lear, hears that his bastard son was the villain, and that he had wrongly disowned his own son Edgar: "Edgar was abused, kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!"

This episode is shaped like a counter-piece to that of Lear. It begins as an actual experience for the audience with the blinding of Gloucester on the stage at the end of Act III accompanied by the realization that he was wrong. He is thrust into the storm on the heath, whereas Lear, in Act III, left under his own will in anger, denouncing his daughters and swearing revenge on them. Lear was followed by the Fool, and sooner or later, Kent, Edgar in disguise, and the distressed Gloucester, who finally was able to bring him to a suitable shelter. In Act IV, Gloucester's journey upon the heath begins, with Edgar in disguise as Mad Tom already there to observe his father's condition. There is no rage or vengeful pride in Gloucester; the old man is abased and he suffers gently, "Ah! dear son Edgar . . . Might I but Live to see thee in my touch," Gloucester is only too aware of the truth; in his physical blindness he is all too sensitive. "I stumbled when I saw." Gloucester asks to be left in the care of the madman, again a parallel with the first episode, and Gloucester refers back to the moment when Lear asked to remain with Mad Tom. Gloucester, however, must be aware of Edgar in Mad Tom, "I' the last night's storm I such a fellow saw, . . . my son came then into my mind." Gloucester attempts to make his way to Dover, for, having advised Kent to guide King Lear there where Cordelia awaits with some of the army of France, Dover stands as a resolution to his problems and an end to his suffering. For though his suffering is of a quieter nature than Lear's, Gloucester suffers no less bitterly, "Dost thou know Dover? . . . There is a cliff . . . Looks fearfully in the confined deep." Edgar leads him from the heath to the country near Dover.

The event of Gloucester's episode is the fantastic ruse which Edgar perpetrates on his father to keep him from killing himself. The purpose of this event is that one who has been cruelly struck can regain his belief in life to finally reach his own truth and the knowledge of his son. As Lear broke down in madness, Gloucester is made

to feel that he fell from the height of the cliff and lived, which is madness. Although Gloucester accepts Edgar's deception, he can recognise the change in Edgar’s voice and character. As Gloucester kneels in his supposed suicidal attempt, he says to Mad Tom, "if Edgar live, O, bless him! Now, fellow, fare thee well." Just as Gloucester accepted Edgar's description of the height of the cliff, so he accepted his description of his amazing fall. Edgar has guided his father down through the shock of self-destruction, and up again with the will to live.

The eventual working out of this episode cannot take place as an immediate experience, for it exists only to substantiate the tragedy of Lear. Gloucester's episode weaves in and out of Lear's; they meet on the supposed cliff, where Lear in flowers raves, yet Gloucester recognizes his voice. As Lear is taken away to Cordelia, Edgar pretends to be yet another man to guide his father. When threat to Gloucester appears, Edgar puts on a peasant's accent, kills the would-be assassin, and speaking as before leads his father away again. The last time Gloucester is seen, he is still in the care of Edgar. Although his episode ends there, the end of Gloucester must be recounted by Edgar, rather than to detract from the effect of the supreme grief of Lear's final scene. Edgar's constant care of his father without allowing him to know who he is, is justified; not knowing whether he would return or not from his part in the defense of Lear, Edgar revealed to Gloucester who he was. The old man “too weak the conflict to support . . . twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, burst smilingly." Gloucester had followed the same course as Lear; he misjudged his good child and suffered horribly because of the wicked child. He is truly an object of intense compassion, and is witness to the justness of Lear's self-pity, if that is all it can be called.

King Lear: Criticism

Tragic Form in Shakespeare

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. . . Lear expresses his complete conviction of the power of love renewed in reconciliation to redeem all sorrow, to compensate for all loss, to sweeten all adversity, and to confer blessedness upon the most meager and wretched of material conditions. For Lear the fullness of time is identical with the fullness of the spirit:

> Come, let's away to prison:
> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage:
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
> Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out;
> And take upon's the mystery of things,
> As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
> In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones
> That ebb and flow by th' moon.
> (V.iii.8-19)

But there is a powerful irony in the very conception of the speech. For if birds singing in a cage represent a canonization of love in a hermitage of the blessed, they are nonetheless helpless and captive creatures. Lear's Olympian indifference to the ebb and flow of the power-seekers and the time-servers is an ironic image of the indifference to remote, frail, and petty life of the heavenly powers to whom Lear had thundered his demand

for care, concern, and justice. For himself, he possesses all that his soul desires, therefore he has become godlike; Cordelia's sacrifice is the object of the obeissance of the gods themselves; and they, God's spies, are within ecstatic sight of the very mystery of things. So he consigns the world to the devil and embraces eternity. The unreconstructed hubris of the speech, the unextinguishable vitality of the spirit, is the most necessary prelude to the death blow to follow. It is his heroic distinction, this resilience, this capacity for renewal, which has survived unheard-of trials, and risen triumphant like the phoenix from the ash heap of affliction.

But if it is in Lear's imaginative compass to be king of infinite space in an eternity of blessedness, it is Lear's irreversible tragic destiny to suffer the loss of the life upon which that blessedness solely depends, to suffer the finitude of the human condition in the bitterest and highest degree. It is unaccommodated man who enters with his beloved child dead in his arms. In the play's final mirror-image Lear hangs upon Cordelia's lips in death as he did once in life, but all that was concealed from him then has emerged into the clearest light. Cordelia's death hurls Lear back into his Jobian posture of irreconcilable, inconsolable protest against the arbitrary and inexplicable slaughter of innocence.

All of Shakespeare

(From *All of Shakespeare* by Maurice Charney. ©1993 Columbia University Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.)

Shut out on the heath during a wild storm, the mad Lear is preoccupied with justice:

> Tremble, thou wretch,
> That hast within thee undivulged crimes
> Unwhipped of justice.
> (3.2.51-53)

He is exploring one of the fundamental themes of Shakespearean tragedy. In the moral audit he is "a man/ More sinned against than sinning" (59-60). Fundamental to his vision of a more just society is his invocation of "poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,/ That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (3.4.28-29). This is what he has taken "Too little care of" (33) when he was King, and we seem to see a transformation of Lear on the heath. He is now exposed to "feel what wretches feel" (34), and the pomp of majesty (so brilliantly displayed, for example, in *Henry V*) must now "Take physic" (33), or a cathartic purge, in order to cure itself.

It is only a short step from this point to Lear's overwhelming attraction to Poor Tom, who is "the thing itself; unaccommodated man" (3.4.109-10), and Lear tears off his clothes and tries to imitate the Bedlam beggar: "Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here" (111). But Poor Tom is actually Edgar in disguise, who is playing the role of Bedlam beggar with consummate skill. In a sense, Lear is still deceived by false appearances as he always was. It is interesting how completely Edgar as Poor Tom displaces the Fool, who disappears from the play with the line: "And I'll go to bed at noon" (3.6.84).

. . . King Lear's preoccupation with justice is the leading theme of his madness, and by justice is meant the inner truth that will be revealed by stripping off false appearances. Thus, "Robes and furred gowns hide all" (4.6.167), whereas Truth in its emblematic representation is naked. The "rascal beadle" is lashing the whore that he "hotly lusts to use . . . in that kind/ For which thou whip'st her" (164-65). The image of the world in this scene, with the blind Gloucester as an almost mute witness to Lear's imaginings, is very bleak. This is a low point for Lear in the play, and his homicidal frenzy mixes with more general images. There is wild energy in his "delicate stratagem, to shoe/ A troop of horse with felt" and steal "upon these son-in-laws,/ Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (188-89). The frenzy of these six repetitions of *kill* look forward to the five repetitions

of *never* at the end of the play (5.3.310).

The redemption of Lear, his recovery from madness, and his reconciliation with Cordelia take place in the next scene (4.7), which may be the most tender and moving in the play. The old King believes that he is a soul in hell, and he needs to be convinced that he is alive and that his daughter Cordelia is speaking to him:

> You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave:
> Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
> Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
> Do scald like molten lead. (45-48)

This scene comes closest in Shakespeare to fulfilling the criteria of Aristotelian tragedy because Lear's return from madness brings with it an intense recognition of his fallible humanity: "I am a very foolish fond old man,/ Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less" (60-61).

His acknowledgment of Cordelia is done with extraordinary simplicity; Shakespeare seems to avoid any sense of writing up this powerful scene in which the dramatic pressures are so acute. Lear says modestly:

> Do not laugh at me,
> For, as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child Cordelia.
> (4.7.68-70)

Cordelia replies with a triumphant gush of emotion that echoes her father's "as I am a man": "And so I am, I am" (70). This could all seem simplistic if the dramatic action were not so keyed up and highly wrought. Lear and Cordelia exit with a line that seems deeply religious: "You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (84-85). This is so different from anything in the first scene of the play that it marks the radical transformation of Lear.

Overview

Northrop Frye
[*In this informal, almost conversational, essay on* King Lear*—developed from his lectures to undergraduate students over many years—Frye ranges widely across many aspects of the play as he outlines its tragic vision. He describes the Elizabethan concept of order or hierarchy in nature and the different levels of existence in* King Lear: *the supernatural, the human, physical nature, and the demonic world. Frye also discusses the association of the word "nothing" with loss of identity and remarks on the various meanings of the word "fool" in the play. As he takes up each of these thematic issues, he also offers commentary on Lear, Cordelia, Goneril and Regan, Edmund, and Edgar.*]

The story of Lear is one of a series of legends about the ancient history of Britain, legends that in Shakespeare's day were thought to be genuine history. How they got to be that makes a curious story, but we just have time for its main point. A Welsh priest living in the twelfth century, called Geoffrey of Monmouth, concocted a fictional history of early Britain modelled on Virgil, and according to this Britain was settled by Trojan refugees led by one Brutus, after whom Britain was named. There follows a long chronicle of kings and their adventures, mostly, so far as we can see, gathered out of Welsh legend and historical reminiscence. This is where the story of Lear and his three daughters came from: Lear was supposed to have lived somewhere around the seventh or eighth century before Christ. So, except for *Troilus and Cressida*, which is a very medievalized version of the Trojan War, *King Lear* is the earliest in historical setting of all Shakespeare's plays. It's true that we notice a tendency to mix up various historical periods increasing as Shakespeare goes

on. In *Hamlet*, for instance, we seem to be most of the time in Denmark of the Dark Ages, but Hamlet is a student at Wittenberg, a university founded around 1500, and Laertes appears to be going off to a kind of Renaissance Paris. In *King Lear* we find Anglo-Saxon names (Edmund, Edgar, Kent) and Roman ones (Gloucester), and we also have contemporary allusions, including religious ones, of a type that the audience was accustomed to. But still there does seem to be a roughly consistent effort to keep the setting pre-Christian.

There are a lot of advantages here for what is perhaps Shakespeare's biggest dramatic design. First, with a setting so far back in time, the sense of the historical blurs into the sense of the mythical and legendary. The main characters expand into a gigantic, even titanic, dimension that simply wouldn't be possible in a historical context like that of *Henry IV*. Then again, there are certain tensions between a tragic structure and a framework of assumptions derived from Christianity. Christianity is based on a myth (story) which is comic in shape, its theme being the salvation and redemption of man. You can see what I mean by comic: when Dante wrote his poem about hell, purgatory and paradise he called it a *commedia* because it followed the central Christian story, which ends happily for all the people who matter. Tragedy needs a hero of outsize dimensions: you can get this easily in Greek tragedy, where some men can really be descended from gods, and where there's very little distinction between history and legend anyway, but in Christianity there's no hero except Christ who has a divine dimension of any kind. Also, tragedy raises some disturbing questions about what kind of power is in charge of the universe. Christianity has prompt and confident answers, but the more emotionally convincing the tragedy, the more we may feel that the answers sometimes are a bit too pat. We can see this feeling reflected in what people say who are assumed to be living before the coming of Christ.

The very little evidence we have seems to indicate that Shakespeare took more time over *King Lear* than over most of his plays, and the freedom with which he handled a story familiar to his audience is extraordinary. No previous account of Lear suggests that he went mad, or that Cordelia was hanged by her enemies; and the incorporating of the Gloucester-Edgar subplot, as a counterpoint to the main, Lear-Cordelia one, is entirely Shakespeare's. The material seems to have come from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, but the source doesn't seem significant. Neither do the books he consulted for the names of the devils inhabiting Poor Tom and the like. There's a Quarto text as well as a Folio one, but the relations between them that an editor has to deal with are just too complex to go into.

When you start to read or listen to *King Lear*, try to pretend that you've never heard the story before, and forget that you know how bad Goneril and Regan and Edmund are going to be. That way, you'll see more clearly how Shakespeare is building up our sympathies in the opposite direction. The opening scene presents first Gloucester and then Lear as a couple of incredibly foolish and gullible dodderers (Gloucester's gullibility comes out in a slightly later scene). Gloucester boasts about how he begot Edmund in a way that embarrasses us as well as Kent, and we feel that Edmund's treachery, whatever we think of it, is at any rate credibly motivated. Even at the end of the play, his simple phrase "Yet Edmund was beloved," meaning that Goneril and Regan loved him at least, reminds us how intensely we can feel dramatic sympathy where we don't necessarily feel moral sympathy.

As for Lear and his dreary love test, it's true that Goneril and Regan are being hypocrites when they patter glibly through the declarations of love they are required to make, but we shouldn't forget that it's a genuine humiliation, even for them, to have to make such speeches. At no time in the play does Lear ever express any real affection or tenderness for Goneril or Regan. Of course loving Goneril and Regan would be uphill work, but Lear never really thinks in terms of love: he talks about his kindness and generosity and how much he's given them and how grateful they ought to feel. He does say (publicly) that Cordelia was always his favourite, and that certainly registers with the other two, as their dialogue afterward shows. But they don't feel grateful, and nobody with Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature would expect them to. Then again, while they're not surprised that Lear acts like an old fool, even they are startled by how big a fool he is, and they realize that they have to be on their guard to stop him from ever having the power to do to them what he's just done to Cordelia. The hundred knights Lear insists on could easily start a palace revolution in such a society, so the

hundred knights will have to go.

In the first two acts, all Lear's collisions with his daughters steadily diminish his dignity and leave them with the dramatic honours. They never lose their cool: they are certainly harsh and unattractive women, but they have a kind of brusque common sense that bears him down every time. A hundred knights would make quite a hole in any housekeeper's budget, and we have only Lear's word for it that they're invariably well behaved. If we look at the matter impartially, we may find ourselves asking, with the daughters, what all the fuss is about, and why Lear must have all these knights. When Regan says:

> This house is little: the old man and's people
> Cannot be well bestow'd.
> (II. iv. 290-91)

what she says could have a ring of truth in it, if we forget for the moment that she's talking about Gloucester's house, which she and Cornwall have commandeered. Every move that Lear makes is dramatically a flop, as when he kneels to Regan, intending irony, and she says "these are unsightly tricks," which they assuredly are. The same thing is true of some of Lear's allies, like Kent and his quarrel with Oswald that lands him in the stocks. It is not hard to understand Kent's feelings about Oswald, or his exasperation with the fact that Goneril's messenger is treated with more consideration than the king's, but still he does seem to be asking for something, almost as though he were a kind of *agent provocateur*, adopting the strategy of Goneril's "I'd have it come to question."

It is not until the scene at the end of the second act, with its repeated "shut up your doors," that our sympathies definitely shift over to Lear. Regan says, "He is attended with a desperate train," meaning his fifty (or whatever their present number) knights, but they seem to have sloped off pretty promptly as soon as they realized that they were unlikely to get their next meal there, and Lear's "desperate train" actually consists only of the Fool. When we catch her out in a lie of that size we begin to see what has not emerged before, and has perhaps not yet occurred to them: that "his daughters seek his death," as Gloucester says. It is during and after the storm that the characters of the play begin to show their real nature, and from then on we have something unique in Shakespeare: a dramatic world in which the characters are, like chess pieces, definitely black or white: black with Edmund, Goneril, Regan and Cornwall; white with Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester, Kent and eventually Albany.

Perhaps the best way of finding our bearings in this mammoth structure is to look for clues in the words that are so constantly repeated that it seems clear they're being deliberately impressed on us. I'd like to look at three of these words in particular: the words "nature," "nothing" and "fool."

To understand the word "nature," we have to look at the kind of world view that's being assumed, first by Shakespeare's audience, then by the characters in the play. The opening words of Edmund's first soliloquy are "Thou, Nature, art my goddess," and later in the first act Lear, beginning his curse on Goneril, says: "Hear, Nature, hear; dear goddess, hear." It seems clear that Edmund and Lear don't mean quite the same thing by the goddess Nature, but I think Shakespeare's audience would find this less confusing than we do.

At that time most people assumed that the universe was a hierarchy in which the good was "up" and the bad "down." These ups and downs might be simply metaphors, but that didn't affect their force or usefulness. At the top of the cosmos was the God of Christianity, whose abode is in heaven; that is, the place where his presence is. The lower heaven or sky is not this heaven, but it's the clearest visible symbol of it. The stars, made, as was then believed, out of a purer substance than this world, keep reminding us in their circling of the planning and intelligence that went into the Creator's original construction.

God made a home for man in the garden of Eden, which, like the stars, was a pure world without any death or corruption in it. But Adam and Eve fell out of this garden into a lower or "fallen" world, a third level into which man now is born but feels alienated from. Below this, a fourth level, is the demonic world. The heaven of God is above nature; the demonic world of the devils is below it; but the important thing to keep in mind is that the two middle levels both form part of the order of nature, and that consequently "nature" has two levels and two standards. The upper level, the world symbolized by the stars and by the story of the garden of Eden, was man's original home, the place God intended him to live in. The lower level, the one we're born into now, is a world to which animals and plants seem to be fairly well adjusted: man is not adjusted to it. He must either sink below it into sin, a level the animals can't reach, or try to raise himself as near as he can to the second level he really belongs to. I say "try to raise himself," but he can't really do that: the initiative must come from above or from social institutions. Certain things—morality, virtue, education, social discipline, religious sacraments—all help him to raise his status. He won't get back to the garden of Eden: that's disappeared as a place, but it can be recovered in part as an inner state of mind. The whole picture looks like this to the audience:

> 1. Heaven (the place of the presence of God), symbolized by the sun and moon, which are all that's left of the original creation.
>
> 2. Higher or human order of nature, originally the "unfallen" world or garden of Eden, now the
> level of nature on which man is intended to live as continuously as possible with the aid of religion, morality and the civilized arts.
>
> 3. Lower or "fallen" order of physical nature, our present environment, a world seemingly indifferent to man and his concerns, though the wise can see many traces of its original splendour.
>
> 4. The demonic world, whatever or wherever it is, often associated with the destructive aspects of nature, such as the storm on the heath.

When we speak of "nature" it makes a crucial difference whether we mean the upper, human level of nature or the environment around us that we actually do live in. Many things are "natural" to man that are not natural to anything else on this lower level, such as living under authority and obedience, wearing clothes, using reason, and the like. Such things show that the proper "natural" environment for man is something different from that of animals. But when Edmund commits himself to *his* goddess Nature, he means only the lower, physical level of nature, where human life, like animal life, is a jungle in which the predators are the aristocracy. When Lear appeals to the goddess Nature to curse Goneril, he means a nature that includes what is peculiarly natural to man, an order of existence in which love, obedience, authority, loyalty are natural because they are genuinely human; an order in which "art," in all its Elizabethan senses, is practically indistinguishable from nature. Goneril is being cursed because her treatment of her father is "unnatural" in this context.

But we shouldn't assume that Edmund knows clearly that he is talking about a lower aspect of Nature, or that Lear knows clearly that he is talking about a higher one. Such categories aren't clear yet in a pre-Christian world. In the Lear world there is no actual God, because there is only the Christian God, and he has not revealed himself yet. Very early, when Kent stands out against Lear's foolish decision, Lear says, "Now, by Apollo—" and Kent answers:

> Now, by Apollo, King
> Thou swear'st thy Gods in vain.
> (I. i. 160-61)

Lear retorts by calling him "miscreant," unbeliever. A parody of this discussion occurs later, when Kent is in the stocks. And just as the divine world is hazy and mysterious, so is the demonic world. *King Lear* is in many respects the spookiest of all the great tragedies, and yet nothing explicitly supernatural or superhuman occurs in it: there is nothing to correspond to the Ghost in *Hamlet* or the witches in *Macbeth*. Five fiends inhabit Poor Tom, but we don't believe in his devils, and wouldn't even if we didn't know that Poor Tom is really Edgar. To Shakespeare's audience, the Lear world would look something like this:

> 1. World of impotent or nonexistent gods, which tend to collapse into deified personifications of Nature or Fortune.
>
> 2. Social or human world with the elements the more enlightened can see to be essential to a human world, such as love, loyalty and authority. In particular, the world represented by Cordelia's and Edgar's love, Kent's loyalty, Albany's conscience, etc.
>
> 3. World of physical nature in which man is born an animal and has to follow the animal pattern of existence, i.e., join the lions and eat well, or the sheep and get eaten.
>
> 4. A hell-world glimpsed in moments of madness or horror.

As an example of what I'm talking about, notice that one of the first points established about Edmund is his contempt for astrology. If we ignore the question of "belief" in astrology, for ourselves or for Shakespeare or his audience, and think of it simply as a dramatic image revealing character, we can see that of course Edmund would dismiss astrology: it has no place in his conception of nature. Astrology was taken seriously in Shakespeare's day because of the assumption that God had made the world primarily for the benefit of man, and although the original creation is in ruins, we can still see many evidences of design in it with a human reference. The stars in the sky are not just there: they've been put there for a purpose, and that's why the configurations of stars can spell out the destinies of men and women.

Similarly, there are links, however mysterious and fitful, between natural and human events, at least on the top social level. Comets, earthquakes and other natural disturbances don't just happen: they happen at crucial times in human life, such as the death of a ruler. Not necessarily a Christian ruler: there were . . . such portents at the time of the murder of Julius Caesar. So Lear has some ground for expecting that the order of nature around him might take some notice of his plight and of his daughters' ingratitude, considering that he's a king. But one thing the storm symbolizes is that he's moving into an order of nature that's indifferent to human affairs. His madness brings him the insight: "They told me I was everything: 'tis a lie; I am not ague-proof." With his abdication, whatever links there may be between the civilized human world and the one above it have been severed.

It should be clear from all this that the question "What is a natural man?" has two answers. On his own proper human level it is natural to man to be clothed, sociable and reasonable. When Goneril and Regan keep asking Lear why he needs all those knights, the first part of his answer, in the speech beginning "Oh, reason not the need," is a quite coherent statement of the fact that civilized life is not based simply on needs. But in this storm world that Lear is descending into, what is natural man like? Lear has hardly begun to formulate the question when Poor Tom appears as the answer to it. "Didst thou give all to thy two daughters?" Lear asks, still preoccupied with his own concerns. But we're getting down now to the underside of the Goneril-Regan world:

> Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for sallets, swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle of the standing pool . . .
> (III. iv. 132ff.)

The imagery creates a world more nauseating than Hamlet ever dreamed of. "Is man no more than this?", Lear asks. In a way Poor Tom is a kind of ghastly parody of a free man, because he owes nothing to the amenities of civilization. Lear is reminded that he still has at least clothes, and starts tearing them off to be level with Poor Tom, but he is distracted from this. He says in a miracle of condensed verbal power: "Thou art the thing itself." He has started at one end of nature and ended at the other, and now his downward journey has reached a terminus. Perhaps one of Edgar's motives in assuming his Poor Tom disguise was to provide a solid bottom for Lear's descent. Below or behind him is the chaos-world portended by the storm: the world of the furies and fiends that Edgar is keeping Lear protected from, just as he protects Gloucester later from the self-destructive "fiend" that wants to hurl him over a cliff.

The word "nothing" [also appears in] *Richard II*, where it [is] connected with the conception of the king's two bodies [that is, his dual nature as both an individual and an office of state]. In both plays "nothing" seems to have the meaning of being deprived of one's social function, and so of one's identity. A king who dies is still a something, namely a dead king; a king deprived of his kingship is "nothing," even if, or especially if, he still goes on living. That is one thing that the issue of the train of knights is about. They represent, for Lear, his continuing identity as king, even though he has abdicated his powers and responsibilities: he wants both to have and not have his royalty. His daughters do not, at least not at first, want to kill him: they want him to go on living without power, once he has renounced it. Regan says, and may well mean it at this point:

> For his particular, I'll receive him gladly,
> But not one follower.
> (II. iv. 293-94)

Such treatment of him is, at least symbolically (and symbolism is immensely important here), what Lear says in another connection is "worse than murder." To kill him would be murder; to let him survive without his identity is a kind of annihilation. Similarly Edgar says, when assuming his Poor Tom disguise: "Edgar I nothing am." He's still alive, but his identity as Edgar is gone, or at least in abeyance.

There is another context, easier to understand, in which the conception of nothing is of great significance. What is the cause of love, friendship, good faith, loyalty or any of the essential human virtues? Nothing. There's no "why" about them: they just are. In putting on his love-test act, Lear is obsessed by the formula of something for something. I'll love you if you love me, and if you love me you'll get a great big slice of England. When Cordelia says that she loves him according to her "bond," she of course doesn't mean anything like Shylock's bond [in *The Merchant of Venice*]: the word for her has more the modern sense of "bonding." Love and loyalty don't have motives or expectations or causes, nor can they be quantified, as in Lear's "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" Much later in the play, when Cordelia awakens Lear and he finally realizes he is still in the same world, he says:

> I know you do not love me; for your sisters
> Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
> You have some cause, they have not.
> (IV. vii. 73-75)

Cordelia's answer, "No cause, no cause," is one of the supreme moments of all drama. And yet when Cordelia says that, she is saying precisely what she said at the beginning of the play: she will have nothing to do with these silly conditional games. It is characteristic of such relationships that sooner or later they come to focus on some anxiety symbol, which for Lear is the issue of the hundred knights. Pursuing this anxiety drives Lear toward the madness he so much fears, and forces him into those dreadful bargaining scenes that we can hardly bear to reread:

> Thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty,
> And thou art twice her love.
> (II. iv. 261-62)

As for "fool," we have first of all Lear's version of the common phrase, used several times by Shakespeare, "all the world's stage":

> When we are born, we cry that we are come
> To this great stage of fools.
> (II. iv. 184-85)

The word "fool" is in course of time applied to practically every decent character in the play. Those who are not fools are people like Goneril and Regan and Edmund, who live according to the conditions of the lower or savage nature they do so well in. But Albany is called a "moral fool" by Goneril because he is unwilling to accept such a world; Kent is called a fool for taking the part of an outcast king. As for the Fool himself, he is a "natural," a word that again evokes the sense of two levels of nature. As a "natural" in this world, he is deficient enough, mentally, to be put in a licensed position to say what he likes. In his kind of "natural" quality there is a reminiscence of a still coherent and divinely designed order of nature, a world in which no one can help telling the truth. In our world, there is the proverb "children and fools tell the truth," and the Fool's privilege makes him a wit because in our world nothing is funnier than a sudden outspoken declaration of the truth.

There is another sense of the word "fool" that seems to be peculiar to Shakespeare, and that is the "fool" as victim, the kind of person to whom disasters happen. Everyone on the wrong side of the wheel of fortune is a fool in this sense, and it is in this sense that Lear speaks of himself as "the natural fool of fortune." . . . [When] Gloucester says:

> As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods,
> They kill us for their sport.
> (IV. i. 36-37)

he certainly hasn't forgotten that his own plight is the quite understandable result of his own folly, Edmund's treachery and Cornwall's brutality; it doesn't need any gods to explain it. Some nineteenth-century commentators felt that this remark displayed an atheistic pessimism which Shakespeare himself believed in (because they did) and was keeping up his sleeve. I don't know what Shakespeare believed, but he knew what his audience would buy, and he knew they wouldn't buy that. Gloucester is no atheist: he postulates gods, divine personalities, and if he replaced them with a mechanism of fate or destiny he couldn't ascribe *malice*to it. What he feels is that there is some mystery in the horror of what's happened to him that goes beyond the tangible human causes.

Edgar and Albany, on the other hand, are moralists: they look for human causes and assume that there are powers above who are reacting to events as they should. Albany is a decent man, and Goneril a vicious woman, and yet in Goneril's world Albany looks weak and ineffectual. He produces his great melodramatic coup, the letter proving Goneril's intrigue with Edmund, which should overwhelm her with shame and confusion. But Goneril isn't listening: in her world, of course anyone of her social rank who despised her husband would take a lover. It's true that she kills herself when Edmund is fatally wounded, but that too is part of the Goneril ethic. Albany's demonstrations of the workings of providence also get undercut pretty badly. When he hears of the death of Cornwall he says it shows that "justicers" are above, passing over the fate of Gloucester himself and of Cornwall's servant. He sees a "judgement of the heavens" in the deaths of Goneril and Regan: at once Kent enters, inquires for the king, and Albany says, "Great thing of us forgot!" It looks almost as though the memory of the "heavens" had slipped up along with Albany's. Finally, he tries to set up a

scene of poetic justice in which:

> All friends shall taste
> The wages of their virtue, and all foes
> The cup of their deservings.
> (V. iii. 302-304)

What follows this is Lear's terrible lament over the dead body of Cordelia, and in the nuclear-bomb desolation of that speech, words like "wages" and "deserving" fade into nothingness. It may be, as some say, that Lear thinks Cordelia is alive again at the end of the speech, but we know that if so he is being mocked with another illusion.

Edgar too, for all his prodigies of valour and fidelity, gets some curiously limp things to say. At the end of the heath scene he makes a chorus comment (which is not in the Folio):

> When we our betters see bearing our woes,
> We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
> (III. vi. 105-106)

and so on for another dozen sickening lines. After he strikes down Edmund in the final duel, he remarks that the gods are just, and that Gloucester's blindness was the inevitable result of going into a whorehouse to beget Edmund. (I feel very sorry for Edmund's mother, who seems to me to get a quite undeservedly bad press.) Even though Edmund agrees with the statement, it doesn't make much of a point, as we're explicitly told that Goneril and Regan were "got 'tween lawful sheets." In fact, the whole relation between Gloucester and the Lear tragedies seems to have something of a contrast between an explicable and an inexplicable disaster. The Gloucester tragedy perhaps can—just—be explained in moral terms; the Lear tragedy cannot.

There is a lot more to be said about both Albany and Edgar, and I shall be saying some of it myself in a moment. They are not in the least ridiculous characters, but, like all the virtuous people, they are fools in the sense that a fool is a victim: they utter the cries of bewildered men who can't see what's tormenting them, and their explanations, even if they are reassuring for the moment, are random guesses. In this dark, meaningless, horrible world, everyone is as spiritually blind as Gloucester is physically: you might be interested in looking at the number of references to blindness in the play apart from those connected with Gloucester. The moral for us, as students of the play, is clear enough: we have to take a much broader view of the action than either a fatalistic or a moral one, and try, not to "explain" it, but to see something of its dimensions and its scope.

Many critics of Shakespeare have noticed that there often seem to be two time clocks in the action of his plays, the events in the foreground summarizing slower and bigger events in the background that by themselves would take longer to work out. It's a little like looking at the scenery from the window of a car or train, with the weeds at the side of the road rushing by and the horizon turning slowly. In the foreground action the scene on the heath seems to take place in the same night that begins with Regan and Cornwall shutting Lear out. In the background we pick up hints that Albany and Cornwall are at loggerheads, but are forced to compose their differences and unite against a threatened invasion from France, partly encouraged by Cordelia, although in the foreground action nothing has yet happened to Lear that would justify such an invasion. At the end of Act II we still don't feel that Gloucester's statement "his daughters seek his death" is quite true yet, though they certainly don't care if he does die. But within an hour or two Gloucester's concern for Lear becomes strictly forbidden, and his action in helping the king to get to Dover is, from Cornwall's point of view, the basest treachery. It's not difficult to get all this from the indications we're given. I think there's also a third rhythm of time, if it really is time, in a still larger background.

Before the play begins, we are in roughly the upper world of human nature; not a paradisal state, of course, but a world where there is authority, social discipline, orders of distinction, and loyalty: the conditions regarded as the central ones in the Tudor world. Then the dreaded image of the map appears, with a proposal to carve up the country. . . . By the end of the scene we have the feeling of sliding into a different world, and when Edmund steps forth with his "Thou, Nature, art my goddess," we feel that he's the first person to have recognized this new world for what it is. He's Gloucester's "natural" son, and on this level of nature he's the kind of person who will take command. When the storm begins in Act III it's described in a way that makes it clear that it's more than just a storm. It's an image of nature dissolving into its primordial elements, losing its distinctions of hierarchies in chaos, a kind of crossing of the Red Sea in reverse.

One of the central images of this descent is that of the antagonism of a younger and older generation. "The younger rises when the old doth fall," says Edmund, and Goneril, speaking of Lear, issues a blanket denunciation of old people generally: "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash." On the other side, Lear appeals to the gods, "If you do love old men," and Gloucester, with a still more futile irony, appeals for help, during the blinding scene, to any "who will think to live till he be old." The principle that made hereditary succession so important in the history plays seems to be extended here, in a world where the honouring of one's parents is the most emphasized of all virtues. Albany regards Goneril's treatment of her father as the key to everything else she does that's wrong:

> She that herself will sliver and disbranch
> From her material sap, perforce must wither
> And come to deadly use.
> (IV. ii. 34-36)

The connection between honouring one's parents and long life is, of course, already present in the fifth commandment, though the characters in *King Lear* are not supposed to know that. In any case the principle doesn't work in the post-storm world: Cornwall's servant feels that so wicked a woman as Regan can't possibly live out her full life, and Regan does get poisoned, but then Cordelia is hanged, so that again doesn't prove or explain anything. Wherever we turn, we're up against the ambiguity in all tragedy: that death is both the punishment of the evil and the reward of the virtuous, besides being the same end for everybody. Our moralists, Edgar and Albany, the survivors of the play, actually speak as though the length of human life had been shortened as a result of the play's action. The last four lines, spoken by Edgar in the Folio and by Albany in the Quarto, are:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say:
> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.
> (V. iii 323-26)

The second line, incidentally, seems very curious. If it's a vindication of the conduct of Cordelia and Kent in the opening scene, it's a bit late in the day; and as a general principle it covers too much ground. When Edmund says, "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land," he is saying what he feels, and certainly not what he ought to say. Nonetheless, I think it's a very central comment: it points to the fact that language is just about the only thing that fights for genuine humanity in this blinded world.

Let's go back to the conception of the king's two bodies. Lear gives up his second body when he surrenders himself to the power of Goneril and Regan, and consequently, as we said, he no longer has any identity as a king. His loss of identity troubles him, and he says to Oswald: "Who am I?" The question is rhetorical, but Oswald's answer, "My lady's father," has the unusual quality of being both the exact truth and a calculated insult. The next time he asks the question it is the Fool who answers: "Lear's shadow." There follows the

expulsion and the storm on the heath, and before long things begin to change in Lear. We notice the point at which he is suddenly conscious of the misery of the Fool, and an even more significant moment when he says: "I'll pray, and then I'll sleep." The prayer is a strange prayer, not addressed to any deity, but to the "poor naked wretches" of his own kingdom. What is happening is that he has lost his identity as a king in the body peculiar to a king, but is beginning to recover his royal nature in his other body, his individual and physical one; not just the body that is cold and wet, but the mind that realizes how many others are cold and wet, starting with the Fool and Poor Tom. To use religious terms, his relation to his kingdom was transcendent at the beginning of the play; now it is immanent. Whatever his actual size, Lear is a giant figure, but his gigantic dimensions are now not those of a king or hero; they are those of a human being who suffers but understands his affinity with others who suffer.

In the mad scenes (which would have to be very carefully staged in Shakespeare's day because there was a tendency to think mad people funny), we get a negative aspect of Lear's new sense of identity with his subjects. He speaks of the endless hypocrisies in the administering of justice, of the sexual pleasure with which beadles lash whores, of the prurience lurking under the prude, of the shame of living in a society where "a dog's obeyed in office." These things are not exactly news to us, but they are new sensations to him. All Poor Tom's fiends of lust and theft and lying sweep through him, but they are not in possession of him: he is . . . absorbing the good and bad of the human nature in his kingdom. He is at the opposite pole from the deposed king who had half expected the storm to take his part:

> Tremble, thou wretch,
> That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
> Unwhipp'd of Justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand . . .
> (III. ii. 51-53)

We can summarize all this by saying that Lear has entered a world in which the most genuine language is prophetic language: that is, language inspired by a vision of life springing from the higher level of nature. Albany's providence and Edgar's divine justice make sense as a part of such a vision, though as prophecy in the sense of predicting what is going to happen it may fail. Kent, again, is often prophetic; his fury against Oswald is really a prophetic vision of the kind of thing that such people as Oswald do in the world:

> Such smiling rogues as these,
> Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain . . .
> (II. ii. 74-75)

The "holy cords" may be parental or matrimonial: in either case he's dead right about Oswald, as the rest of the play shows. Again, he is someone possessed by a need to have a "master" who represents genuine "authority," as he says to Lear. At the end of the play, when he comes in to "bid my king and master aye good-night," he of course means Lear; when he repeats this a few lines later, a second or two after Lear's death, he may have some intuition about a bigger master who nonetheless includes Lear:

> I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;
> My master calls me, I must not say no.
> (V. iii. 321-22)

I don't mean that he is moving toward a specific religious belief, Christian or other; I mean only that his vision of the source of authority and mastery is expanding from its exclusive focus on King Lear.

The audience is apparently expected to recognize a number of Biblical allusions that the characters who make them do not know to be Biblical. Cordelia speaks of going about her father's business, echoing a phrase of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: had she known of the resemblance she would hardly have made the remark in

quite those words. A gentleman says of Lear:

> Thou hast one daughter,
> Who redeems nature from the general curse
> Which twain have brought her to.
> (IV. vi. 206-208)

He could, theoretically, mean Goneril and Regan, or he could mean Adam and Eve. I'd say that he means Goneril and Regan and has probably never heard of Adam and Eve. At the same time it would be true to say that Adam and Eve brought a general curse on nature, and a bit overblown to say it of Goneril and Regan, except insofar as they are participating in a "second fall of cursed man," [*Henry V*]. The statement is unconsciously prophetic, and the audience picks up more than the speaker is aware of.

Lear on the heath, again, is attended by two bedraggled prophets, the Fool and Poor Tom. The Fool is introduced in the somewhat ambiguous role of keeping Lear amused by repeating incessantly, "You are nothing, nothing, nothing." However unhelpful, it is prophetic enough: it tells Lear the outcome of his journey to Regan and what the next stage of his life will be. Goneril, no devotee of either humour or truth, believes that he is "more knave than fool," because the Fool is a "natural" allied to a level of nature that she does not know exists. On the heath the Fool's role is largely taken over by Poor Tom, although the idiot doggerel that he recites (in the Folio text only) at the end of Act III, Scene ii is still called a "prophecy." As for Poor Tom, a ballad on "Tom o' Bedlam" was collected in the eighteenth century, and may well go back to something very similar extant in Shakespeare's time. The last stanza of the ballad goes:

> With an host of furious fancies
> Whereof I am commander,
> With a burning spear, and a horse of air,
> To the wilderness I wander.
> By a knight of ghosts and shadows
> I summoned am to tourney
> Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end,
> Methinks it is no journey.

This kind of imagery reminds us of certain primitive poets and magicians, like the "shamans" of central Asia, who go through long initiations that involve journeys to upper and lower worlds. We are now in a world where all knowledge of anything "spiritual" or otherworldly has been degraded to Poor Tom's fiends, his nightmare with her ninefold, his dark tower of Childe Roland, and other phantasms linked to the night and the storm.

Edgar says explicitly that he is trying to "cure" Gloucester's despair, and to lead him to feel that "ripeness is all," that man does not own his life, and must wait until it concludes of itself. Lear has told Gloucester the same thing earlier, and the fact that the mad Lear is in a position to do so says a good deal about the essential sanity of Lear's madness. What Edgar expects to do for Lear by producing his Tom o' Bedlam act is more difficult to say. He seems to be acting as a kind of lightning rod, focussing and objectifying the chaos that is in both Lear's mind and in nature. He's holding a mirror up to Lear's growing madness, somewhat as, to refer to a very different play, Petruchio tries to cure Katharina's shrewishness by showing her in his own behaviour what it looks like [*The Taming of the Shrew*].

The action of the play seems to be proceeding to a conclusion that, however sombre and exhausting, nonetheless has some serenity in it. But just as we seem about to reach this conclusion, there comes the agonizing wrench of the hanging of Cordelia and the death speeches of Lear. Naturally the stage refused to act this down to the nineteenth century: producers settled for another version that married Cordelia off to Edgar.

We act the play now as Shakespeare wrote it, but it's still pretty tough even for this grisly century. I said that in the course of the play the characters settled into a clear division of good and bad people, like the white and black pieces of a chess game. The last of the black pieces, Goneril, Regan and Edmund, have been removed from the board, and then comes the death of Cordelia. Part of this is just the principle that the evil men do lives after them, Edmund's repentance being too late to rescind his own order. But there seems to be a black king still on the board, and one wonders if there is any clue to who or what or where he is.

I [have] said [in an earlier lecture] that *Hamlet* was the central Shakespeare play for the nineteenth century; in the twentieth century feelings of alienation and absurdity have arisen that tend to shift the focus to King Lear. All virtuous or evil actions, all acceptances or rejections of religious or political ideology, seem equally absurd in a world that is set up mainly for the benefit of the Gonerils and the Cornwalls. A generation ago this statement would have stimulated arguments about ways and means of changing such a world, but such arguments are not only irrelevant to Shakespeare's play, but avoid one of its central issues. . . .

Perhaps it takes a madman to see into the heart of tragedy, the dark tower of Lear's fury and tenderness, rage and sympathy, scorn and courtesy, and finally his broken heart. I've often come back to the titanic size of Lear, which is not a size of body or ultimately even of social rank, but of language. This seems to put him at an immense distance from us, except that he is also utterly human and recognizable. Perhaps Lear's madness is what our sanity would be if it weren't under such heavy sedation all the time, if our senses or nerves or whatever didn't keep filtering out experiences or emotions that would threaten our stability. It's a dangerous business to enter the world of titans and heroes and gods, but safer if we have as a guide a poet who speaks their language.

To speak of a black king, however metaphorically, is to make an assumption, and to ask what or who it is makes secondary assumptions. Another step takes us into the blind-men-and-elephant routine, where we "identify" the source of tragedy as the consequence of human acts or divine malice or fatality or cosmic absurdity. I also spoke of three important words in the play, "nature," "fool" and "nothing": perhaps I could have mentioned a fourth, "fortune." Fortune in Shakespeare's day . . . was symbolized by a wheel, and there are several powerful images of wheels in this play. In some rural areas at certain times of the year a wheel was made of straw, rolled to the top of a hill, then set on fire and let roll down: the Fool seems to be using this image about Lear's fall from one level of nature to another. Lear himself, waking out of sleep and seeing Cordelia, speaks of himself as bound on a wheel of fire, a spirit tormented in hell, though he soon discovers he isn't. Edmund accepts Edgar's view of him as the nemesis of Gloucester's folly in the phrase "The wheel has come full circle," after which he suddenly changes character. The image is inexact in one essential respect: wheels turn, but they remain wheels. Whatever is turning in *King Lear* also keeps turning *into* other things. The language of definition is helpless to deal with this: the language of prophecy can come closer, because it's more nearly related to the language of madness. At the beginning of the play Lear is technically sane, but everything he says and does is absurd. In his mad scenes his associations are often hard to follow, but his general meaning is blindly clear. The language is a counter absurdity: that is what the play leaves for us, a sense of what we could release if we could speak what we feel.

I keep using the word "prophetic" because it seems to me the least misleading metaphor for the primary power of vision in human consciousness, before it gets congealed into religious or political beliefs or institutions. In the final scenes particularly, we see both what's in front of us, where "all's cheerless, dark and deadly," and the power of language that will not stop expanding, even when it starts to press into the mystery that's blocked off from us by death. We don't know the answers; we don't know that there are no answers. Tragedy forces on us a response of acceptance: we have to say, "Yes, this kind of thing is human life too." But by making that response we've accepted something much deeper: that what is defined or made finite by words becomes infinite through the power of words.

SOURCE: "King Lear," in *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, edited by Robert Sandier, Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 101-21.

Double Plot

Ian W. O. House

[*House emphasizes the dynamic relation between the main plot and the subplot in* King Lear*, proposing that the differences as well as the similarities between them unsettle and illuminate our understanding of the principal story. As the critic explains, the double plot universalizes the action by shifting emphasis away from individual characters and situations; the effect is more like that of a prism than a mirror, multiplying images rather than giving back a single one. Further, House analyzes the notorious implausibility of dramatic events in* Lear*, arguing that the absurdity is purposeful and heightened by the changes in the humorous tone of the subplot "from farce to melodrama, from domestic tragedy to surrealism." In the course of discussing these issues, the critic provides extended evaluations of Gloucester, Edmund, and, especially, Edgar.*]

Does the subplot of *King Lear* do more than provide parts for actors who would otherwise have been out of work? Why pad out a play with a plot that merely repeats, with whatever incidental variations, the events and themes of the main plot? The two plots are closely similar but have no narrative connexion; Gonerill's opportunism is independent of Edmund's intrigue. . . .

[A. W.] Schlegel, the first critic to comment on the subplot, says: 'Were Lear alone to suffer from his daughters, the impression would be limited to the powerful compassion felt by us for his private misfortune. But two such unheard-of examples taking place at the same time have the appearance of a great commotion in the moral world,' [*Lectures on Dramatic Art*]. Is Schlegel right? Surely we do not share Gloucester's view that the divisions spring from eclipses in the sun and moon. Isn't the effect, rather or also, that this evil, of flesh tearing itself ('Is it not as this mouth should teare this hand/For lifting food too't?' (III.4.15)), is a permanent feature of life. . . . ? The universalizing effect happens not only because, statically, we see links between the two plots but because, dynamically, our attention is continually switched. Wherever we turn, whatever the individual characters and circumstances, the same underlying truth is to be discerned. In this way our interest is focused on the situation and is not totally absorbed by the welfare of individual characters. The double plot gives a sense of largeness and completeness, of a world and of time passing rather than the selective events of a cautionary tale.

This cannot, however, in itself be an adequate answer to the charge of redundancy. The effect of something universal—something that is not parochial, transitory, accidental, unrelated to the sorry scheme of things entire—can be achieved by plays that have a single plot. Do not the *Oedipus* of Sophocles or the *Misanthrope* of Molière far transcend the particular circumstances of their protagonists? The principle of artistic economy justifies the subplot only if the universalizing effect in this case could not have been achieved by a single plot.

Some hostile critics suggest that, in *King Lear*, our minds are burdened by plot complications and our emotions are fatigued by an excess of horrors. Margaret Webster, drawing on her large experience as a director, says [in *Shakespeare Today*] that the characters are 'too fierce and full for the space within which they are confined'; they interrupt the main plot and distract us from it. On the other hand, [A. C] Bradley who agrees in essence with this complaint, far from finding all the characters 'fierce and full', thinks that Gloucester is neither interesting nor distinct [*Shakespearean Tragedy*].

Some reply that the subplot does not distract us but, by being on a more human scale, makes the main plot more credible and engages our sympathy more readily. Its victims are not 'every inch a king' but ordinarily decent men, however flawed; the hardheartedness of its villain is neither uncaused by anything in nature nor untinged by repentance. The greatness of Lear, the scope and depth of his mind in its many phases, is never

more sharply felt than by contrast with the stumblings of Gloucester, *l'homme moyen sensuel* [the average nonintellectual man].

These defences of the subplot as universalizing and human are not wrong, but they tend to be couched in an unilluminatingly general way and they too often involve a reductive approach to the play. It ceases to be a changing experience in which subplot and main plot continuously interact with each other and with us (a dynamic reading) and becomes a static thing in which points of correspondence and divergence can be noted.

As the subplot unfolds, its similarities and differences from the main plot at all levels (narrative, character, theme, genre, tone) shape our response to the main plot and form an integral part of our experience of the play as a whole. Until the blinding of Gloucester the subplot lags behind the main plot, offering at each point an oblique, and even comic, reflection of it. Thereafter the subplot takes the lead, stepping into the uncharted darkness. However grim its story, we are to learn that no worst there is none; Lear's agonies, though also, perhaps, his joys, however transitory or delusive, will outtop Gloucester's.

The subplot is sometimes claimed to simplify the main plot, often converting what is archetypal or philosophical in the Lear plot into physical situations (blindness rather than madness), or morality play (the didactic journey of Gloucester and Poor Tom) or 'medieval' ritual (the fratricidal combat at the end). It seems to me that . . . the Gloucester plot makes the Lear plot look both odder and more normal, makes it more appalling and more affecting.

The subplot both unsettles and clarifies our understanding of the main plot. The fall of Lear and the rise of Edgar are not only two different ways of responding to adversity but also, as we shall see, and linked with that, two different kinds of drama. Shakespeare's detailed craftsmanship in forging links and contrasts and parallels, in exciting our interest and then in switching to another strand of the play, is matched by our sense of a generosity, almost a casualness, in the co-existence of the two stories. They are so different, however similar, in narrative line, in characters and in tone that their relationship is bound to generate a hundred impressions in us. Each goes its way—sometimes with urgent intention, not staying a jot; sometimes labouring and stumbling, inevitably, but for no compelling reason—to Dover. . . .

No doubt for many in the original audience the effect was enhanced by the fact that they knew the broad development of one of Shakespeare's sources, *The True Chronicle History of King Lear* (though, as it turned out, that knowledge would mislead them), while the narrative of the Gloucester plot was unknown. Yoking the familiar story of Lear with the unfamiliar story of the Paphlagonian King is to put a wild card into the deck. As one story proceeds on its appointed way, modifying its original, another meets it in unpredictable counterpoint until, crushingly, Lear and Cordelia are denied the happiness that would have kept faith with the chronicles and, with qualified optimism, a new ruler emerges from the doom-laden underplot. The play's recurrent concern with recognition ('Do'st thou know me, fellow? (I.4.26), 'Does any heere know me?' (I.4.223), 'Your name, fair Gentlewoman? (I.4.233), the whole relationship of Gloucester and Edgar, Lear's reunion with Cordelia, . . .) is matched by the fact that the two plots and their characters barely recognise each other. Crucially, in the great meetings between Lear and Edgar, and between Lear and Gloucester, there is ignorance, or shocking disparity between recognition and action, or recognition with heartbreaking indifference: 'I know thee well enough, thy name is Glouster' (IV.6.175). The characters in each story are as deeply mistaken about the significance of the events in the other as they are about the events in their own. Lear is not, as Edgar thinks, 'childed as I fathered' (Q1:III.6.108), for Gloucester's cruelty towards him springs not from malevolence but from ignorance. Similarly, Lear is mistaken when he says:

> 'for Glouster's bastard Son was kinder to his Father,
> Then my Daughters got 'tweene the lawfull sheets.'
> (IV. 6. 114)

The unpredictability of the relationship between the two stories is increased by the fact that *Lear* is, by contrast with, say, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, a play without plot, a causally determined sequence of events. Once Lear has been driven out into the storm and Edmund's intrigues have dispossessed Edgar, almost anything might happen and almost nothing actually does happen. In the background, conventional stage armies are conventionally assembled, but in the foreground of our attention, they are all fools and madmen, absorbing punishment, punchbags, not doers. Indeed, one important function of the subplot is to provide some narrative impulse for a play that would otherwise be devoid of incident for two or three acts. Lear has glimpsed the truth about his daughters before the end of Act I: 'O most small fault, / How ugly did'st thou in *Cordelia* shew?' (I.4.264-5). Once he knows that, he can experience deeper suffering and, possibly, widening circles of enlightenment, but the play does not allow him to act upon his knowledge. It leaves him to howl and to 'crawle toward death'. . . .

The unpredictability, the sense that each plot appears to take its own chances, does not mean that the two plots are not linked with extraordinary craftsmanship. In his first appearance we may think that Gloucester is no more significant than one of those bystanders commonly used at the beginning of plays to create an impression of the main characters before they enter. We cannot notice until the next scene the economy with which Shakespeare unites his two plots by making a principal figure in one an attendant lord in the household of another. Gloucester is created with exactness of implication both about his character and about his fate: 'It did alwayes seem so to us' (3). He is a member of the inner circle, one of the 'gilded Butterflies' who 'Talke of Court newes . . . Who looses and who wins', but he has been kept in the dark about Lear's change of plan and also, as we shall learn, about Lear's 'darker purpose'; he is rooted in a world of 'seemes' and 'appeares' (4); he is behind the times. Edmund, too, is an outsider: a bastard who has been 'out nine years' (31) and who is barely known to Kent. By the end of the scene Kent will have been banished and Cordelia, 'stranger'd with our oath', will have left for France. Almost all the characters of the play are, at some time and in some sense, outsiders, cut off from society by the cruelty of others or by their own folly or inhumanity. But we can have no premonition of the nightmare that awaits the genial courtier, polished in his manners and coarse in his attitudes, or of how soon the language of compliment that is used between the three men will be called into question as 'a glib and oylie Art'.

Gloucester, it seems, is no more than one called upon to do his master's bidding and attend the lords of France and Burgundy: one who will do 'to swell a progress, start a scene or two; / Advise the prince, . . .' But later, when, like Edmund, he is gathered up into the affairs of Regan and Cornwall and then sees the king's servant thrown into the stocks, he reveals a kindliness and prudence that make him more than 'an easy tool; / Deferential, glad to be of use, . . .' A personality is added to a role. This concern for others, whatever the motive, will be his undoing and it is appropriate that it is at this moment that he should begin his transition from comic dupe to tragic victim.

The relationship between the two plots is not only material but also causal and analogical. Causally, Edmund owes his promotion to the lust of Lear's daughters and to the ambition of one of their husbands, while Gloucester's downfall is caused by his care for Lear and by his desire to keep a foot in that camp and, in its turn, provides the opportunity for Edgar's reconciliation with him. The blinding of Gloucester turns all hearts against those who have also wronged the king. Edgar's assumed madness precipitates Lear's final descent into the madness of obsession: 'Did'st thou give all to thy Daughters?' (III.4.48). Edgar's defeat of Edmund restores the possibility of the right governance of the country.

Analogically, the position is more complicated. Obviously, Lear is like Gloucester in that he suffers for failing to understand the true nature of his children. But he is also like (as well as unlike) Edgar in being mad, naked and an outcast, and he is also like Edmund in that he proposes a redistribution of property on unorthodox lines: 'Where Nature doth with merit challenge' (I.1.52). This last similarity is not farfetched. Edmund's blasphemous invocation of Nature as his goddess links him to Lear, who will call upon the same goddess in his great curse on Gonerill and who has already invoked 'the sacred radiance of the Sunne' (I.1.108). Equally,

Edgar is like Cordelia a wronged child and sibling, though he is the victim of intrigue rather than of opportunity and his response ('which makes me bend' (Q1: III.6.107)) is the opposite of her inflexibility. Then again, on his first appearance, it is Edmund who is, for us, similar to Cordelia, the truth-teller. Am I the only person ever to have wondered, on first acquaintance with the play, whether Cordelia would turn out to be a villain, harbouring in her plainness 'more craft, and more corrupter ends'?

The subplot begins to seem not like a looking-glass but like Sir Epicure Mammon's hall of mirrors 'cut in more subtle angles to disperse/ And multiply the figures' [Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*]. For example, it is often pointed out that whereas Lear's folly receives the mental punishment of madness (*ira furor brevis*), Gloucester's physical sin brings the physical and conventional retribution of blindness. That, however, is not a point to be stressed too heavily, since Gloucester feels fear and despair and the dullness of Lear's sight is not only metaphorical: 'Mine eyes are not o'th'best' (V.3.278). In both plots, as [Ann] Thompson puts it [in "Who Sees Double in the Double Plot?"] ideas about distributive justice in families lead to ideas about distributive justice in society. Here again, there may be a difference between Lear's large expressions of concern for the poor naked wretches and Gloucester's practical attempt to relieve the poverty of one beggar; he says, 'Here take this purse' (IV. 1.63), before launching into his reflections on distribution and excess. [William R.] Elton invites us to contrast the genuine supernatural of the thunder's 'rumble' with the fraudulent demons of Edgar's 'grumble' in the straw or Cordelia's fidelity to objective truth with Edgar's fidelity to subjective feeling [*King Lear and the Gods*]. It has also been suggested that, while Lear combines Gonerill's selfish wilfulness with Cordelia's courageous advocacy, Gloucester unites Edmund's lust with Edgar's pathos. And so one could go on. These correspondences arise, I think, as two rich plots take their ways; they are important but they do not really show us how our experience of one unfolding plot shapes our experience of the other.

It may be useful, therefore, to show how, in one scene, one aspect of the secondary plot shapes our experience of the play. In the play's second scene, what is this ridiculous business with a letter, and the terrible dispatch of it into Edmund's pocket, and the plan of 'Auricular assurance'? Is this plot going to be comic: Gloucester the foolish *senex* [old man], full of idle and fond superstitions, reflecting Lear's 'infirmity' and 'waywardnesse'? Gloucester's sudden taking against Edgar seems like a broadly comic parallel to Lear's taking against Cordelia, itself a decision so abrupt and startling as to be, at least potentially, comic. Like Lear, too, he believes that we exist and cease to be by the operation of the orbs. Once one knows the play, however, there are terrible premonitions peeping out everywhere in the comedy: 'Let's see: if it bee nothing, I shall not neede Spectacles' (34-5).

Edgar enters. Not merely is it a comedy, however serious, but the stage manager knows it is a comedy: 'Pat: he comes like the Catastrophe of the old Comedie: my Cue is villainous Melancholly with a sign like Tom o' Bedlam' (131). We are encouraged to see Edgar as a pasteboard figure in a low farce, to see him as we shall see him for a great deal of the play, someone who is plasticine in his brother's hands and then a gibbering idiot.

The comic tone of this scene offers relief from the intensity of the Lear scene (audiences always warm to Edmund at this point), throws it into relief, makes us aware of its comic potential, lulls us with the false promise of comfort (our hearts will not be wrung by this plot) and, as comedy always does, sharpens our intellectual awareness (of resemblances and differences). Later we shall know the serious issue of this fooling, when we know that our laughter at 'Nothing like the image, and horror of it' (172) was but a faint glimpse of the 'image of that horror' (V.3.263) of the apocalyptic ending. Edgar's later development needs to be read not only as the flowering of a personality but also as the passage from one genre to another or, perhaps better, to many others.

In the rest of Act I, which is essentially serious, the humour constantly shifts in emphasis and kind: the bluntness of Kent, the derisory subservience of Oswald (whom audiences love to hate), the farcical tripping of Oswald, the corrective satire of the Fool. In this play, comedy and tragedy are sometimes related by appalling

juxtapositions but often by constant modulation and interpenetration.

The broadly humorous tone of the subplot is maintained through the spurious duel with its swirl of servants and torches, Edmund's hyperbolic description of his brother's devilry ('Mumbling of wicked charmes, conjuring the Moone') and his histrionic appeal to his father's attention ('Looke Sir, I bleed'). The comedy of Edgar as an evil magician points forward to his later association with devils. On the heath his talk will be full of devils; when his father enters with a torch, he cries, 'This is the foule Flibbertigibbet' (III.4.112); later he will again appear to Gloucester's mind's eye as 'The Fiend, the Fiend' (IV.6.79). This association of Edgar with the devil works partly by contrast; no man is less devilish than Edmund's 'Brother Noble' (I.2.176) with his 'foolish honestie' (I.2.178). But there is another, darker dimension to it that becomes apparent in the storm scenes.

As the links between the two plots multiply, the subplot becomes ever more serious, its humour ever darker. We can no longer enjoy Edmund's satirical hyperbole, which now itself seems 'most savage and unnaturall" (III.3.7), for we know how truly appalling are the events to which he is reacting. . . . From now on, Edmund and his words do not, on the whole, engage our interest. The banality of evil is in his language. We might contrast his resounding boast at the halfway point ('The yonger rises, when the old doth fall' (III.3.25)) with the puzzled and puzzling words with which his brother closes the play:

> The oldest hath borne most: we that are yong
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.
> (V.3.324)

Edgar has a bruised sense of the limitations of the young and of the suffering implicit in the fall of the old; his lines respond to the experience we have lived through. Edmund's words reverb a hollowness. This is a degeneration not merely from the braggadocio of his first soliloquy but from its quieter depths. There even his use of 'us' was pregnant: 'Why brand they us/ With Base?' Not a merely self-pitying 'me', but a compassionate and angry 'us'. Edmund knows that there is a whole 'tribe' of people like him. Lear will need a storm to know that he has taken too little care of the poor naked wretches, but Edmund experiences fellow-feeling or solidarity already. There is self-pity here and selfishness too but, implicitly, other possibilities, some ground from which, at the end, he can mean to do good.

Only in the corners and implications of the play do we continue to find an Edmund who is more than an appetite for power and an object of desire. When, with the blinding, the Lear plot reaches out to appropriate the Gloucester plot, Edmund is, in a sense, banished from his own plot. Cornwall says to him: 'the revenges wee are bound to take uppon your Traitorous father, are not fit for your beholding' (III.7.7). Later, Regan says:

> *Edmund*, I thinke, is gone
> In pitty of his misery, to dispatch
> His nighted life: Moreover to descry
> The strength o'th'Enemy.
> (IV.5.11)

We do not know whether we discern, through the disingenuousness of Cornwall and his wife, the lineaments of pity.

As Edmund withers, Edgar grows in interest. The stages of his dark journey of the imagination to Dover with his father are marked by many different kinds of comedy from the black farce of the 'fall' from the cliff-top to the chillingly boisterous Mummerzett [a pseudo-rastic dialect] with which Oswald is dispatched, the cheerful melodrama of Edgar's description of the fiend with a thousand noses, and the Beckettian comedy of Lear's boots. Edgar's failure to reveal himself to his father is as comically cruel as Launcelot Gobbo's [in *The*

Merchant of Venice]. The comedy does not trivialize, diminish or attempt to dispel human suffering. In some ways it throws it into relief. But it does make us alert to see the absurdity inherent in it and in the pathos of man's punily fist-shaking reactions to it:

> I will do such things,
> What they are yet, I know not, but they shalbe
> The terrors of the earth?
> (II.4.278)

The comedy offers us also, as does his disguise to Edgar, a relief for our feelings and even a way of concealing them. But our own laughter may also seem to us outrageous and forbidden; King Lear persuades us of the unplumbed darkness of the human mind not least by showing us the unpredictability and strangeness of our own reactions. A blind old man attempts to commit suicide: we laugh. A man is killed: we laugh. The king is mad: we laugh. It's a mad world, my masters, and a frightening one. The laughing, leering faces of [the French painter Honore] Daumier rise, unbidden, in my mind.

The comic incongruities of the subplot and its chameleon transformations from farce to melodrama, from domestic tragedy to surrealism, are linked to the implausibility of which it has frequently been accused. How can a father believe that one of his sons would write an incriminating letter to the other while they are living in the same house? Why does Edgar, when on the run, return to the neighbourhood of his father's house? Why does he adopt so many bizarre impersonations? Why does he not reveal himself to his father? . . . Realistic answers to these questions are likely to be helpful in each case and unsatisfying for the totality. The improbabilities of this plot arise from the madness of its world and also from the multiplicity of its dramatic genres; the stuff of many of these genres is, typically, disguise or 'business' with letters.

To think about the impact of implausibility and lunacy it will be helpful to look at a climax where Lear, Gloucester and Edgar come together: all three marry in an instant. Edgar's great cry 'Fathom, and halfe, Fathom and halfe; poore *Tom!* (III.4.37) is not in the Quarto. It is part of the Folio's systematic tendency to build up the character of Edgar. Edgar's cry here from within the hut, the voice of the storm and of someone wrecked in it, and, therefore, of the tempest in Lear's mind, is chilling. The Fool identifies him straightaway as a 'spirit'. His appearance as the dispossessed madman that Lear has dreaded becoming, with the bitter irony of 'Humh, goe to thy bed and warme thee' (46), turns the King's wits. Lear's obsession now governs him: 'Did'st thou give all to thy Daughters?' (48). The moment is unbearably moving and is also comically grotesque: 'Nay, he reserv'd a Blanket, else we had bin all sham'd' (64). Primal nakedness and civilized prudery about nudity are jarred together. We measure simultaneously the artifice of society and the distance the great king has travelled towards the merely animal. It is a further savage irony that it is the harmless Edgar who pushes Lear over the cliff. The harmless Edgar is the most deadly of the play's characters: the murderer of Oswald, the slayer of his brother, the lethal narrator to his father.

Poor Tom makes Lear seem both odder, because Lear is genuinely mad, and relatively normal; we can understand how Lear has been brought to this condition, but why should Edgar have adopted this disguise and why does he enter upon it so wholeheartedly and with, apparently, such appalling indifference for the consequences to others? Why are his speeches about lust and devils so long, so vigorous, so vile? Surely they far exceed the demands of the part he needs to play. In the energy of these speeches, their driving rhythms, their disgusted relish of lubricity, we feel, I think, some release for Edgar and for ourselves. This is the darkness in all of us, even in the best of us. Children and actors know the freedom and confidence and excitement that come from working with a mask. The role of unaccommodated man, which is Edgar's mode of accommodation to this harsh world, protects him but also lays him bare. His nakedness is, and is not, the thing itself; it is both mask and revelation. At some level he knows about 'the sulphurous pit; burning, scalding', and this knowledge may be part of what fits him to be king. . . .

At this profound moment the plots are linked not only by cause but by analogy (and, of course, disanalogy). We have seen Lear as Edmund and still see him as Gloucester; now we see him, he sees himself, as a reflection of Edgar: the demented outcast. Consideration of Edgar's nakedness leads Lear to his insight into the nature of man: 'Unaccommodated man, is no more but such a poore, bare, forked Animall as thou art' (103). This insight, like his later insights into injustice and hypocrisy, is not in itself extraordinary. What makes it extraordinary is the intensity of the language and the fact that it occurs to this man in whom absolute power has given way to absolute need; it is not an intellectual idea but the vision of the whole man. Lear now treats Edgar as his philosopher; the man who has been through the sharpest of all adversities and who expresses in his own body the nature of man must know the cause of thunder and of its moral equivalents, madness and the hard-heartedness of daughters.

The presence of Gloucester makes this a great non-recognition scene as moving as the reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia. If Edgar recognises his father, he does not know the truth about his conduct; Gloucester does not recognise his son and is still misled about his nature; Lear recognises neither of them; no-one recognises Kent. It is the world's midnight, full of 'absence, darknesse, death; things which are not'. In the darkness Gloucester sees: 'Our flesh and blood, my Lord, is grown so vilde, that it doth hate what gets it' (142-3). But his sight is as dull as Lear's. He does not see his loving son, heart-broken: 'Poore Tom's a cold' (144). Like Lear, 'I am almost mad my selfe' (163). At the end he cares for Edgar without recognising him: 'In fellow there, into th' Hovel; keepe thee warm' (171). In its concern for the anonymous other, outcast by madness, it is as touching as Lear's 'Come, let's in all' (172). Edgar has precipitated not only madness but also, through the insight he provokes into the condition of man, fellow feeling.

From now until the end of the play, Edgar will comment frequently, almost like a chorus, upon his own situation or that of others. His continual, and sometimes long-winded, reflections upon his experience can make him seem, despite his lively lunacy, rather priggish. Sometimes his soliloquies seem too naively optimistic or too simple to capture the bitterness and complexity of what we see. . . . Edgar is whistling in the dark; his words demonstrate the inadequacy of language in the face of experience—this experience, which is entirely the creation of words. His use of words to define and contain 'the horror, the horror' is part of his admirable resilience and perseverance. The words in which he represents his situation to himself are as important in his life's struggle as the masks he wears to meet the faces that he meets.

Through his eyes, untainted by guilt and unclouded by heroics, we can measure the bizarreness of what we see and hear:

> My teares begin to take his part so much,
> They marre my counterfeiting.
> (III.6.59)

> I would not take this from report,
> It is, and my heart breakes as it.
> (IV.6.139)

> O matter, and impertinency mix'd
> Reason in Madnesse.
> (IV.6.172)

Most breathtaking of all in its simple enormity is his explanation of his extraordinary attempt to cure his father of his suicidal urge:

> Why do I trifle thus with his dispaire,
> Is done to cure it.

(IV.6.33)

Seldom can a confidence have seemed so unconvincing. We contrast this . . . indirection with Cordelia's straightforwardly loving treatment of Lear and we see to what indirect and crooked paths even a cheerful and frank rationalist (such as the Edgar of his first scene; such as ourselves?) may be driven by the wickedness of the world. It can seem that Edgar is a glutton for his father's punishment, as though

> he hates him
> That would upon the wracke of this tough world
> Stretch him out longer.

It is too easy to say that this concern to preserve his father from suicide is prompted by religious considerations. His attitude towards the prospect of his own death is given by his words to Albany:

> (O our lives sweetnesse,
> That we the paine of death would hourely dye,
> Rather than die at once!)
> (V.3.183)

He may even begin to seem like the fiends who fill his conversation and imagination in Acts III and IV. Edgar's warped deeds and words are the converse of, and the necessary response to, the facile words of Gonerill and Regan. Edgar's speeches and conduct are forced from him by the weight of the sad time. In such a time, to speak and act as one feels and as one needs to do in order to survive is to appear a villain and a fool.

On the other hand, Edgar's longer reflections ('When we our betters see bearing our woes (Q1, not in F: III.6.100-13); 'Yet better thus, and knowne to be contemn'd (IV.1.1-9); 'By nursing them my Lord' (V.3.180-220)) seem oddly inadequate to the situations they describe or by which they are provoked. When Lear's words fail to rise to the situation, their failure is transparent; he is reduced to howls or iterations; his aphasia is magniloquence. But the thinness of Edgar's language is the thinness of ours; in the face of the experience that is King Lear we feel that he feels as inadequate as we do. In both cases, Shakespeare's own rhetoric, which creates both the experiences and the inability of the characters to match them with words, is triumphant. . . .

Edgar's imperative . . . is survival: 'Whiles I may 'scape/ I will preserve myselfe' (II.3.5). His method . . . is disguise: as Poor Tom, as the man who goes to the foot of the cliff to rescue Gloucester, as the bumpkin who kills Oswald, as the messenger to Oswald and as the disguised challenger of Edmund. (To this list we might add, parenthetically, his two appearances as a fiend: in Edmund's description of him to Gloucester at the time of his flight and in his own description of Gloucester's cliff-top companion.) His most effective disguise is to be quite openly part of the heath on which he lives; his language is full of ford and whirlpool, of bog and quagmire, of the hawthorn through which the cold wind blows. . . .

Cordelia told the truth openly. Defenceless, she has 'nothing'; she has death. Edgar knows that as himself he is nothing. Only by playing Poor Tom, a part far less openly heroic than Cordelia's, can he be 'something'. To be something, to be able to say 'come on' (V.2.11), is not much, but it may be another quality that fits him to be king.

Although, as he leads his blind father around in Acts IV and V, he may seem to be worse than ever he was, we can also feel that his curve of fortune is beginning to rise. For one thing, he knows the truth about his father. (He would have known it earlier if he had listened: 'I had a Sonne,/ Now out-law'd from my blood; he sought my life' (III.4.163). But children rarely hear what their fathers are saying.) For another, when Gloucester is puzzled about Edgar's changing voice or Edgar calls him 'father', we sense a growing bond between the two.

Also, he is now wearing some clothes.

He has learnt to adapt. . . . But he has done so without losing [the] ability to respond to the sufferings of others: 'Who, by the Art of knowne and feeling sorrowes,/Am pregnant to good pitty' (V.6.219), Edgar unites the plighted cunning of the villains with the human compassion of the good; by sacrificing his identity and by concealing his tears he safeguards his life and, perhaps, some part of his personality. He can emerge in the last scene, triumphant in arms, authoritative and humble. But to bend, however necessary, is to be, to some degree, warped. We sense this deviation from normal human decency in the impassioned play-acting of his mad scenes, in the bizarre treatment of his father, in his own knowledge that he maintained his disguise too long ('Never (O fault!) reveal'd my selfe unto him' (V.3.191)), and in the unyielding judgements he makes as an exchange of charity with his dying brother.

Like history, *King Lear* repeats itself first as tragedy and then as farce. The subplot's comic, domestic, bizarre and didactic transformations of the main plot throw that into relief, show us more clearly what it is, but they also indicate the absurdity latent in the extremism of tragedy. Implausibility or melodrama are *placed*, incorporated into the strengths of the play. The play gives us two outcomes. We that are young may draw some fragile comfort from the story of Edgar, who found 'the happy hollow of a tree' (II.3.2). Bent, he strengthened, warped by his experience, he survives. The cheerful and charming Edgar of his first scene was a passive victim. Now he has killed his father by accident and, in killing his brother, has committed the act that has the primal eldest curse upon it. But he is the man best fitted to be king. He has done what we all need to do: obeyed the weight of the sad time.

SOURCE: "'I know thee well enough': The Two Plots of *King Lear*" in *English*, Vol. 41, No. 170, Summer, 1992, pp. 97-112.

Language and Imagery

George W. Williams

[*Williams focuses on Act III, scene ii of* Lear, *pointing out the correspondence of the storm with Lear's disordered mind, disrupted families, and the divided kingdom. The storm has a restorative effect on Lear, the critic declares, and he must live through it in order "to be cured of evil." Williams reads the language of Lear's speeches evoking the destructive elements in terms of the Old Testament flood and the New Testament concept of the Last Judgment. He also demonstrates the relation between images of animals and warring elements, harsh diction, and the theme of disordered nature.*]

The lines opening the second scene of Act Three of *King Lear*, comprising the king's remarks on the storm, often quoted and admired, and admittedly some of the most important in the play, have never been examined in detail. They are, however, climactic in the play and fundamental to the character of the king, and they exhibit that combination of dramatic and poetic genius which one expects to find in Shakespeare in critical passages. They are, in short, "the very heart of the organism" [G. Wilson Knight in *The Shakespearean Tempest*]. The late Harley Granville-Barker has pointed out [in *A Companion to Shakespeare Studies*] the fusion of the storm in nature and the storm in the protagonist:

> Lear—striving (we are given the hint) ". . . in his little world of man to outscorn the to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain," matching himself against the storm, echoing it in defying it—becomes for us, without ceasing to be himself, a very image of it. He creates it dramatically; but not by detached description, which would merely let us see it through his eyes. He is endued, and he endues, us, with the very spirit of it. He, for the crucial moment, is at one with it, and we with him, and he is to us Lear and the storm too.

This dramatic presentation of the storm without identified and equated with the storm within and, it may be added, with the disruption in the kingdom, requires writing of the highest intensity.

The first speech in the second scene is Lear's (III. ii. 1-9). It is the crowning speech of the first part of the play—in a sense the keystone. Only a few lines later, Lear says, "My wits begin to turn." His speeches in scene ii show the last traces of his already vanishing sanity, and in scene iv he is "far gone, far gone." His prayer in scene iv (28-36) concluding:

> Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just

is the first step in the regenerative process, showing as it does a sympathy towards man and an incipient willingness to admit an error, but it is also the last sane utterance, if not indeed an expression of a mentality already deranged, and it follows the height of the storm.

The storm of the Third Act is prepared for with the greatest care. At the conclusion of the Second Act there are several references to its approach.

> *Cornwall*. Let us withdraw; 'twill be a storm. (290)
> *Gloucester*. Alack, the night comes on, and the bleak winds
> Do sorely ruffle. For many miles about
> There's scarce a bush. (303-305)
> *Regan*. Shut up your doors. (307)
> *Cornwall*. Shut up your doors, my lord; 'tis a wild night.
> My Regan counsels well. Come out o' th' storm.
> (311-312)

In scene i of Act Three the clouds continue to gather.

> *Kent*. Who's there, besides foul weather?
> *Gentleman*. One minded like the weather, most unquietly.
> *Kent*. I know you. Where's the king?
> *Gentleman*. Contending with the fretful elements;
> Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
> Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
> That things might change or cease; tears his white hair,
> Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
> Catch in their fury and make nothing of;
> Strives in his little world of man to outscorn
> The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.
> This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
> The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
> Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs,
> And bids what will take all. (1-15)
> *Kent*. Fie on this storm! (49)

This descriptive speech is extremely important to the great storm speech of the following scene, for it suggests in advance the wildness of the night (not realized fully until it appears in Lear), it anticipates the themes he is to develop (the violence of the wind and water, destruction and annihilation), and it emphasizes significantly

the unnaturalness of nature. The animal imagery is here, as typically in Lear, very revealing: the implication is clear that the animals mentioned in this passage—wild, ravening, and scavenging at best and here urged by abnormal causes to a state beyond their characteristic wildness—are reacting more reasonably to the storm than is the king. Edgar's lines, "False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey" (III. iv. 95-97), may serve as a useful gloss to these allusions. Thus the lion is not the royal figure (is without the majesty and ceremony of kingship) so much as he is the beast of prey; the wolf, by nature greedy, is *belly-pinched*, almost starving; and the bear dam, having nursed her cubs—who like Lear's daughters have taken all from her and yet clamor for more—hungers to feed herself and them. An association is evidently intended. These wild animals in spite of their roughness are, after all, out of the weather under cover from the storm in the same way that Lear's daughters have found shelter from its violence, closing their doors to him as they went. Lear himself points the significance of these references to wild animality in his earlier lines:

> No, rather I abjure all roofs, and choose
> To wage against the enmity o' th' air,
> To be a comrade with the wolf and owl—
> Necessity's sharp pinch!
> (II. iv. 211-214)

The wolf, symbol of greed, and the owl, of malevolence, are the evil companions the king expects to meet on the heath. Actually even the most irrational animals have left the barren heath to seek protection, while the king, *unbonneted*, and abandoned by every creature, stands alone against animal nature, human nature, and, as he discovers, cosmic nature, attended only by the pricking wisdom of the Fool.

The unnaturalness and wildness of nature are further indicated in the very winds and seas themselves, which are urged to reverse the order of things prescribed in the creation of the world: "God said againe, Let the waters under the heauen bee gathered into one place, and let the drie land appeare: and it was so" [Genesis i. 9-10]. But the reversion and madness of the elements are equated with the chaotic condition of the king at odds with himself and are described in terms of human physiology to heighten the identification. The *impetuous blasts* are in a state of *eyeless rage* just as Lear is in *high rage*; the image of sight instantly recalls the frequent references to Lear's spiritual blindness and to Gloucester's physical blindness. The correspondence between Lear and the world, the microcosm and the macrocosm, is indicated in the line "striving in his little world of man" and affirmed by Gloucester: "O rum'd piece of nature! this great world/Shall so wear out to naught" (IV. vi. 137). This anthropomorphic description of the storm winds emphasizes another parallel which is inherent in the Lear-cosmos relation. The correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, macrocosmic violence in terms of the microcosm, suggests additional and amplifying correspondences; the kingdom and the family, the body politic and the body domestic, are caught up in this mesh of interlocking connotations. That these correspondences form an intended extension of relevance Gloucester explains: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourg'd by the sequent effects. . . . Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. . . . We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves" (I. ii. 112-125). The assimilation of the body politic into the equations between the body domestic or the family, the microcosm, and the macrocosm is suggested in the imagery borrowed from political warfare describing military operations: *to-and-fro-conflicting* and

> But yet I call you [elements] servile ministers,
> That will with two pernicious daughters join
> Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
> So old and white as this!

(III. ii. 21-24)

The eclipses, the jarring elements, the divided kingdom, the disordered family, the demented Lear are firmly linked together in the system of correspondences. At the same time, however, it must be noted that the storm, a perversion of nature, is yet disorder within order and actually presupposes an order. "The storm suggests, on one level, the victory of a nature hostile to humanity; yet the storm is regularly regarded as a convulsion of nature—a disorder which interferes with but does not destroy an essential order which still is. There is chaos in the world; but tragedy sees chaos in perspective; it measures chaos by order. Chaos is irreparable only when it is mistaken for order; when it is felt as disorder, there is still hope. . . .

"The tragic world is a kind of chaos: the disorder within the soul is projected into the larger world" [R. B. Heilman, *This Great Stage*]. The storm is thus the disorder or purgative necessary to the order or health of the king. It can only be meaningful if taken in this sense and understood to be a necessary evil through which he must live so as to be cured of evil.

In the first nine lines of scene ii the storm and the style rise to their greatest pitch. It is in fact only through the rise in the style that the audience comes to feel the full extent of the storm. In these lines Shakespeare reaches the point for which he has been preparing in the preceding two scenes. The report which the Gentleman makes in scene i first announces the condition of the king, at war with himself and the elements. This is followed by a digression of thirty-five lines during which the conversation shifts to the fortunes of Cordelia and the activities of the British dukes. Kent recalls the storm hastily before his exit and immediately in the person of the king it breaks in full fury.

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
> You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
> Vaunt couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
> Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
> Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,
> Crack Nature's moulds, all germains spill at once,
> That make ingrateful man!

The phonetics in these lines is especially remarkable. Most notable is the frequency of fricatives and stops in clusters of onomatopoetic vernacular words chosen to suggest the roughness and harshness of the weather:

> blow, crack, cheek, blow, cataract, spout, drench'd, steeples, drown'd, cocks,
> thought-executing, oak-cleaving thunderbolts, singe, shaking thunder, strike (in the Qq, *smite*), thick, crack, spill, make.

The pattern of nasals—

> winds, huricanoes, drench'd, drown'd, vaunt, cleaving thunder, singe, thunder, rotundity, nature's moulds, germains, make, ingrateful man—

and the pattern of the sibilants—

> winds, cheeks, cataracts, hurricanoes, spout, steeples, cocks, sulph'rous, executing, fires, couriers, bolts, singe, shaking, strike (in the Qq, *smite*), nature's moulds, germains, spill, once—

while not so spectacular are equally present. The combination of a low vowel with a nasal, honored from classical times, occurs most effectively in

> *Vaunt*-couriers to oak-cleaving *thunder*bolts
> Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking *thunder*,
> Strike flat the thick *rotundity* o' th' world.

Here the *-und-* group links the three lines inextricably together, providing the equivalent of the continued rumbling of thunder. But after the hissing, the crashing, and the thundering, the passage comes to rest as far as that is possible on the liquids, *moulds, all, spill, ingrateful. . . .*

It is not inappropriate to examine the relationship of the king and the elements at this point as it is revealed in these nine lines and in the following eleven. This tremendous nine-line speech can not be regarded as an accurate though frenzied meteorological report on the state of the weather. Such has already been given by the two faithful retainers at the opening of the Act. These lines are not the statement of one resigned to his fate, for the king is not yet in the purgative stage. If they are regarded as a prayer to the great gods for retribution, serious difficulties are encountered in resolving the imprecations hurled at the elements in the second part of the speech, following the lines of the Fool, and including "I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness. . . ." and "But yet I call you servile ministers. . . ." If these lines again form a prayer they differ strikingly from the more easily recognized prayers, "O heavens, if you do love old men" and "Poor naked wretches." They are in fact much closer to the curses of barrenness which they parallel in thought as well as in tone and mood. The Gentleman explains finally the nature of the king's speech: "Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,/ Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main" (III. i. 5-6). This bidding can only be equivalent to the command of the king, as when he says: "bid them [Regan and Cornwall] come forth and hear me,/ Or at their chamber-door I'll beat the drum/ Till it cry death to sleep" (II. iv. 118-120). These wild lines then must be understood as direct orders to the winds, the waves, the thunder, and the lightning. Such an interpretation accords well with what has been seen of the character of the king. The commands of the first nine lines recall those given throughout the earlier part of the play; they are in the same vein. King Lear regards himself still as every inch a king, and shouting his orders to his subordinates, he reveals clearly his proud, arrogant, and stubborn authority. The elements are Lear's servants. But he has given to them, as to Cordelia, Kent, and the Fool, nothing. Here at last the reckoning is made: nothing comes of nothing. From these unfee'd servants Lear no longer receives toadying flattery, he no longer receives even obedience. To a royal philosophy of *quid pro quo* (or *quid pro nihilo*) [something for something (or something for nothing)], the basis of Lear's erroneous sense of values, comes the awakening: "You owe me no subscription." *Nihil pro nihilo* [nothing for nothing]. The first lines of the speech command general destruction in which Lear's white head must perforce be singed. The second group of eleven lines is anti-climactic; the destruction does not occur. The tempest continues, however, to beat down on Lear's unprotected head. The realization develops that the elements are no longer his servants; they are in fact his masters, now servilely and venally colleagued with his daughters. He is no longer a king. He discovers at this moment when the elements do not obey him that they, allies of his ungrateful daughters, have also thrown off the imperial yoke. Instead of responding to his commands immediately, as he remembers later, they turn on him. "When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out" (IV. vi. 102-105). It is the remarks of the Fool between the two sections of the speech that make this clear: "O nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rainwater out o' door." That is to say, voluntary submission to your rebelling daughters is to be preferred to enforced submission to the rebelling or nature, which evidently has no longer any intention of obeying you.

Furthermore, in giving these orders to the elements, Lear is acting in conformity and parallel with Roman and Celtic tradition. These mythologies both state the ancient position of the king as the creator of the weather, especially of the stormy weather. Numa, an early king of Rome, for classical precedent, is recorded to have been able to call on the elements at will. An interesting expression of this tradition is seen earlier in Edmund's

deception of his father: "I told him the revenging gods/ 'Gainst parricides did all their thunders bend" (II. i. 47-48). Though Edmund utters this threat as a means of inciting his father's superstitious nature to action against Edgar, it becomes a "bloody instruction" which with typical Shakespearian irony returns to plague him. Edmund, the parricide, like Lear's daughters, is finally stricken down by the forces that league with the gods. Paradoxically, it is his own head which is eventually "singed."

This power of calling on the thunderbolt, which is granted to the king, exalts him to a position equal to that of Jupiter and identifies him with the Thunderer, the Rain-god, and the Hurler of the Lightnings. As Gloucester says, "He holp the heavens to rain" (III. vii. 62). The king-god Lear demands from the heavens, as is his right, a storm, the violence of which can be paralleled only by the turbid violence of his own mind.

The extent of the storm must be absolute and final. This is made clear in the imagery first of *cataracts* and *hurricanoes* in the quotation. The waters loosed on the land are to be poured from the heavens and raised from the deeps: are to be heavenly and earthly. . . . *Cataracts* are descending waters, of the heavens, and *hurricanoes* are rising waters, of the earth.

By pouring down, the cataracts of heaven will cause the steeples to drink: by inundation the rising waters of the sea will cover the cocks. Lear orders a return of the Hebraic deluge with a covering of the land by the water, a return to a state of near chaos, of elemental confusion. The works of man are to be destroyed and even the works of God are to be annihilated. The words of Jehovah announcing the Flood before the building of the ark similarly describe the destruction of His own work: "And I, Beholde, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under the heauen: and everything that is in the earth shall perish" (Genesis vi. 17).

As the imagery of cataracts and hurricanes has evoked connotations of destruction comparable to that at the time of the Deluge, so the concluding images suggests the ruin of the Last Judgment. Bolts of thunder and lightning are to flatten out the roundness of the earth, Nature's moulds are to be cracked and shattered until they are useless, all germains are to be spilled. Such imagery can indicate only eschatological destruction. [A. C] Bradley has suggested [in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*] that the theme of the latter day may have been in Shakespeare's mind during the writing of this play, and Lear himself threatens to do undescribable things, the "terrors of the earth." Bradley cites specifically the passages in Matthew and Mark generally titled "the little apocalypse," and it may not be irrelevant to point out that in both these scriptural predictions there are descriptions of the time of the Final Judgment which would set in within the time scheme of this play: "the brother shall deliuer the brother to death, and the father the sonne, and the children shall rise against their parents and shall cause them to die" (Mark xiii. 12). It is not improbable in the light of the importance of the themes of justice and injustice in the play that Shakespeare was thinking in the king's hectic speech in terms of the Day of Judgment when justice shall finally be accomplished in the world. . . .

The reason for this mad ruin is not hard to find: *ingrateful man*. This is a destruction which like the Noachic Deluge and the Final Judgment is sent as a punishment for filial ingratitude, to overcome all "unnaturalness between the child and the parent." Its thunderbolts must destroy and abrogate utterly; its lightnings must eracinate all germens lest they, grown up sinners and ingrates like Goneril and Regan, might make another generation of ingrateful creatures.

Lear's command to Nature in these tremendous lines is for complete destruction and primordial chaos. Miss [Edith] Sitwell has pointed out [in "*King Lear*," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1950] that "Lear . . . in his prayer to Nature to kill the sources of life in his daughters, struck at the very heart of Nature, disturbing that lake of Darknesse, the original chaos from which all being arose." In his command he wills that all creation tumble again into that lake of chaos in a cataclysmic eruption with the characteristics at once of the original Deluge and of the "abomination of desolation" at the Latter Day.

SOURCE: "The Poetry of the Storm in *King Lear*," in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. II, No. 1, January, 1951, pp. 57-71.

John C. McCloskey

[*McCloskey examines the association of images from the world of "animals, insects, and the more repulsive denizens" of the seas with the shifts in Lear's emotions. The king's selfishness and moral blindness, together with his inability to understand others, lead him into a world of disordered nature, the critic maintains. McCloskey notes that as Lear moves from resentment in Act I to indignation in Act II, and, finally, rage in Act III, the imagery changes to reflect the increasing intensity of his moods and to underscore the theme of unnaturalness.*]

It has been said that we must accept the passionate, irrational King Lear, with his plan for dividing his kingdom, and the devoted yet strangely reticent Cordelia as data not to be inquired into but taken on poetic faith. Yet Lear's "retirement" is a sensible thing in itself. What makes it fraught with tragedy is his misreading of human nature. Had all his children been like Cordelia, things might have turned out well. And here is the irony—that what is sensible in itself is made a foolish, senseless thing to do by the characters of those involved. Or to put it another way, imperfect, selfish human nature again wrecks ideals.

Consider that Lear is a king who loves his daughters and out of his egoism expects love in return, a king who believes simply that generosity begets gratitude, that children revere and honor their parents, that obedience is of the nature of the filial relation. A king who "hath ever but slenderly known himself", he has not known his courtiers either, for example, Kent. A king who is curiously naive in the ways of human nature, who has no subtlety in human relations, who does not even suspect that power may corrupt and that old age rendered helpless is a thing for contempt. A king who is not wise enough to protect himself but of his own volition throws himself upon the untender mercies of the evil, whom he does not even recognize as evil.

Yet Lear embodies the idealism of fatherly love as Cordelia and Edgar are emblems of filial devotion, Kent of loyal service, the Fool of conscience, and France of true love. But Lear's idealism is tainted by evil, by the moral corruption of self-deluding egoism, while the idealism of the others is not, and the proper end for Lear is, therefore, tragic disaster.

In the chaotic and hostile world into which Lear is precipitated by his acts of misjudgment, self-will, and wrath, the tragic disaster toward which he proceeds and which culminates in madness and death in a world against which he cannot contend, a world wild and ferocious, a world of negated values, moral blindness, and unnaturalness, is expressed to a remarkable degree by images from the padding, stalking, creeping, crawling, slithering world of animals, insects, and the more repulsive denizens of the waters, and the images are evoked to express or to intensify his anger, rejection, indignation, wrath, and vengeance.

The imagery of the lower animals, which suggests the moral derangement of the world in which Lear has hitherto thought himself secure, begins with the cooling of his reception in Goneril's home, when her servant Oswald neglects to answer Lear's question as to the whereabouts of his daughter. This breach of decorum and respect and reverence for authority stirs a mild resentment in Lear, the first stage of the emotional turmoil which brings him at length to madness. His resentment and, perhaps, a touch of proper contempt, the genesis of which is Lear's instinctive awareness of the social disparity between his kingly state and the lowly status of a servant, are expressed in his epithet "mongrel", an image general, colorless, and uncommitted, since the offence is not at the moment identifiable with the attitude of the daughters or the moral problem of the play. When Oswald describes Lear as not the king but "My lady's father", Lear's indignation is spurred, and the imagery becomes more intense and particularized in its connotative derogation as "whoreson dog" and "cur". It is significant that Lear thinks in terms of such lowly, though commonplace images, since he has himself already entered upon his own descent, with the result that eventually his state is reduced as low, in the storm scene on the heath particularly, as that of the animal world in terms of the imagery of which his mind

constitutionally reacts.

From the evocation of mere resentment and indignation the imagery becomes grimmer, more serious, and more vividly suggestive of Lear's destitute moral condition and the frightful eventualities of the future. The Fool's bitter statement,

> For you know, nuncle,
> The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
> That it had it head bit off by it young.
> (I. iv. 234-236)

is not only a sharp and crude image of ingratitude, but it is also an image of Lear's own foolishness, his misjudgment, his improvident helplessness, and his egoistic blindness. The imagery implied in the verb "bit off" is by transference an image of human decapitation and a darkly prophetic forewarning of what Lear is to experience from his children. In the image is implicit the lack of gratitude and love and even common humanity which already are Lear's destiny. The image is so proper and so apt in its context that though Lear seems to ignore it, it succeeds immediately in condensing the whole moral problem which enmeshes Lear in its inevitable consequences.

As Lear enters the incipiency of his rage, irritated by Oswald and shocked by the callousness of Goneril, who desiring to teach him what is properly conventional to age refers to his actions as pranks, thus suggesting his senility, and demands that he be shorn of his knights, the imagery changes to correspond with his emotional state—his indignation and his anger at the filial ingratitude of Goneril, this "degenerate bastard". Since the natural order of things is here disturbed, the expression of this state of affairs, which is quite monstrous, receives its correspondency in its figurative presentment of ingratitude as a "hideous seamonster". This is reinforced by an appropriate shift in the imagery, though the correspondence of destructive intent and power is maintained, to "detested kite". For a kite is a falcon-like bird which preys on small quarry, such as is Lear without his kingship, without his power, moving down the scale from greatness.

Shifting from the image of the kite, Lear intensifies his emotion of frustration and rage, which seethes in him against his unnatural daughter Goneril, whom he has just cursed unnaturally, praying nature to make her sterile, by objectifying his rising obsession of ingratitude in the figure of a serpent's tooth. In thus juxtaposing images from the sky and from the crawling earth he suggests, perhaps, his subconscious awareness that both heaven and earth are against him. Having employed the images of sea-monster, kite, and serpent to vivify his referent, he gives further extension to the notion of Goneril's cruelty and sly, cunning nature by additional images from the animal world, "wolvish visage" and "fox", and these images for the first time blend with anger the passion of vengeance, for Lear wrathfully states that when Regan hears of this she will "flay" Goneril's wolvish visage and the Fool states that had one caught a fox like this daughter it would soon to the slaughter.

Now the imagery sinks below the animal stratum to the mollusk, thus intensifying the sense of the moral depths in which Lear, not yet pessimistically, helplessly wanders. The imagery of the snail and the oyster carries to the lowest pitch of figurative expression the blindness of Lear, his lack of judgment, the low order of the ratiocination from which proceeded his initial error. Then the image of the foolishness of Lear is carried upward to the animal stratum once again by "assess". If in this connection it is recalled that the animal stratum is often referred to as "the animal kingdom", the irony of Lear's position is painfully apparent.

Just as Goneril has been reduced in the area of imagery to a correspondence with animals that sting, bite, and destroy, organisms which are feral and inhuman, so her servant Oswald is dehumanized as a rat, a dog, a goose, the latter image being peculiarly appropriate to Oswald, who is remarkably consistent in the traits implicit in this figure.

With the momentary resurgence of Lear's old imperious attitude in his indignation at the stocking of his messenger Kent, the scale of the animal imagery rises from the stupid and compliant goose to horses, dogs, bears, and monkeys, thus suggesting the greater degree of the culpability of Cornwall and Regan by creating imagery belonging to animals on a higher ratiocinative plane and thereby rendering their guilt less excusable. Now again irony is blended explicity with the imagery which sets forth Lear's moral problem. His imperious indignation, in terms of the imagery, is as cogent as learning secured from an ant. His intensified anger becomes adulterated with helplessness, and his orders to Regan and Cornwall to come forth are as ineffective as the cockney crying to the eels when she put them alive in the pastry. While anger is often imaged forth in feral terms, blindness, stupidity, weakness, and helplessness are presented in images from the still lower stratum of animate things, that of the snail, the oyster, and the eel, and in the appropriateness of the imagery is apparent once again its integral relation to the total structure of the play.

When Lear, having fled to his "Beloved Regan", reflects upon his love and generosity to his daughters which proceeded from his heart and upon the unnatural ingratitude paid him by Goneril in return, the image which externalizes his emotional state of outraged paternal affection mingled with surprise and shock appears in the form of sharp-toothed unkindness, like a vulture, tearing at his heart, and in his rising anger at Regan's rejection of his claims and her injunction to ask Goneril's forgiveness and return to her, this image is reinforced in the collateral one of being struck with a serpent's tongue upon the very heart. In the psychological application of the imagery as expressive of Lear's emotive states at various stages of his mounting tragedy, the images of the wounding of his heart by vultures and serpents mark a crisis in the rising action, for after this there occurs, eventually in the storm scene, the loss of his wits, in other words, an ironic reduction of Lear himself to that unnatural state which is so essential a theme of the entire tragedy. His estrangement from normal human relations, consonant with the above, is further marked, in passionate reaction to Regan's rejection of him, by his refusal of her demand to dismiss fifty of his knights and by his determination, instead, to abjure all roofs and be a comrade with the wolf and the owl. Throughout the imagery runs an intensification of the theme of unnaturalness, the basis of which is, of course, filial ingratitude. Even the Gentleman discussing with Kent the storm on the heath uses imagery similar to Lear's as an atmospheric reinforcement of the psychological mood into which Lear has been precipitated; the stormy night into which Lear has emerged from the previous rejection scene is one from which the cub-drawn bear, the lion, and the belly-pinched wolf flee. Contending with the frightful elements, tearing his hair, striving to outscorn the wind, rain, and night, Lear is pursued by his heart-struck injuries. Also the unnatural cruelty of his pitiful state and the savagery of the night are figured forth, to some degree, in the aforementioned famished bear, fierce lion, and hunger-driven wolf.

The lowly imagery of the louse employed by the Fool, that of a small, wingless, blood-sucking insect, is an ironic image presenting a vivid, concrete manifestation of the contrast between Lear's impotent state and his rather imperial, though helpless, arraignment of the elements which have with his two pernicious daughters joined their battles against so old and white a head as his. The image of the louse is implicative of a descent from elevation, a contrast with the soaring evil of the vulture, and a descent from size, the massive evil of the sea-serpent; considered in its context it is also, in contrast with "head", indicative of a lack of intelligence and is, therefore, a further indictment of Lear's original irrationality. The imagery of the louse is both a presentment of Lear's impotency, the louse being on a lower level than that of the feral animals, a small wingless thing, almost insignificant though painful, and also a prefiguring of the pelican image which soon intensifies it, the image of a blood-sucking animate thing, implicit in the figure of the louse, having for its referent the daughters who have taken all and, draining his blood from him, seek his death. And in an extension of this idea and a logical transmutation of it, that of flesh feeding on the flesh that begot it, Lear's emotions express themselves in the metaphor of the pelican daughters. So admirable a consistency is there in the images and so vivid a reflection of Lear's psyche that it is evident that the imagery is of the very texture of Lear's psyche itself. Habitually and spontaneously his mind expresses itself in imagery, and when his mind is in a disturbed state the imagery is that of the animal world, or at least the world of animate, sub-human things.

The notion of descent, which inheres in the animal figures, is made explicit by Lear in his assertion that in Edgar's case nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters. Expressive of this and showing the partial correspondency of Edgar's state with that of Lear on the stormy heath are the images employed by Edgar:

> . . . hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey
> (III. iv. 96-98)

With Lear's climactic statement:

> Ha! here's three on's us are sophisticated! Thou are the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings!
> (III. iv. 110-14)

the descent is accomplished, and the correspondency of Lear to the animal stratum toward which his psychic tragedy has been tending and in terms of images from which he has characteristically expressed himself is complete. Bereft of reason, mad, tearing off his clothes, Lear is now little better than the beasts. He has reached the bottom of the scale which his imagery has prefigured. The climax of descent in terms of animal imagery, if this is not too paradoxical a statement, coincides with the climax of the play.

When Lear appears at Dover mad, fantastically dressed with wild flowers, some of his imagery corresponds to his state of mind: crow-keeper, mouse, bird, gilded butterflies; this is the innocent, naive imagery of childhood or senility, a harmless, neutral, non-evocative imagery proper to one whose wits are gone. Yet in the subsequent imagery begins his reascent into partial rationality, his progress upward from the animal state with which in the climax he had identified himself. His memory, in the area of his emotions, reasserts itself and with it a reminiscent indignation and anger which bring into prominence once again his obsession of filial ingratitude: "They flattered me like a dog" (IV. iv. 98). Blended with it, too, is a critical bitterness which is an image of his renascent awareness of his fallen state. The wren and the gilded fly, the fitchew and the soiled horse become images of copulation and adultery, and in the extension of causes into a relative complexity is suggested not only the advance of Lear's mind in a tentative way toward humanity once again but the substitution of cynicism for the violated and outraged affection which throughout the play had so obsessed him.

Lear's reascent to reason and, therefore, to humanity is arrested by a resurgence of tragedy—the death of Cordelia. The irony of his apparent moral victory in self-recognition, in his awareness of good and evil, and in at least a rudimentary sense of equity and of the real victory of the malevolence of his enemies, carries the essential tensions of the play through to the very end. Lear's reaction against the injustice of Cordelia's death, the needless waste of goodness in the world, his questioning of the why of things, are expressed through his characteristic imagery which presents his skepticism in regard to the moral system of the cosmos, an act of ratiocination which is, of course, on a human rather than an animal level:

> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
> And thou no breath at all?
> (V. iii. 306-07)

And on the curve of his partial reascent toward reason and humanity, presented in terms of animal imagery to the last, Lear dies.

SOURCE: "The Emotive Use of Animal Imagery in *King Lear*" in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 3, Summer, 1962, pp. 321-25.

Love

Marilyn Gaull

[*Gaull argues that* King Lear *depicts two kinds of love: divine love, associated with universal order, and erotic love, associated with chaos and destruction. When Lear abdicates his royal responsibilities, the critic asserts, he plunges his kingdom into a state of spiritual and emotional disorder. Gaull suggests that Lear's choice of corrupt, erotic love over divine love results in a transference of sexuality; the king becomes emasculated as he is gradually stripped of the symbols of his traditional role, while at the same time Goneril and Regan increasingly assume masculine attitudes. By contrast, the critic declares, Cordelia adheres to the principle of domestic and political hierarchy, and thus she becomes an agent of divine love in the play.*]

Placing *King Lear* in the intellectual climate in which the play was conceived, one finds a conflict on the thematic level between two kinds of love: divine love, expressed in an ordered cosmic, social, and spiritual hierarchy, and erotic love, a kind of subterranean energy which is the source of chaos, disorder, and destruction. Specifically, when King Lear assumed he could divest himself of responsibility, retiring as any lesser mortal to the obscurity of an "unburdened" old age, he committed an offense against universal order and thereby denied divine love. Then, when he allowed himself to be seduced of his kingdom by Goneril and Regan, he exchanged his role as king for that of love goddess, suffering all the consequences of a submission, however tacit, to the illegitimate order of eros. . . .

[By] appropriating the privileges of position without the responsibilities, by preferring private interest to public obligation, by investing an inordinate amount of power in inferior indivduals, Lear created the conditions for rebellion by those whom he was enjoined to control. By extension, through his failure to be ruled by reason, he alienated himself from divine love and forfeited his sovereignty over his own baser passions. His abdication of responsibility released the destructive energies of eros in the social and political sphere and delivered him and all those upon whom his life impinged into psychological and spiritual chaos.

It is the three exiles in the play, Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar who, by maintaining the three basic relationships of an ordered society, express divine love. Displaced by the collapse of the social and political hierarchy, they are the most evident victims of Lear's truancy. Nonetheless, they continue to articulate and perform the services demanded by universal order. Thus Cordelia demonstrates woman's subordination to her husband; Kent, a subject's subordination to his king; and Edgar, a son's subordination to his father. . . .

Gloucester and Albany may also be considered victims of Lear's truancy, more helpless than the exiles insofar as their fulfilling their roles in the universal order depends upon circumstance rather than a capacity for divine love. But because they are basically good and adapted, however passively, to their roles in the legitimate hierarchy, they cannot survive in the alternative and subversive hierarchy of eros. The gentle and ineffectual Albany allows his wife to dominate him, creating the conditions for his own cuckolding. And Gloucester, who suffers a defect of vision long before his blindness, was never able to distinguish between the legitimate and the subversive order. His acknowledgment at the opening of the play of the position he allowed Edmund, the product of an adulterous union, is an ominous concession to the order of eros which will ultimately betray him. He admits to Kent: "But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account: though this knave came something saucily to the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair, there was good sport in the making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged" (I, i, 19-26). The desolating consequences of this emotional generosity are summed up by Edgar in the same speech in which he reveals his identity:

> The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us:
> The dark and vicious place where thee he got

Cost him his eyes.
(V, iii, 172-175)

If the three exiles, Gloucester, and Albany are victims of Lear's truancy, Goneril and Regan are villains for the same reason. In their mismanaged attempts to fill the vacuum created by Lear, they are simply fulfilling another principle of natural law. The chaos which surrounds them arises from the appetitive or erotic instincts by which they are dominated. But, after all, it was these very instincts to which Lear appealed when he invited his daughters' declarations of love, declarations which he made the qualification for possessing his kingdom. A comparison between Lear's overtures and Cleopatra's at the opening of *Antony and Cleopatra* suggests rather strikingly the role Lear had assumed. Like Lear, she asks, "If it be love indeed, tell me how much" (I, i, 14). And this Egyptian love goddess is admonished by Antony in terms peculiarly reminiscent of Cordelia's: "There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd" (I, i, 15). What I am suggesting is that not only did Lear disregard divine love in favor of the profane but also that it was a profane love which was essentially perverted. This idea seems to be enforced by a fascinating transference of sexuality which gradually emerges in the interaction of Lear and his daughters. Lear's emasculation begins when he places himself in the custody of his daughters thereby forfeiting along with his kingdom his masculine role as superior, ruler, protector, and provider. After Goneril has abused her power over him, he begins to conceive of her as a man, calls her a "degenerate bastard," claims that he is ashamed of her "power to shake [his] manhood," and finally in his madness accuses both her and Regan of not being "men o' their words" (I, iv, 260, 304; IV, vi, 106). Simultaneously, Goneril and Regan assume increasingly masculine attitudes, particularly in their competition for Edmund's affection. Regan's masculinity is most evident in the passage in which, expressing decidedly female jealousy of Goneril, she adopts the spare terms of the battlefront: "I am doubtful that you have been conjunct/And bosomed with her, as far as we call hers" (V, i, 12-13). Goneril, on the other hand, like an intriguing courtier contrives to have her husband murdered so that she might better pursue Edmund. Her attitude reveals the destructive consequences of investing the political power of a legitimate hierarchy in female figures who are adapted to rule only in the subversive hierarchy of eros: "I had rather lose the battle than that sister/Should loosen him and me" (V, I, 18-19).

The Fool and Edmund, initially vagrants or aberrations in the official hierarchy, function as vocal adversaries in the debate between the two major opposing forces of order and chaos. The Fool with his detached and uncompromisingly literal perspective shrewdly if instinctively predicts and interprets the consequences of Lear's action, measuring it against the norms of hierarchy. For example, when Lear asks him "When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?" The Fool replies:

. . . e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters
thy mothers; for when thou gav'st them the rod, and
put'st down thine own breeches,
Then they for sudden joy did weep,
And I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bo-peep
And go the fools among
(I, iv, 175-182)

The Fool's musical association is a significant one since it is an indication of his affinity with cosmic order, his instinctive harmony with natural law and divine love. Cordelia similarly uses music to restore Lear's rationality, to bring him back in tune with the divine principles of the universal hierarchy.

Finally, Edmund, the child of eros, serves not only as the voice of the anarchical group but also as the source of its daemonic energy. His superior rationality adapts him to his role of leadership, but his abuse of this faculty for self-advancement marks him as the most culpable. His is the only purely volitional offense against natural law. An unregenerate individual with an insight superior to Lear's, Cordelia's, Edgar's, indeed to that

of any of the major candidates for heroic stature, Edmund ranks among the great literary villains who before their defeat contrive to express and to expose the great sanative values of the drama. As an illegitimate son, Edmund has no position in the social and political hierarchy, but this same condition eminently qualifies him to lead the subversive hierarchy of eros, chaos, and destruction. Having been indiscriminately admitted to the hierarchy by Gloucester, Edmund becomes an incipient threat to it, manipulating and exploiting it with a dashing expertise. . . .

Ironically, it is by emulating the King that Edmund becomes the ruler of his illegitimate kingdom. He formulates his legal code on the authority of Lear's distortion of natural law: the prerogatives of youth and private interest over age and public responsibility. By the time Edmund articulates the rationale for his treason, he is only interpreting what has been empirically demonstrated by Lear: "The younger rises when the old doth fall" (III, iii, 26). This statement with its Machiavellian disregard of human feeling, its frigid recognition of what the modern temper regards as the inevitable pattern of social evolution, acquires its barb from the ethos of Lear's world. Although cosmic hierarchy illustrated and natural law proclaimed that age and the fullness of experience were the supreme virtues for wielding power, Lear voted for his own retirement, disqualified himself, relinquished the protection of a position he held by divine right. Then, he appealed to the very order which he had violated:

> O heavens!
> If you do love old men, if your sweet sway
> Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,
> Make it your cause. Send down, and take my part.
> (II, iv, 188-191)

The corrective, the re-assertion of natural law in the development of generations, is offered as an admonition by Edgar to his suicidal father:

> A man must endure
> Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
> Ripeness is all.
> (V, ii, 9-11)

The battle lines between the forces of chaos, a grotesque paradox of the legitimate hierarchy, and the forces of order, assembled in the costumes of fools, beggars, and madmen, are clearly defined when Gloucester moves from the castle, now ruled by Edmund, to the moor, the storm, and the insane court of Lear. It is a powerful confrontation, for Gloucester is appealing to the very source of chaos when, disheartened by what he thinks is Edgar's treachery, he laments to Lear:

> Our flesh and blood, my Lord, is grown so vile
> That it doth hate what gets it.
> (III, iv, 148-149)

But in this kingdom of the absurd, even this multiple truth is an untruth, or at best a half truth. Fidelity is everywhere evident—in an anonymous retainer, a mad beggar, and an oracular fool. The central and compelling truth distorted beyond recognition is flung at a raging and primordial world by the alienated and insane symbol and minister of virtue, reason, and justice:

> I am the King himself. . . .
>
> Nature's above art in that respect.
> (IV, vi, 84, 86)

Lear's insanity involves his recognition of the emotional basis of his relationship with Goneril and Regan, a love professedly filial but essentially corrupt, profane, erotic. Thus he passes from a fixation on filial ingratitude to one on lechery and adultery. This change is initiated when he meets Edgar disguised as Tom o'Bedlam and hears his factitious autobiography. Tom attributes his madness, the "foul field" which pursued him, to his life as a foppish courtier seduced by his mistress and corrupted by his passions:

> A servingman, proud in heart and mind, that curled my hair, wore gloves in my cap; served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her; swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of heaven. One that slept in the contriving of lust, and waked to do it. Wine loved I deeply, dice dearly; and in woman out-paramoured the Turk. . . . Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman. Keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend.
> (Ill, iv, 85-99)

Lear's response suggests the essential bestiality which he senses he shares with Tom, both exiles from the protective order of society:

> Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.
> (III, iv, 108-110)

The "foul fiends" for Lear are Goneril and Regan who become more explicitly identified with lust and appetitive excess in the mad scenes of Act IV. Vainly grasping the remnants of his royal position, it is with crushing pathos that he confuses the blinded Gloucester with the pagan god of eros: "No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love" (IV, vi, 139-140).

It is divine love, the love which created and maintained the cosmic order, embodied in Cordelia, which restores Lear both to his rationality and to his royal position. "Thou has one daughter," says her emissary to the nearly disabled king.

> Who redeems nature from the general curse
> Which twain have brought her to
> (IV, vi, 208-210)

Although her success in restoring Lear will be limited, since the "curse" was essentially self-inflicted, Cordelia is eminently qualified for her task. She comes from a politically ordered kingdom, suggested in the text by France's deserting her to fulfill his first obligation, the reparation of a breach in his own kingdom (IV, iii, 3-6). Her reason for invading England, not "blown ambition" but "love, dear love, and our aged father's right" (IV, iv, 27-29), is one of the only two motives for war sanctioned by natural law. Self-defense, the other motive, is expressed, ironically enough, by her temporary opponent, Albany, exonerating him from a violation of natural law but creating an almost insoluable conflict (V, i, 20-27). While both causes are just, because Lear is too feeble to defend his right and because in the absence of France there is no military leader qualified to defend it for him, Albany with the advantage of strength succeeds. It is a facet of natural law which modern revolutionaries have espoused: force until right is ready.

Psychologically and emotionally, Cordelia exhibits the internal order of faculties which she expressed in her speech on proportion in the first act. Her response to the news of her father's suffering is described in appropriately political terms, suggesting the correspondent hierarchies in the internal and external kingdom:

It seemed she was a queen
Over her passion, who most rebel-like,
Sought to be king o'er her. . . .

There she shook
And clamor moistened: then away she started
To deal with grief alone.
(IV, iii, 14-16, 30-34)

Concomitant with this inner control, proportion, and order are Cordelia's clear perspective, her immediate apprehension of the sources of Lear's madness, and her unsuspected power to restore his sanity, his political identity, and his spiritual harmony with the order of the spheres. Thus she prays:

O you kind gods!
Cure this great breach in his abused nature.
Th' untuned and jarring senses, O, wind up
Of this child-changed father.
(IV, vii, 14-17)

The cure is affected by three means, each symbolic of one of the major categories in the chain or order of being: sleep induced by herbs, suggesting the subjugation of nature; music, appealing to rationality and the sense of balance; and Cordelia's kiss, symbol of transcendent love.

O my dear father, restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made.
(IV, vii, 26-29)

Considering, therefore, Cordelia as symbol of the entire range of hierarchy and order, one ought, it seems to me, to be able to interpret Lear's awakening as a return to a proper relationship with that hierarchy and divine love. But he continues to challenge Cordelia, confessing thereby his failure to recognize the immutable cosmic bonds involved in the familial relationship.

I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.
(IV, vii, 72-74)

Cordelia's response, "No cause, no cause," is less a volitional expression of Christian charity than the acquiescence of a sane and virtuous individual to the very sources of sanity and virtue, an affirmation of what Kent had described as "the holy cords . . . / Which are too intrinse t'unloose" (II, ii, 76-77).

But there is only a momentary stasis, a temporary suggestion of supernal peace before the violence with which the drama concludes. I would like to suggest several reasons why at the end of the drama Lear is subjected to such apparently unaccountable suffering, why he is unable to reclaim his kingdom, and why Cordelia must become the final though potentially most meaningful sacrifice. First, because Lear is redeemed not by the purgatorial experience of his madness but rather by Cordelia's intervention, he acquires only a passive immunity to further suffering. Secondly, he fails to recognize that his previous suffering was self-inflicted, a miscalculation of the responsibilities of his position which allowed the betrayal of Goneril and Regan. Thirdly, his instincts remain escapist, regressive, expressed in his rationalization of their prospective

imprisonment. The pastoral withdrawal, the edinic vision which he depicts so lyrically is the ideal of the courtier rather than the vision of a king; it is a return to a lower order of nature, uncorrupted but outside the pale of human achievement:

> . . . Come, let's away to prison:
> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage:
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
> Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
> Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out,
> And take upon's the mystery of things,
> As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
> In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones
> That ebb and flow by th' moon.
> (V, vi, 8-19)

Once more Lear disregards that he is by birth and by divine ordination king, God's minister, and executor of law and order in the secular sphere. In his sanguine willingness to adapt to his environment, to adjust to his surroundings, Lear reveals his decidedly terrestial inclinations. Since Cordelia's existence in the political order depends upon Lear's assuming command of himself and of his kingdom, she is for the second, and final time, a victim of his weakness.

Finally, the kind of love relationships into which Lear entered and the emotional bases on which he entered them suggest a kind of constitutional defect which prevented him from entering the transcendent emotional realm which Cordelia opened to him. This defect is perhaps best formulated in a statement from Saint Augustine's *City of God*, XI, in which appear many of the orthodox principles of cosmic order: we are "endowed with a kind of attraction for our proper place in the order of nature. The specific gravity of a body is, as it were, its love, whether it tends upward by its lightness or down-ward by its weight."

It is somewhat by natural selection that Edgar not simply survives but prevails at the end of the play. On a plane productively human he resolves the major conflict between eros and divine love, between chaos and order. If the sins of the father are truly visited upon the son, as Edgar's suffering at the hands of Edmund would suggest, then he frees himself and his kingdom of the "foul fiend" when he vanquishes his bastard brother, the ruler of the illegitimate order of eros. Moreover, in his guise as Tom o'Bedlam he has been purged in a preventive fashion of both the vice and the consequences of erotic love. But unlike Cordelia he is a terrestial creature committed to a human sphere, the only sphere in which a human being to remain human may work out his salvation. This salvation, earthly perfection, "ripeness" if you like, is made possible by the emotional affinity he shares with Cordelia, divine or transcendent love, and is the basis for the creation of a new and more stable order.

SOURCE: "Love and Order in *King Lear*," in *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. XLX, No. 3, October, 1967, pp. 333-42.

Simon O. Lesser

[*Lear desperately seeks reassurance that his daughters will allow him to carry out his plans for his final years, Lesser maintains, and so he stages a "play" in the opening scene that will draw out this response. The critic notes that the king looks chiefly to his favorite, Cordelia, for love and praise. The extraordinary intensity and possessiveness of his love for her makes Lear more vulnerable to disappointment, Lesser argues. In the critic's judgment, Lear's possessiveness has its source in an unconscious sexual desire, which Cordelia*

is aware of—even as she guards herself against expressing her own excessive, incestuous feelings toward him. Lesser contends that Cordelia resents the hypocrisy of the love-test, is overwhelmed by hatred of her sisters, and is too angry in this first scene "to think clearly or to serve her own interests."]

What is basically being enacted in Act I, Scene 1, of *Lear* is an unwritten play. The play has no function in terms of the political purposes of the ceremony. The division of the Kingdom, the redistribution of power and Lear's own plans, have all been decided upon in advance. The intention of announcing all these decisions in the course of a play is evidence of the assurance felt by its author, Lear, that it would be performed as planned, that everyone would accept and enact the role assigned him—or, more accurately, *her*. Other than Lear himself, the only characters in the drama he has composed in his mind are his daughters. Kent is an unwelcome intruder.

In terms of state purposes the play is a foolish way for Lear to make his decisions known. But for Lear himself the play has functions of the utmost importance. The King is an old man who, as he himself points out, is preparing for death. As part of that preparation he is doing something which at some level he knows to be dangerous: he is surrendering his power, wealth and state functions to his daughters and their husbands, retaining for himself only the title and honors of a King and a small retinue of Knights to attend him. He is in effect throwing himself on the mercy of his daughters and their husbands. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that he knows two of these daughters to be cold-blooded, calculating and untrustworthy. As the first speech of the play tells us, he also has, or has had, reservations about the Duke of Cornwall, Regan's husband. Lear is a frightened man. The despotism he displays later on may be in part a way of denying this and proving to himself that he still has authority and power. It is certain that he desperately needs the reassurance his play has been planned to elicit. We of course, whether readers or spectators, can see as Kent does that it is a poor way of eliciting reassurance upon which he can depend.

Intermixed with this need is an equally powerful desire for praise and love. They are of course the proofs Lear seeks that though he is surrendering his prerogatives he need not be afraid—reassurance against feared or already-present feelings of impotence and defenselessness. But we should not overlook his quasi-independent need to be flattered. This need too is understandable. We speak of extreme old age as a second childhood, and it is in childhood that narcissism is strongest. The regressive influence of age adds to Lear's need to be admired.

The burden of satisfying all of these needs—for reassurance, praise and love—falls almost entirely upon Cordelia. She is the heroine of Lear's play. She is given the climactic position in it, and is clearly intended to give a speech which outshines her sisters' speeches in substance and eloquence, a speech which is at once sincere, yet warm, even extravagant, in its declaration of love and approbation. The thirds into which the kingdom is divided are not exactly equal, any more than the halves into which a grapefruit is cut usually are. Cordelia's portion, Lear suggests, is "more opulent" than her sisters'—and really superior to theirs in some small way, I would suspect. It should be stressed, however, that the superiority of her portion is slight. We have every reason to believe Lear's statement that he is making and announcing the division of the kingdom at this time to prevent future strife; and the opening lines of the scene tell us that the portions going to Albany and Cornwall are so well equalized that neither Duke will have cause for envy. We can assume that Lear would not jeopardize his goal of avoiding future war by giving Cordelia a portion notably superior to the others.

The early parts of Scene 1 prepare us for the recognition that Cordelia is Lear's favorite, if not the only daughter he loves. Though he calls his second daughter "Our dearest Regan," both his charge to her to speak and his earlier charge to Goneril are matter-of-fact. There is scarcely a wasted word. Moreover, though both daughters praise him fulsomely, his responses are perfunctory; indeed, both responses give the impression of having been memorized, or composed in a general way, before the ceremony. The text does not support [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge's view that Lear was "duped by [Goneril's and Regan's] hypocritical professions of

love and duty. . . ." On the contrary, it is evident—probably even to Goneril and Regan— that Lear is gliding over this part of the ceremony as quickly as possible to get to the part for which the rest is preparation: his favorite's avowal of admiration and love. From "our joy" at the beginning to the hardly impartial suggestion at the end that Cordelia speak in such a way as to merit a "more opulent" third than her sisters, the invitation to her to avow her love has a different ring than the preceeding ones.

Though we may be no better prepared than Lear to recognize it, the very fact that his expectations are focussed so completely upon Cordelia has its dangerous side. She is the daughter whose avowals can quiet his fears, but by the same token she is the one who can disappoint and hurt him most.

This obvious danger is compounded by two others. The first stems from the fact that Cordelia is Lear's youngest—and because he does not want to be reminded of his age may be thought of as more of a child than she is. Though Lear's bid to Cordelia to speak is longer than the bids to Goneril and Regan taken together, it is only three and a half lines in length. Yet in this brief speech Lear twice refers to Cordelia's youth. We may sense that his emphasis on this causes him to think of Cordelia as more obedient and pliant then her sisters, thus heightening the expectations based upon love and his assurance that the love is returned.

The very intensity of Lear's feeling for his youngest daughter is the second factor that makes his situation so dangerous. Unconsciously we may have already sensed that there is a not wholly desexualized—a repressed incestuous—element in Lear's feeling for Cordelia. There is additional evidence of this incestuous element later in the opening scene and elsewhere in the tragedy. For the light it throws upon this element and other feelings of Lear's, what he says when he is most enraged—disappointed and angry at Cordelia and further infuriated by Kent's intervention in her behalf—is particularly revelatory.

Most significant are some blunt words at the very beginning of his tirade against Kent:

> I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
> On her kind nursery.

"Set my rest" may mean not only "find my rest," but also, on the basis of usage in an Elizabethan card game, "stake my all." These words confirm some of the things we have sensed about Lear's feelings toward all three of his daughters. They tell us of course that Cordelia was his favorite and that he wanted to spend all his remaining days with her, but they just as clearly show that he had no confidence in the kindlines of his older daughters. We may feel that if Lear had been in better control of himself, he probably would have spoken less frankly. But the decision referred to shoukd not be dismissed as the product of anger: it was evidently made when Lear was thinking carefully and objectively about his future course. . . .

Later in this outburst there is another remark which in indirect fashion suggests the strength of Lear's love for Cordelia:

> So be my grave my peace, as here I give
> Her father's heart from her!

The words "So be my grave my peace" seem to imply a comparison—probably to some such words as "and not my stay in my youngest daughter's 'nursery'." The pessimism of the words tells us again that Lear had never expected any kindness from his older daughters.

Considered closely, Lear's rage at Cordelia's refusal to accept the part assigned her in his play and his disinheritance of her are also evidence of his love: his fury and punitive behavior stem chiefly from the frustration of hopes too dear to be renounced. More technically, Cordelia's unanticipated behavior thwarts a whole cluster of unconscious, or at any rate unacknowledged, desires. Lear has evidently not even faced his

dependency on his youngest daughter, much less specified the needs he expected her "performance" to satisfy. As we shall see, moreover, some of the things Cordelia says in her third and, ironically, most conciliatory speech give it the character of a sexual rejection. A metaphor Lear uses a little later in this outburst suggests that he has understood the speech, or perhaps the entire pattern of her behavior, in this way: "Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her."

After disinheriting Cordelia Lear speaks harshly about her to the King of France. However, the opening words of France's reply provide further evidence of the intensity of Lear's affection for his youngest daughter just before this turnabout:

> This is most strange,
> That she whom even but now was your best object,
> The argument of your praise, balm of your age,
> The best, the dearest . . .

The exchanges between Lear and Burgundy and Lear and France dramatically expose the incestuous element in Lear's love. It is perfectly clear that he no longer wants either Burgundy or France to marry Cordelia. His anger is certainly a factor, but his attitude also suggests that, while he was willing to share his favorite daughter with a husband, he is reluctant to let another man possess her to the exclusion of himself. His position is hardly consistent with his disinheritance of his daughter, but he is now dominated by a part of the psyche little concerned with consistency. . . .

Later in the play, when Lear has been subjected to the cruelty or his older daughters and is experiencing the fury of the storm, he speaks again in passion—passion born not only of his anger toward them but also, it may be surmised, toward himself. His last speech before his wits begin to turn shows that incest is very much on his mind. It is the second crime he specifies, and its placement gives it more emphasis than the one mentioned first.

> Let the great gods
> That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads
> Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
> That hast within thee undivulged crimes
> Uinwhipped of justice. Hide thee, thou bloody hand,
> Thou perjured, and thou simular of virtue
> That art incestuous.
> (III. ii. 49-55)

When Lear and Cordelia are briefly reunited late in the play, his love—their love—reappears in its original intensity, if not in heightened intensity. . . . Lear's speech to Cordelia in V. iii., after their capture by the victorious British forces, is more like the speech of a lover to his beloved than that of a father to his daughter.

Why does not Cordelia, who loves her father, give him the praise and assurances he so obviously needs and is so obviously beseeching? We can perceive several interlocking factors that combine to inhibit her and set her on a mistaken course she can never correct, though she clearly feels a mounting need to assure her father of her love. She is furiously angry at him, we realize, for staging this farcial pageant, which puts a premium on hypocrisy. More obviously she is overcome by hatred of her unscrupulous sisters. She feels that she cannot compete with them in lying and does not want to participate in such a competition. She is revolted by play, players, and author—this last despite her love for her father. She is too completely in the grip of anger and revulsion to think clearly or to serve her own interests. Her initial refusal to say anything when it is her turn to speak is not simply a rebuff but a reprimand, and intended as one.

Her hatred of her sisters noticeably influences her behavior. Her tendency throughout to understate, to confine herself to minimal statements of her love, is clearly born in part of her desire to disassociate herself from her sisters, to show how different she is from them, and, by so doing, to convey her disapproval of them. But her course—it cannot be called a strategy since it is not rationally decided upon—hurts herself, not her sisters. As Lear perceives her behavior, her over-scrupulousness must make her seem dutiful at best, and patently unloving.

Indeed, everything Cordelia does here turns out wrong. Despite her rejection of the part she senses her father wants her to play, she does try to communicate with him. In particular, she tries to remind him of the cold-bloodedness and insincerity of Goneril and Regan, though this is neither necessary nor an acceptable substitute for what Lear wants from Cordelia. Probably because she is angry at him, moreover, her efforts are half-hearted and not well calculated to succeed. In responding to her father's second effort to induce her to speak, she makes a fugitive attempt to explain her recalcitrance. But the very placement of the words, "Unhappy that I am," causes them to be glided over and robs them of emphasis. She hopes that her tight understatements will call attention to the fulsomeness of her sisters' avowals of love. But such comparisons as Lear is capable of making are all to her disadvantage. Her speeches—in particular her "I love your Majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less"—seem meager and devoid of affection.

To be sure, her next speech (97-106) is longer and warmer. Moreover, she is here directly comparing herself with her sisters and more openly trying to warn her father of their hypocrisy. Though she couches what she says about her sisters in interrogative form, she all but declares: "They don't mean what they say. Their protestations to you aren't even consistent with their marriage vows." Cordelia's decision to bring up the conflict between a daughter's obligations to husband and father is not accidental. It is of course on her mind since she senses that she will suffer more than ordinarily from this conflict because of the unspoken demands her father makes upon her. The main determinant of her allusion is her unconscious awareness of the excessive, incestuous element in her father's love. Her fear is intensified, the entire pattern of her behavior suggests, by a more deeply buried realization that she must also be on guard against her love for him. The need she feels to defend herself against the over-strong attachment to her father has a pervasive influence upon her behavior. It is a major cause of her initial refusal to speak and all her subsequent mistakes. Unfortunately, no consideration she could have advanced to explain and justify her behavior could have been more detrimental in its effects. The point she is driven to insinuate does not escape her father. On the contrary, it has a greater impact upon him than is objectively warranted. The way she words her point must also wound Lear. The idea that the man she marries "shall carry /Half my love with him, half my care and duty" is intolerable to him. The word "half" is probably not meant literally, but this makes no difference: Lear cannot brook the idea of there being any limit on his favorite's love for him.

It is inappropriate to appraise Cordelia's conduct in moral terms. On the other hand, it can and should be noted that, allowing for the stress she is under, she behaves like a child, even a spoiled child, during her father's play. If we did not sense this, if we did not perceive that at times both she and Lear act like infants, we could not accept the suffering which they, and we, are later called upon to endure. That Cordelia is capable of acting more maturely and defending her own interests is shown a little later in this scene (225-234) when, while apparently asking her father to limit and specify the offenses responsible for his disfavor, she very effectively clears herself. Here she is buoyed by France's spirited defense and avowal of confidence in her. Earlier her poise had been undermined by the behavior of her father and sisters. When she acts childishly, she is in the grip of such primitive emotions as anger, resentment, and fear—and, what is perhaps more disturbing still, anxiety born of the feeling, in which her own love is a factor, that her father is making inappropriate demands upon her. Nevertheless, the sulkiness and recalcitrance she displays under these pressures are a part of her too and cannot be disregarded. Had she been more comfortable about her own feelings for her father, which however strong were under firm control, and had she been able to face his love for her consciously and calmly, she would have realized that it would never lead to demands she could not readily and guiltlessly satisfy. What her father needed was to be bathed in a protective affection which would obliterate the feeling

that he was old and powerless. Cordelia could have avowed her love—avowed it as extravagantly as she sensed her father wanted her to. Facing her own repugnance for the ceremony, and even any slight hypocrisy of which she might be guilty, she could have given Lear the reassurance he so desperately needed. But of course if tragic characters were as rational and controlled as this, and as capable of compromising, they would not be tragic characters and there would be no tragedy.

Lear's daughters know him no less well than he knows them. There is no reason to doubt some of what Goneril and Regan say about him in private. We feel no disposition to question either Regan's statement that he has never sought to know himself or their judgment that what he has just done shows how old age is exacerbating his natural rashness. They are referring specifically to Lear's disinheritance of Cordelia and banishment of Kent, but what they say applies to the whole of his behavior, including his generosity to them. Lack of self-understanding is the key to everything Lear feels and does after Cordelia disappoints him and is a principal cause of the disappointment itself. Lack of self-control is also a factor in his behavior, but if he had had a fuller awareness of his own feelings, he would have had a much better chance of controlling them.

It seems unlikely that Lear ever acknowledged how much fear and anxiety he felt about giving up his power and prerogatives and going forth bare-handed to meet death. It is still less likely that he apprehended the purposes of the play he had written in his mind. He seems blind to the intensity of his need for love and reassurance—and to the fact that the satisfaction of the need hinges almost entirely upon Cordelia. True, he has tried to be fair and has given all of his daughters roles in his play. But he is listening for one voice, one asseveration of love and esteem.

There is no indication that the speeches of Goneril and Regan have any emotional effect upon Lear. Paradoxically, it would have been better for Cordelia if they had buoyed his confidence: there would have been some diminution of the demands upon her. But what Lear wanted was an extravagant affirmation of esteem from Cordelia. We may suppose that he had composed innumerable speeches for her, each more satisfying than the one before in its affirmations of affection and approval.

Cordelia's actual behavior frustrates Lear's desperate need for love, praise and reassurance. The very real dangers of Lear's external situation do much to explain that need, but it is increased by unconscious factors. As has been mentioned, he is more frightened than he is willing to acknowledge—subject to innumerable vague and protean worries. An important function of the Fool—a splinter of Lear himself—is to name many of the anxieties, fears, and insights too painful for Lear to face. The Fool disappears when Lear himself begins to see more fully.

Cordelia denies her father the very things the ceremony was planned to provide. The impact of this is aggravated by other implications and effects of her behavior. First, it is experienced by her father as a rejection of his love. The distinction she draws between the love she owes father and husband is probably perceived as a bitter criticism of his love. Whereas acceptance of love, any kind of love, seems momentarily at least to justify it, rejection calls it into question, makes it seem dubious or evil. Cordelia's words and conduct probably make Lear subliminally aware of the not wholly desexualized nature of his feeling for her—and arouse guilt as well as anger. He feels that she is both scolding and rejecting him.

The independence and fastidiousness she displays hurt him for a second reason. They compel him to recognize that she is no longer baby or girl but grown woman. This in turn forces him to face something else he would prefer not to be reminded of, the fact that he is an old man. Her guardedness may also be wounding because it is the first sign of ambivalence he has permitted himself to recognize in someone he has thought of as loving him without reservation. Finally, as A. C. Bradley points out, Cordelia's behavior subjects Lear to public humiliation: he may feel that everyone present, Kent excepted, is aware of the lack of warmth and the criticism he senses in her words. His rage and need to lash out at her is fully understandable.

All the mistakes which account for Lear's later suffering are made while he is in the grip of this rage. He behaves like a child in a tantrum, striking out against those he loves, against his own self-interest, and against anyone who would remind him of the calamitous errors he is making.

Yet Lear knows that he has only one daughter who has a warm and generous nature and loves him. The fact that as he disowns her he invokes not only the sun but Hecate and the night suggests that he half realizes he is doing something evil. His refusal even to listen to Kent when he first tries to speak suggests even more forcibly that subliminally he knows that he is making a mistake.

We have seen how many constituents of Lear's next speech, the one which interrupts Kent's attempt to defend Cordelia, betray Lear's knowledge of the character of his daughters, of their feeling for him, and of his feeling for them. Yet in this very speech he proceeds to divide Cordelia's third of the kingdom between Cornwall and Regan, Albany and Goneril. His prerogatives are also divided between his sons-in-law. He retains only the titles and honors of King and a hundred knights, whom Cornwall and Albany, not he, must sustain. And he announces that he and his knights will divide their time between his older daughters and their husbands, moving monthly from one castle to the other.

His harshness to Kent once he is given a chance to criticize his sovereign's decisions shows us how determined Lear is not to acknowledge what on some level he assuredly realizes—that he has made a whole series of grievous mistakes. We may assume that Lear knows Kent almost as well as he knows his own daughters and is well aware that Kent has served him loyally and zealously and spoken sincerely. At this point Lear is astonishingly like Oedipus—determinedly blind and overcome by fright and anger when anyone tries to tell him what unconsciously or even preconsciously he already knows.

SOURCE: "Act One, Scene One, of *Lear*," in *College English*, Vol. 32, No. 2, November, 1970, pp. 155-71.

Madness

Kenneth Muir

[*Muir discusses the theme of "reason in madness" in* King Lear *and outlines the king's descent into insanity. Goneril's sharp complaints, Lear's discovery of Kent in the stocks, and Regan's rejection progressively disorder his mind, the critic argues, and the sudden appearance of Edgar as Poor Tom pushes him over the edge. Muir maintains that Lear's subsequent attacks on hypocrisy and worldly justice "show profound insight" into the human condition. However, the critic cautions readers against assuming that these speeches represent Shakespeare's own point of view.*]

There is no madness in the old play of *King Leir*, none in the story of Lear as told by Holinshed, Spenser, in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, or in any other version before Shakespeare's time, and none in Sidney's story of the Paphlagonian King. . . . [M.] Maeterlinck believed that Shakespeare deliberately unsettled the reason of his protagonists, and thus opened

> the dike that held captive the swollen lyrical flood. Henceforward, he speaks freely by their mouths; and beauty invades the stage without fearing lest it be told that it is out of place. [*Life and Flowers*]

[George] Orwell, on the other hand [in his *Selected Essays*], regarded Lear's madness as a protective device to enable Shakespeare to utter dangerous thoughts. . . .

Against Maeterlinck's view it must be objected that the mad scenes of *King Lear* are no more lyrical than the rest of the play; and against Orwell's view of Shakespeare as the subversive sceptic without the courage of his

own convictions it must be pointed out that none of his characters should be taken as his own mouthpiece. Ulysses' views on Order [in *Troilus and Cressida*] are shared by Rosencrantz [in *Hamlet*], whom Shakespeare treats with scant sympathy, and considerably modified by the King in *All's Well that Ends Well*. We cannot even be certain that the *Sonnets* are autobiographical. We cannot tell whether Shakespeare was a cowardly sceptic or a natural conformist. His acceptance of the 'establishment' and his criticism of it are equally in character. This is not to say that no point of view emerges from each play and from the canon as a whole; but the point of view is complex, subsuming both the anarchical and the conformist. The Shakespearian dialectic is not a reflection of the poet's timidity but of his negative capability.

In the dialogue with Gloucester in IV, vi, Lear's invective has a double target—the hypocrisy of the simpering dame and the hypocrisy of the law. There is no evidence to show that Shakespeare was sheltering behind a mask. The attack on lechery can be paralleled in the diatribes of Timon [in *Timon of Athens*] and the attack on authority and law is no more extreme than that of the eminently sane Isabella or that of the praying Claudius [both in *Measure for Measure*] who knew that

> In the corrupted currents of this world
> Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
> And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
> Buys out the law.

Lest the audience should be tempted to dismiss what Lear says as mere raving, Shakespeare provides a choric comment through the mouth of Edgar:

> O, matter and impertmency mix'd!
> Reason in madness!

Lear's mad speeches, moreover, are all linked with other passages in the play. The revulsion against sex, besides being a well-known symptom of certain forms of madness, is linked with Lear's earlier suspicion that the mother of Goneril and Regan must be an adultress, with Gloucester's pleasant vices which led to the birth of Edmund and ultimately to his own blinding, and to Edmund's intrigues with Goneril and Regan. The attack on the imperfect instruments of justice, themselves guilty of the sins they condemn in others, is merely a reinforcement of Lear's speech in the storm, before he crossed the borders of madness:

> Let the great gods,
> That keep this dreadful pother o'er our heads,
> Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
> That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
> Unwhipp'd of justice: hide thee, thou bloody hand;
> Thou perjur'd, and thou simular man of virtue
> That art incestuous: caitiff, to pieces shake,
> That under covert and convenient seeming
> Hast practis'd on man's life: close pent-up guilts,
> Rive your concealing continents, and cry
> These dreadful summoners grace.

Here, as in the mad scene, the justice of the gods, from whom no secrets are hid, is contrasted with the imperfections of earthly justice. One of Lear's first speeches after his wits begin to turn consists of a prayer to 'houseless poverty':

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoever you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,

> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just.

It has not escaped notice that Gloucester expresses similar sentiments when he hands his purse to Poor Tom:

> heavens, deal so still!
> Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
> That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
> Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly;
> So distribution should undo excess,
> And each man have enough.

This repetition is of some importance since [Levin L.] Schücking has argued [in his *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays*] that it is not really consistent with Shakespeare's philosophy to see in the play a gradual purification of Lear's character. Shakespeare, he argues, nowhere associates compassion for the poor 'with a higher moral standpoint'. The point is not whether Lear's pity was intended to arouse the audience's sympathy for him, nor even whether Shakespeare himself agreed with Lear's sentiments, but whether the audience would understand that his newly aroused concern for the poor was a sign of moral improvement. Here, surely, there can be no doubt. Shakespeare's audience was not so cut off from the Christian tradition as not to know that charity was a virtue; and the fact that similar sentiments are put into Gloucester's mouth is a reinforcement of Lear's words. If Lear were mad at this point—and he has not yet crossed the frontier—he would be expressing reason in madness. Even Schücking is constrained to admit that Lear's later criticisms of society show profound insight; but he claims that this does not exhibit a development of Lear's character, because it is dependent on a state of mental derangement. The Lear who welcomes prison with Cordelia

> is not a purified Lear from whose character the flame of unhappiness has burnt away the ignoble dross, but a nature completely transformed, whose extraordinary vital forces are extinguished, or about to be extinguished.

But . . . the three moments in the play crucial to [A. C] Bradley's theory of Lear's development—his recognition of error, his compassion for the poor, and his kneeling to Cordelia—occur either before or after his madness; and Schücking seems insufficiently aware of the 'reason in madness' theme so essential to the play's meaning. . . .

Lear is driven insane by a series of shocks. First, there is the attack by Goneril (I, iv). This makes him angrily pretend not to know her, or to know himself, but at this point it is still pretence:

> Doth any here know me? This is not Lear:
> Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?
> Either his notion weakens, or his discernings
> Are lethargied.—Ha! waking? 'Tis not so.—
> Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Later in the same scene he begins to realize that he has wronged Cordelia:

O most small fault,
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show! . . .
O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in,
And thy dear judgement out!

In the next scene he comes to a full recognition of his folly: 'I did her wrong.' All the Fool's remarks in both scenes are designed, not to distract Lear's attention from Goneril's ingratitude, but to remind him of his foolishness in dividing his kingdom and banishing Cordelia. It is arguable that the Fool's loyalty to Cordelia helps to drive his master mad. At the end of the Act Lear has his first serious premonition of insanity:

O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
Keep me in temper: I would not be mad!

The second great shock comes in the second act when Lear finds Kent in the stocks. This causes the first physical symptoms of hysteria, which were probably borrowed by Shakespeare from [Samuel] Harsnett's pamphlet on demoniacs or from Edward Jorden's *Brief Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1603), which shows 'that divers strange actions and passions of the body of man, which in the common opinion, are imputed to the devil, have their true naturall causes, and do accompanie this Disease'. But the symptoms would now be described as 'racing heart' and 'rising blood pressure':

O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!
Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow,
Thy element's below. . . .
O me, my heart, my rising heart! but, down!

The third shock, the rejection by Regan, follows immediately. Lear prays for patience; he threatens revenges—the terrors of the earth—on the two daughters; his refusal to ease his heart by weeping is accompanied by the first rumblings of the storm which is a projecting on the macrocosm of the tempest in the microcosm; and he knows from the thunder that what he most feared will come to pass: 'O fool, I shall go mad!' Exposure to the storm completes what ingratitude began.

Lear's identification with the storm is both a means of presenting it on the stage and a sign that his passions have overthrown his reason. He contends 'with the fretful elements';

tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of;
Strives in his little world of man to out-storm
The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.

But when Lear makes his next appearance, invoking the storm to destroy the seeds of matter, urging the gods to find out their hidden enemies, or addressing the poor naked wretches, he is not yet wholly mad, though he admits that his wits are beginning to turn. What finally pushes him over the borderline is the sudden appearance of Poor Tom who is both a living embodiment of naked poverty and one who is apparently what Lear had feared to become. Edgar, in acting madness, precipitates Lear's.

What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?
Could'st thou save nothing? Didst thou give 'em all? . . .
Is it the fashion, that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?

Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters.

The Fool comments:

This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

It is in fact the exposure and the physical exhaustion which prevents Lear's recovery from the shocks he has received. He is soon trying to identify himself with unaccommodated man by tearing off his clothes.

The madness of the elements, the professional 'madness' of the Fool, the feigned madness of Edgar, and the madness of the King himself together exemplify the break-up of society and the threat to the universe itself under the impact of ingratitude and treachery. When Gloucester appears, confessing that he is almost mad and that grief for his son's treachery has crazed his wits, only Kent is left wholly sane.

Poor Tom compares himself with emblematic animals—hog, fox, wolf, dog and lion—and Lear contrasts the naked Bedlam, who does not borrow from worm, beast, sheep and cat, with the sophisticated people who do. Man without the refinements of civilization is 'a poor, bare, forked animal', as man without reason is no more than a beast. But Lear, who has lost his reason, is anxious to discuss philosophical questions with the man he takes for a learned Theban. His first question, 'What is the cause of thunder?', had been a stock one ever since the days of Pythagoras, who had taught, Ovid tells us [in *Metamorphoses*],

The first foundation of the world: the cause of every thing:
What nature was: and what was God: whence snow and lyghtning spring:
And whether *Jove* or else the wynds in breaking clowdes doo thunder.

The storm suggests the question to Lear. . . .

Lear returns again and again to the thing which had driven him mad—his daughters' ingratitude. He asks if Poor Tom's daughters have brought him to this pass; he exclaims:

Now, all the plagues that in the pendulous air
Hang fated o'er men's faults light on thy daughters!—

declares that nothing but his unkind daughters 'could have subdu'd nature / To such a lowness'; and inveighs against the flesh which 'begot / Those pelican daughters'.

Just before he was driven out into the storm Lear had declared that he would avenge himself on his daughters:

I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall—I will do such things,—
What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth.

In the refuge provided by Gloucester Lear begins to brood on his revenge. . . .

Poor Tom in his blanket, and the Fool in his motley, suggest to his disordered mind two robed men of justice, and he imagines—this is his first actual illusion—that he sees Goneril and Regan. When we remember Lear's later attacks on the operations of justice because the judges are as guilty as the criminals they try, the justices in the mock trial of Goneril and Regan—a Bedlam beggar, a Fool, and a serving-man—are at least as likely to deal justly as a properly constituted bench, even though Lear accuses them of corruption in allowing the

criminals to escape.

Shakespeare hits on two characteristics of certain kinds of mental derangement—the substitution of a symbolic offence for a real one ('she kick'd the poor King her father') and the obsession with a visual image. Lear thinks of the 'warped looks' of Regan, though in an earlier scene he had spoken of her 'tender-hefted nature' and of her eyes which, unlike Goneril's, 'do comfort and not burn'. It was the contrast between her beauty and her behaviour when she, like Goneril, put on a frowning countenance, that impressed Lear with her warped looks; and the same contrast makes Lear ask:

> Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?

The question is an appropriate introduction to the next scene in which we see the tender-hearted Regan assisting at the blinding of Gloucester.

When the imaginary curtains are drawn on the sleeping Lear we do not see him again for nearly 500 lines—about half-an-hour's playing time—but we are prepared for the development of his lunacy by the two short scenes in the middle of the fourth Act. In one of these Kent reveals that Lear refuses to see Cordelia:

> A sovereign shame so elbows him: his own unkindness,
> That stripp'd her from his benediction, turn'd her
> To foreign casualties, gave her dear rights
> To his dog-hearted daughters, these things sting
> His mind so venomously, that burning shame
> Detains him from Cordelia.

It is significant—though I do not remember that anyone has called attention to it—that after the admission at the end of Act I 'I did her wrong', Lear makes no further reference to Cordelia until he recovers his wits at the end of Act IV. The reason for this is partly, no doubt, that the ingratitude of Goneril and Regan drives everything else from his mind; but we may suspect, too, that Lear's sovereign shame prevents him from facing his own guilt. In the other scene (IV, iv) Cordelia describes her mad father,

> singing aloud;
> With burdocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckooflowers,
> Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
> In our sustaining corn.

The significance of this picture is that Lear has reverted to his childhood. The Doctor . . . prescribes rest for the lunatic king.

> Our foster-nurse of nature is repose,
> The which he lacks; that to provoke in him,
> Are many simples operative, whose power
> Will close the eye of anguish.

In the scene in which the mad Lear meets the blinded Gloucester there is a wonderful blend of 'matter and impertinency'. Even the impertinency has the kind of free association which is often found in the utterances of certain types of lunatics; and precisely because he is mad Lear is freed from the conventional attitudes of society. He is able, at moments, to see more clearly and piercingly than the sane, because the sane buy their peace of mind by adjusting themselves to the received ideas of society. Lear recognizes the way he has been shielded from reality by flattery. He also sees the hypocritical pretensions of society with regard to sex and with regard to its treatment of criminals. And, finally, he sees that human life is inescapably tragic:

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither;
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air,
We wawl and cry . . .
When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.

When we next see Lear he is awakening from a drugged sleep. The Doctor has given him the repose he needs. The second part of the cure consists of music which . . . was a means of winding up the untuned and jarring senses. The third part of the cure is Cordelia's love. It is characteristic of her that she is eloquent so long as Lear is asleep, and that she falls back into her natural reticence when he awakens. The cure is completed when he kneels to the daughter he has wronged and begs her forgiveness.

SOURCE: "Madness in *King Lear*," in *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespearean Study and Production*, Vol. 13, 1960, pp. 30-40.

Josephine Waters Bennett

[*Bennett focuses on three scenes—III.iv, III.vi, and V.vi—where, in her estimation, Lear shows unmistakable signs of insanity. She sees the king's obsessive references to daughters, his attempt to tear off his clothes, and his delusion that Poor Tom is an ancient philosopher as clear indications of madness. The chief causes of Lear's insanity, Bennett observes, are his bitter resentment toward his daughters and his inability to put up an effective defense against repeated humiliations. The critic argues that Lear's delusion at the close of the play—that Cordelia is not dead—is an expression of love and hope rather than a sign of madness.*]

An understanding of Lear's madness is essential to any serious interpretation of the play and to any understanding of its structure. Yet critics have not agreed about when Lear goes mad, and almost no attention at all has been given to the dramatic function of his madness. . . .

Interpretation of the play has been distorted by too much emphasis on the external conflict, on Lear's helplessness and the inhumanity of his ungrateful daughters; there has been too little attention to Lear's struggle with himself, to the storm within. . . . Let us begin with . . . the three short scenes which exhibit Lear's insanity, its cause in his own character, and its effect on him.

The first of these scenes is III.iv. Like any competent dramatist, Shakespeare makes obvious those matters which an audience must understand in order to follow the play. . . .

Shakespeare's preparation had to be particularly thorough, because this is an innovation, not to be found in any earlier version of the story, and so the audience would not expect it if they were not prepared. Kent plants the idea in the first scene (line 146) when he implies that Lear is mad for disinheriting Cordelia. We see him in a furious rage in I.iv, and at the end of I.v, he expresses the fear,

O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!
(ll. 40-41)

We do not see him again until II.iv, when he comes upon Kent in the stocks. Here his rising rage, his "hysterica passio" (l. 55), is countered by a real struggle for patience in his interview with Regan. But his daughters are pitiless in their contest to reduce his retinue, and as he goes out into the gathering storm Lear utters what proves to be a prophecy,

I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws

Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!
Exeunt

With the opening of Act III, the suggestions of approaching insanity grow more frequent. In the first scene Kent speaks of Lear's "unnatural and bemadding sorrow" (l. 38). In the second scene, after his invocation of divine justice, when Kent urges him to take shelter in the hovel, Lear replies, "My wits begin to turn" (l. 67). He goes on, however, to speak gentle and sane words to his Fool,

Come on, my boy, How dost, my boy? Art cold?
I am cold myself. . . .

The statement, "My wits begin to turn", is a cue to the audience, and it is full of irony because it is more true than the speaker realizes; but Lear is still sane, as he is a moment and one short scene later when they reach the hovel and he hesitates to enter. To Kent's urging he replies, "Wilt break my heart?" (III.iv.4). He is using the storm and his physical misery to counter and control the storm within his mind, fighting grief and rage with physical suffering, and the prospect of shelter threatens to destroy the balance, as indeed it does. He explains to Kent,

But where the greater malady is fixed,
The lesser is scarce felt. . . .
This tempest will not give me leave to ponder
On things would hurt me more, . . .
(III.iv.8-25)

His mind is on the brink, wavering between concern for physical suffering, and for others who share it, and self-pity, bitter hate, and longing for revenge, as he has made clear in the same two speeches:

The tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude, . . .

But I will punish home.
No, I will weep no more. In such a night
To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure.
In such a night as this! O Regan, Goneril,
Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all—
O, that way madness lies, let me shun that.
No more of that.
(ll. 12-22)

This is the storm within, which he is controlling precariously with the help of physical suffering inflicted by the cold. But he is on the brink of madness, as the audience has been repeatedly warned. He pauses for a moment to pity those

Poor naked wretches wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, . . .
(ll. 28 f.)

He is not mad while he can pity others, and even blame himself:

O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.
(ll. 32-36)

He is the king, thinking charitably of others, and then, suddenly, one of those "wretches", Edgar disguised as Tom o'Bedlam, appears, and Lear, just controlling his own sanity by thinking of others, suddenly confuses the Bedlam beggar with himself, and he is over the brink.

His first words to Tom, "Didst thou give all to thy daughters? And art thou come to this?", might, by themselves, be taken as no more than bitter irony, but they are in prose and therefore suited to one whose wits are jangled, or fallen out of tune. More important for the audience, however, because more obvious, is Lear's obsessive reiteration, his insistence in the next three speeches on "his daughters", "thy daughters", and when Kent protests, "He hath no daughters, sir", Lear retorts hotly, "Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters." This obsession, or *idée fixe*, is one of the most easily recognized exhibitions of insanity. Lear's four references to Tom's "daughters", in four successive speeches, could hardly fail to convince listeners seeing the play for the first time, that what had been predicted repeatedly as about to happen has now happened: Lear has gone mad. The aimless babble of Tom's attempt to simulate madness contrasts effectively with Lear's fixed idea. However, just to be sure the point is not missed, the Fool is made to remark, "This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen" (III.iv.75).

Lear's next speech, "What hast thou been?" invites Tom's caricature of a serving man, which ends incoherently and in turn produces Lear's "Is man no more than this? . . ." This speech ends with the second and most striking exhibition of insanity. . . . Lear's attempt to strip is an action which would be recognized by almost anyone as evidence of violent insanity. Who has not heard tales of people suddenly exhibiting this sign of madness? Today we would promptly put in a call to the nearest mental hospital. While this is not the most common manifestation of mental derangement, it is the most dramatic and easily recognized. Following upon the "eminently sane" "Is man no more than this?" and as an eminently logical conclusion, it exhibits just that "matter and impertinency mixed" (IV.vi.171) which is characteristic of much insanity and which Lear exhibits in all three of his mad scenes.

Lear has given two obvious symptoms of mental derangement, but the rule of the theater is that the audience must be told *three* times anything that it must know and remember in order to understand what is to follow. Shakespeare seldom violates this rule. Immediately after the Fool has restrained Lear's effort to tear off his clothes, Gloucester appears to lead Lear to a better shelter. And now he develops the delusion that Tom in his blanket is an ancient philosopher. Beginning with the lines, "First let me talk with this philosopher. What is the cause of thunder?" (l. 145), he speaks of nothing else. In six speeches he five times calls Tom his philosopher, a "learned Theban", a "good Athenian". Neither Kent nor Gloucester can get his attention, and Kent explains (to Gloucester and the audience), "His wits begin t'unsettle." Gloucester echoes the thought (to make sure, among other things, that the audience does not miss it), "Thou sayest the King grows mad. . . . I am almost mad myself. . . . Grief hath crazed my wits" (ll. 156-161). . . .

In spite of the preparation for Lear's madness by his own and others' suggestions of it, and in spite of the three clear symptoms of derangement in III.iv, no critic, so far as I can find, has observed that the chief function of this scene at the hovel is to establish that Lear is mad. Even [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, who does not seem to have felt that the madness must be progressive, says that "this scene *ends* with the first symptoms of positive derangement", and that Lear appears "in full madness in the sixth scene". Those who feel that the insanity must be climactic emphasize Kent's apologetic, "His wits *begin* t'unsettle" (iv.153), and Gloucester's reply, "Thou say'st the king grows mad", but at the opening of scene vi, only twenty-five lines later, Kent says, "*All*

the power of his wits *have given way* to his impatience." If we are to weigh words and tenses, we cannot ignore Kent's *all* and *have given* while emphasizing *begins* and *grows*.

Whatever readers of the play, and criticism based on reading, may contend, it seems obvious that Shakespeare intended his auditors to understand that Lear goes mad in III.iv and is mad when he appears next in scene vi. If the play is a properly constructed Elizabethan tragedy, the climax, or point of no return in the struggle which makes the plot, should come in this scene. Scenes iii, v, and vii bring the Gloucester plot to its climax of horror. Scenes ii, iv, and vi are concerned with Lear. Scene ii shows us his defiance of the storm and his self-pity:

> I am a man.
> More sinned against than sinning
> (III.ii.58-59)

and his premonition of madness: "My wits begin to turn." In the next scene in which he appears we see him go mad, and in the opening of scene vi Kent says that "All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience." The problem is not, therefore, *whether* he is mad in III.iv, but *why* he is mad, and what dramatic purposes are served by the two further exhibitions of his madness.

Kent's clear and emphatic assertion that Lear is now completely mad prepares the audience for the uninhibited exhibition of Lear's inner conflict, and in successive speeches we are shown his pride, his furious desire for revenge, his attempt to use "justice" to get that revenge, and his self-pity. When the Fool proposes his conundrum, "Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman?" Lear understands that the quip is aimed at him and replies proudly, "A king, a king." The Fool supplies the correct answer, but Lear's mind is obsessed with his passionate desire for revenge:

> To have a thousand with red burning spits
> Come hizzing in upon 'em—
> (ll. 15-16)

This furious desire to "punish home", to torture, is as shocking as Lear's earlier cursing of Goneril. It is, in fact, as savage in wish as the blinding of Gloucester is in deed. This is the cause of Lear's madness, his bitter, futile resentment, his frustrated will which has driven him to insane hatred.

In the play-within-a-play which follows, the Fool and Edgar humor Lear by acting the parts he assigns to them, but they also comment, in asides, on the pity of Lear's insanity; as when Edgar says, "Bless thy five wits!" and "My tears begin to take his part so much/ They mar my counterfeiting" (i.e. acting the part of judge). Lear's mind fluctuates from excitement over the imagined escape of Goneril to the abyss of self-pity in which he imagines his dogs behaving like his daughters,

> The little dogs and all,
> Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart—see, they bark at me.
> (ll. 61-62)

The next moment he is ready to anatomize Regan to find out, "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" Then, forgetting what he is about, he tells Tom, "You, sir, I entertain for one of my hundred; only I do not like the fashion of your garments. You will say they are Persian; but let them be changed." This is an echo of his grievance (my hundred), and of his delusion that Tom is an ancient philosopher (end of sc. iv). It serves to remind the audience that he is mad. The reminder is reenforced, a few lines later by Kent's words, "trouble him not; his wits are gone."

This scene gives us, not a further degree of insanity, but a clear exposition of the internal cause of Lear's madness. Balked pride, humiliation, impotence, and self-pity have worn him out and in the midst of this scene he falls asleep out of sheer exhaustion. We do not see him again until IV.vi. . . .

Act IV, scene vi, the third and last of the "mad" scenes, opens with Gloucester's attempted suicide at Dover cliff, and his assertion that he has learned his lesson of patience. Then, in the Quarto, we have the stage direction, "Enter Lear mad." . . .

Lear's first speech is somewhat incoherent. He is under the delusion that he is in command of troops, for his first words are, "No, they cannot touch me for coining: I am the King himself. Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press money" (ll. 83 ff.). He imagines himself handing out coins to pay recruits. The King born (and so a manifestation of nature) is above the art of the coiner. The speech wanders on to the training of recruits to shoot, to the luring of a mouse within range with a piece of cheese, to a challenge to a duel, to an order of battle; finally he approves a soldier's shot and addresses himself to Edgar, "Give the word" (i.e. password). Edgar replies, "Sweet marjoram" and is told, "Pass."

Lear is in a world of his own imagining, and yet he vaguely senses and reacts to the military bustle around him. The blind Gloucester recognizes his voice, but Lear sees only "Goneril with a white beard". This is cruel, coming from the king for whom Gloucester lost his eyes, but there is worse to follow. Lear is still mad and cannot tell his friends from his enemies, yet he has learned one part of his lesson. He has been brought to recognize his physical limitations, for he goes on to say,

> They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. . . . When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, . . . They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie—I am not ague-proof. (ll. 96-104)

This is Lear's second long speech in this scene, and it marks the beginning of his recognition of his true place in the world—his human frailty; so it marks the beginning of his return to sanity. But he is not through with pride yet. Gloucester asks, "Is't not the King?" and Lear replies promptly, "Ay, every inch a king!" He knows himself, and yet, in a deeper sense, he does not "know himself". In a vague way he has recognized Gloucester, but he speaks without pity or sympathy, not about Gloucester's loyalty and service to his king, but about his youthful fault:

> Adultery?
> Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery? No. . . .
> Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son
> Was kinder to his father than my daughters
> Got 'tween lawful sheets.
> (ll. 109-115)

This is cruel. Gloucester owed his blindness not only to the treachery of his bastard son, but also to his loyalty to Lear. He had been punished for his adultery, though Lear in his mad state did not know it—but even if we must assume that he did not know of Edmund's treachery, even if he did not know of Gloucester's loyalty, it was unfeeling of Lear to twit his old liegeman on his blindness—a fact which he did see. Gloucester asks, "Doest thou know me?" and Lear replies,

> I remember thine eyes well enough. Doest thou squiny at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love. Read thou this challenge; mark but the penning of it. . . . O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? [i.e. you are a blind beggar.] Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light one; yet you see how this world goes. (ll.

135-146)

Beginning with the next speech he launches into a tirade against the world, its hypocrisy and injustice, ending,

> Get thee glass eyes
> And, like a scurvy politician, seem
> To see the things thou doest not. Now, now, now, now!
> Pull off my boots. Harder, harder! So.

The action suggested by this speech is that Lear pulls off his boots (the act of disrobing again). A few lines later he has evidently taken off his hat, for he says,

> This' a good block.
> It were a delicate stratagem to shoe
> A troop of horse with felt. I'll put't in proof,
> And when I have stol'n upon these son-in-laws,
> Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

His hat is not only off, but the lines suggest that he is trying to put it on his bootless foot. The terrible reiteration of "kill" proves to be the last thunder-peal of the storm in Lear's mind. He is certainly mad from his first speech where he imagines that he is with his army, to his exit, running, followed by the attendants Cordelia has sent to find him. Yet he is not so completely insane as he was in the scene where he attempted to try Goneril and Regan before the Bedlam beggar and the Fool as two judges. In IV. vi, even in his first and most incoherent speech to imaginary soldiers he seems to be aware of the military bustle around him, although he misinterprets it. His second speech recalls the storm and shows that he has at least learned that "I am not ague-proof". A little later, when Gloucester asks to kiss his hand, he replies, "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality." In lines 173-177 he speaks sanely,

> If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
> I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester.
> Thou must be patient. . . .

But he is not yet ready to be patient himself. His resentment breeds distrust and he mistakes Cordelia's officers for enemies and exhibits the typical cunning of a madman in pretending to yield to them, and then suddenly running. One of these gentlemen makes the interpretive comment,

> A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,
> Past speaking of in a king!
> (ll. 200-201)

By this simple act of running away (in his stocking feet?), Shakespeare invokes our deepest pity for this proud, willful, stubborn, yet helpless old man. . . .

We cannot leave the subject of Lear's madness without considering one more scene. There has been question of whether Lear returns to insanity just before he dies. His delusion that Cordelia still lives, that he can prove it by a looking-glass, a feather, that she has spoken—these things are not evidences of insanity, but of hope and love. Lear is dazed and stunned by his loss. He cannot accept it. His mind struggles against the unbearable truth. Cordelia is the whole world to him now. He replies to Kent at random, and Albany finally says,

> He knows not what he says; and vain it is
> That we present us to him.

(V.iii.293-294)

It is not that he is insane, but that he has completely forgotten self in his concentration on Cordelia. Nothing else enters his consciousness. When he is told that his two wicked daughters are dead, he replies (sadly, looking at Cordelia), "Ay, so I think". His daughters are all Cordelia. He has forgotten hate and revenge. When he speaks of killing "the slave that was a-hanging thee", there is a flash of the old pride, but it is only in retrospect,

> I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
> I would make them skip. I am old now,
> And these crosses spoil [i.e. impair] me. Who are you?
> Mine eyes are not o'th'best. I'll tell you straight.
> (ll. 277-280)

Here he recognizes Kent, but he has forgotten his servant Caius who served him in his madness. He is preoccupied, and inattentive, rather than insane. He pays no attention to the messenger who announces Edmund's death, nor to Albany's plan for ruling the state (a piece of business which convention required). Albany breaks off, directing attention to Lear, with his "O, see, see!"

Here Lear makes his last speech, which is sane down to the last three lines, and then reason and life slacken the string together:

> And my poor fool is hanged: no, no, no life?
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never.
> Pray you undo this button. Thank you sir.
> Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips,
> Look there, look there—*He dies*.

SOURCE: "The Storm Within: The Madness of Lear," in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Spring, 1962, pp. 137-55.

Lear

William Rosen

[*Rosen demonstrates how the focus of dramatic interest in* King Lear *shifts from concern with a particular man to such universal issues as justice, order, and meaning in the world. Initially Lear is imperious, vain, and unwilling to consider any perspective other than his own, the critic notes. In subsequent scenes, Rosen asserts, his notions of himself are no longer valid, for the natural order of society has been subverted and Lear's stature has been stripped away. The critic asserts that on the heath, Lear's suffering becomes universalized: his search for justice in a world where there is none is the dilemma we all must face. Although ultimate knowledge and certainty cannot be achieved, Lear's personality is completely transformed, Rosen concludes, for he develops compassion and comes to understand the ties that bind all humanity together.*]

Apart from action, there are two major devices that delineate character on the stage: direct self-characterization—what the hero says of himself—and the characterization of the hero by others. Often Shakespeare anticipates and prefigures the entrance of the tragic hero by having characters talk about him before he actually comes onto the stage; and such a technique is used notably in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. By prefiguring the hero the dramatist imposes upon

the audience a certain angle of vision: the playwright provides the audience with a dramatic attitude towards the central figure by having others preview his traits or impart value judgments on him. Thus we actively entertain certain emotions towards the hero before meeting him; and when he does appear, his words and actions are inevitably compared to the brief portrait already sketched for us.

In *King Lear*, though the king's character is not sketched before he appears on stage, he nevertheless comes immediately into a certain frame of reference, not through the technique of prefiguring, but through his own exalted status. For an Elizabethan audience particularly, his figure would expand in minds to encompass a whole context of values. The person of Lear is from the very beginning associated with great honor, for he can be viewed as the highest human embodiment of all the elements which give order and dignity to society: he is king of his family, and he an old man. Hence the respect which he should command is triply compounded. . . .

Certainly "kingship" had an evocative power for Elizabethans. There is divinity that hedges a king—we find this idea reiterated in much of the writing of the age. Furthermore, the correspondence between the power of the king and that of the father was an Elizabethan commonplace illustrating the order of a universe in which, as God governed all, so kings ruled states, and fathers, families. . . . [The] ordered family, the private life of a nation, is a mirroring in miniature of the ordered hierarchy of public society; and analogies between the king and his subjects and the father and his children prevailed.

It is within such a context that we first see King Lear: his figure activates in the minds of an audience patterns of value of which he is the embodiment. His formal entrance highlights all the dignity and authority associated with kingship. The set of notes sounded, the "sennet," ushers in the concrete symbol of royalty, "enter one bearing a coronet"; and the stage directions give the precise order of entrance which accords with the prerogatives of rank: "King Lear, Cornwall, Albany, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Attendants." On the Elizabethan stage this would be a stately procession of splendor, Lear the central figure in a crowded scene. All are Lear's subjects, dependent on him.

Lear's stature is even further magnified in his first extended pronouncement in which he tells of his intentions to divest himself of "rule/ Interest of territory, cares of state" (I.i.50), for we see him in the role of public and private figure at one and the same time. Because he is king, his actions in dividing the realm have public consequences affecting the destiny of the state; as benefactor to his children in this division, his actions affect the private life of the family as well. And yet, though the figure of the king bodies forth the ideal, the highest good of family and nation, it is important to see that in this scene Shakespeare presents his central character as an ironist would; and in this way: that the audience does not fully engage its sympathies with Lear or those who oppose him since the dramatist supports the values which Lear represents while revealing the king's misguided position.

Lear's character is objectively dramatized at the beginning. And in situations that are dramatized rather than narrated, the task of projecting states of mind devolves upon the language itself. In Lear's first lengthy speech, which is balanced and regally formal, Shakespeare has the king dramatically reveal himself as proud, authoritative, at the height of his power, wishing to hear not truth, but flattery:

> Tell me, my daughters,—
> Since now we will divest us both of rule,
> Interest of territory, cares of state,—
> Which of you shall we say doth love us most, . . .
> (I.i.49)

Lear's abdication is thus the occasion for a pageant of flattery: each daughter is to vie with the other in a public display of love. Goneril fulfills his expectations:

Sir, I love you more than word 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, honour;
As much as child e'er lov'd, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable:
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.
(I.i.56)

Shakespeare makes it obvious that Lear already has in mind the kind of answer he expects from his daughters. It is significant that after Goneril's fulsome protestations of love Lear does not evaluate or praise her remarks. He makes no comment at all on her speech. He has heard what he has wanted to hear, and he immediately bestows upon her a share of the kingdom. It is interesting to note that in *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, when Gonorill proclaims her love for him, Leir comments, "O, how thy words revive my dying soul" (I.iii.54).

Shakespeare reinforces this imperious characteristic of Lear. Again, after Regan's testimony of love, Lear makes no reference to her speech; in *The Chronicle History* he says, "Did never Philomel sing so sweet a note" (I.iii.74). He allots her portion and calls on Cordelia to "Speak." And it is important to observe that in the three instances where Lear asks the daughters to proclaim the extent of their love, he imperiously concludes with the curt, monosyllabic, "Speak." (The Folio omits the concluding "Speak" addressed to Regan.)

Thus, when Cordelia refuses to follow her sisters in answering with "glib and oily art," the stage has been dramatically set for Lear's wrathful indignation.

Lear. what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
Cordelia. Nothing, my lord.
Lear. Nothing!
Cordelia. Nothing.
Lear. Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
Cordelia. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty
According to my bond; no more nor less.
(I.i.87)

Lear's real attitude comes out when in thwarted rage he revealingly says to Cordelia: "Better thou/ Hadst not been born than not t' have pleas'd me better" (I.i.237).

The situation presented here is the problem of any human relationship: shall we attempt to understand another, really understand another person, or will we accept him only on our own terms? Shakespeare presents Lear as a powerful king, wilful and unyielding, a man who has no desire to understand others or communicate with them. He has not here the humanity of thinking beyond himself. He hears only what he wants to hear, tinting everything with the color of his own mind. When Cordelia speaks these words:

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour 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.98)

Lear, expecting an entirely different answer, the kind of satisfying flattery given by the politic Goneril and Regan, makes no attempt to understand what Cordelia is really trying to say, and casts off the person dearest to him.

Though Lear acts in wrathful haste and blindness, his actions are analyzed, his motivation unfolded, that the audience may see and understand his character fully and unambiguously. Lear even explains himself, like an onlooker unfolding the psychology of action. When he shouts to Cordelia, "Better thou/ Hadst not been born than not t' have pleas'd me better" (I.i.237), he is, in a way, impartially describing himself as one who values love only as a means of adding to his own vanity. And in Kent's banishment there is the same self-revelation. In violent outburst Lear says that Kent must be banished because he sought to make the king break his vow and reverse his sentence which "nor our nature nor our place can bear" (I.i.174). Yet such statements cannot be taken as indications of a high degree of self-awareness on the part of the protagonist. They are best viewed as a mode of partial narrative which S. L. Bethell has described as "appropriate to poetic drama, since it renders the psychological situation clear without transferring attention from the verse to the process of naturalistic induction" [*Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*].

One can say that in the beginning Lear equates "nature" with his own "conception" of himself; that for Lear the natural rights inherent in majesty, fatherhood, and age demand—or, rather, take for granted— the unquestioning and undivided love of children for parent, benefactor and king; the respect of youth for age; and the complete obedience of subject to ruler. Thus, when Cordelia refuses to conform to Lear's own conception of what is natural, the king arbitrarily casts her off as unnatural, disclaiming all "paternal care,/ Propinquity and property of blood" (I.i.115). He banishes Kent because his "nature" allows not the breaking of vows. For Lear, then, nature is not the external world, or reason, but his own image; and he looks out onto a world which must mirror back his own conceptions of loyalty, love, justice, perfection. Proudly independent in the omnipotence of self, he is detached from all, and in his isolation feels no responsibility and kinship towards others. Lear's folly, like that of Oedipus, is one of blindness, the overweening belief in the infallibility of one's own being, the failure to recognize the limitations of mortality. . . .

[This] view is substantiated for us by Lear's friend, Kent, and by his future antagonists, Goneril and Regan. These three appraise him and reach the same conclusions. Kent slightingly calls him "old man," characterizes his actions as "folly" and "hideous rashness." At the end of the scene, when Goneril and Regan review the happenings in businesslike prose, their final judgment of the king, shrewd and incisive, has already been dramatized as truth:

> *Goneril*. You see how full of changes his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always lov'd our sister most; and with what poor judgement he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.
>
> *Regan*. 'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.
>
> *Goneril*. The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look from his age to receive not alone the imperfections of long-engraffed condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.
> (I.i.291)

The speeches of Goneril and Regan at the end of this exposition scene attune us to their later treatment of Lear by arousing a state of expectation, of speculation as to how they will curb their father and king, who has given up his power and yet would, as Goneril fears, still "manage those authorities/ That he hath given away!" (I.iii.17)

In analyzing the way in which Shakespeare portrays Lear at the beginning of the play it becomes evident that the audience sees and understands events not primarily through Lear's eyes, thus becoming one with him, sympathizing with his actions, but through the eyes of Kent and Goneril and Regan who interpret him for us. Friend and foes, by agreeing on the folly which impels Lear, formulate a dramatic attitude towards the character.

When next we encounter Lear there begins a shift in the audience's point of view because there is an attendant change of focus. . . . Lear suddenly moves precipitously from an old world of his own conception into a tough new world which stretches him upon its rack. In this new world Lear finds himself a stranger, rejected, and his is a continual battle to maintain self-respect; to hold desperately to the vision of the man he once was. His values—true values—are no longer recognized; and it is this sudden shift into a new world that drastically changes the dramatic point of view towards Lear.

In Lear's act of dividing the kingdom we saw him at the height of his power. From this high point begins a fall which culminates in the stripping of Lear to the very bone in the storm scene on the heath, a stripping of the respect and honor due him as king, father, and old man. And it is this profound respect which he should command, which is his natural and inherent right, that comprises the informing context of values and determines the audience's point of view towards Lear. . . .

The stripping process is the major movement of the first part of *King Lear*. It begins when Lear disinherits himself. With a pointing of a finger to the map before him he divests himself of his lands and retains only the name and honor of king without responsibility or power. Next Lear strips from himself Cordelia, then Kent. We note the further fall of the king and his further dismantling in the colloquy between Goneril and Oswald. When Goneril learns that Lear struck her gentleman for chiding his fool, she tells Oswald that when the king returns from hunting she will not speak to him; Oswald is to tell the king that she is sick. Furthermore, she even instructs the servant to show disrespect to her father and king:

> Put on what weary negligence you please,
> You and your fellows; I'd have it come to question.
> If he distaste it, let him to my sister,
> Whose mind and mine, I know, in that are one,
> Not to be over-rul'd. Idle old man,
> That still would manage those authorities
> That he hath given away!
> (I.iii.12)

Goneril, evincing this attitude to Oswald, triply compounds her felony: she is disrespectful to kingship, fatherhood and old age.

The relentless stripping of the king continues. When Lear asks Oswald where Goneril is, Oswald does not answer; he merely departs. And when Lear asks his knight why Oswald did not return when called, the knight reports, "he would not" (I.iv.59). Such an answer is given to the king, and we must remember that he still commands the respect owing to a king, and that here a servant has given him insult. The knight feels impelled to speak out: "to my judgement, your Highness is not entertain'd with that ceremonious affection as you were wont. There's a great abatement of kindness appears as well in the general dependants as in the Duke himself also and your daughter" (I.iv.61). Lear's reply, "Thou but rememb'rest me of mine own conception," is a

poignant recognition of what is beginning to take place. And immediately after this, when Lear and Oswald meet, and Lear commandingly asks Oswald, "Who am I, sir?" (I.iv.85), Oswald replies with what can only be considered a deliberate insult: "My lady's father." Here the superiority of degrees so central to the Elizabethan conception of an ordered hierarchic society is completely overthrown and the position of king is subverted.

In this same scene the Fool, acting as chorus, focuses attention on these aspects of overturned degree. It is the Fool who gives the king a lesson in government, pointing out his folly in dividing the kingdom: "When thou clovest thy crown i' th' middle, and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away" (I.iv.175). "Thou art an O without a figure," the Fool tells Lear, "I am better than thou art now; I am a Fool, thou art nothing" (I.iv.212). It is natural that a king should rule a kingdom; it is unnatural for him to give it away. It is natural that a man should ride an ass; it is unnatural that he should carry the ass on his back. This is the complete overturning of what is natural. . . . [An] undivided kingdom symbolized order and due subordination in the realm; with the division of kingdom comes the breaking of all natural bonds, and chaos ensues.

The Fool holds up before Lear the mirror of his follies that he might clearly see his actions and their consequences. In the beginning of the play Kent, Goneril and Regan framed Lear's figure by objectively analyzing him. Now the Fool's utterances help frame the king, and the audience, seeing Lear in terms of the Fool's remarks, quickly perceives the relations between the two. While the Fool is certainly the disinterested truthteller, the "punctum indifferens" of the play, as Enid Welsford tells us in her social and literary history *The Fool*, his truth narrows upon the folly of a king who would give away his titles; of a father who would allow the child to rule him; of a man who deserves to be beaten for being old before his time. The Fool is, as it were, a mirror for magistrates and fathers. But it is to be noticed that Lear does not seem to recognize his own figure in the Fool's mirror. It is we, the audience, who see it far more clearly than Lear. Thus, the audience is drawn into sympathetic participation with Lear because it can see, Lear cannot; it shares the Fool's superior knowledge, unintelligible to Lear for the most part, and recognizes in Lear the collision of opposites: a man who would still cling to the conception of proper place, the values taken for granted before; yet now, in a new world, put in his improper place. And once having entered into Lear's perspective we are forced to look on the world with his eyes.

Though Kent has said to Lear concerning the Fool, "This is not altogether fool, my lord" (I.iv.165), Lear will not recognize the significance of the Fool's wisdom until later, and it will be a self-recognition, not the result of another's explanation, but gained through his own suffering. In Act I, scene iv, Lear does not realize the significance of the Fool's statement: "thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gav'st them the rod, and puttest down thine own breeches. . . ." No sooner does the Fool say this than his statement is demonstrated: Goneril, the daughter, comes in and reproves the king for what she considers to be his insolent retinue. Here we have an example of the daughter instructing the father. Again we see the stripping of Lear—in this instance, of the dignity and respect which a daughter owes him. Again, the Fool acts as chorus: "May not an ass know when the cart draws the horse?" (I.iv.244)—another reference to the inversion of order: the cart drawing the horse; the daughter applying the rod to the father.

And when the daughter, Goneril, wants to diminish the king further, when she suggests that he reduce the number of his retinue, he breaks forth in impassioned anguish, calling her degenerate bastard, and goes off to his other daughter, Regan, who he thinks will not, could not, be so unkind.

The whittling away of the king's stature continues unabated. When the disguised Kent becomes a messenger for the king and is put into the stocks by Cornwall for striking Oswald, it is a further insult to Lear, and this is pointed out by both Kent and Gloucester. . . . [When] Lear sees his messenger in the stocks, this insult against kingship is the first thing to come to mind: "What's he that hath so much thy place mistook/ To set thee here?" "They durst not do't," he cries out. "They could not, would not do't. 'Tis worse than murder/ To do upon respect such violent outrage" (II.iv.12).

But the outrage proceeds. Lear now learns that Cornwall and Regan refuse to speak with him. He still has not attuned himself to the realities of his new world where the inversion of which the Fool speaks has become the norm; and he tries to rationalize and minimize the affront. . . . But when he looks upon Kent in the stocks there can be no doubt of the insult being done himself; and he passionately commands that his servant be released and that Cornwall and Regan be immediately summoned.

In this scene Lear is further degraded. After Regan finally comes, she says to Lear:

> I pray you
> That to our sister you do make return;
> Say you have wrong'd her, sir.
> (II.iv.152))

And Lear replies:

> Ask her forgiveness?
> Do you but mark how this becomes the house:
> "Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
> Age is unnecessary. On my knees I beg
> That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food "
> (II.iv.154)

The king actually kneels before Regan in enacting the shame that would be his were he to return to Goneril, forced to beg her forgiveness and favors. Here we have a picture of the grandeur that was king, now plundered of dignity, bent at the knees.

A further reminder of his ignominy comes when the trumpet heralds not a person of eminence, but, ironically, Oswald, who brought galling shame upon him. The indignities against Lear are compellingly, mordantly dramatized when, in a stylized manner, the king is forced to turn from one daughter to the other as they relentlessly reduce the number of his followers. What began as a retinue of one hundred for the king is halved to fifty by Goneril; halved to twenty-five by Regan (here Lear cries out, "I gave you all"). And when Lear turns to Goneril with the words:

> I'll go with thee.
> Thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty,
> And thou art twice her love.
> (II.iv.261)

the number is further reduced, until Regan divests him of all—"What need one?"

The daughters have finally stripped him of everything: honor, respect, filial devotion, retainers. The dismantling of the king is almost completed; its culmination is to come in the scene on the heath. When Regan says to Lear, "What need one?" he replies in words which show a turning point in his characterization:

> O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
> Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
> Allow not nature more than nature needs,
> Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;
> If only to go warm were gorgeous,
> Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
> Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need,—

(II.iv.267)

If man is stripped of that which gives him dignity— his true need, if he is judged solely by his basic needs, is he no more than an animal? Is it only clothes which make a man, which separate him from the beast? Deprived of the last vestige of outward dignity, Lear asks questions about the status of human values. His speech is an address not only to Regan, but to the world, an agonizing attempt to find universal meaning, universal justice. His particular fate therefore becomes the fate of mankind, and the audience can no longer take an objective view of Lear. To see a man fall from greatness and be reduced to nothingness is an awful spectacle. But when Lear universalizes his particular experience in his address to the world the dignity of all men is at stake. . . . Sympathizing with Lear's values and his precarious position, through his speech we move into his consciousness; we see the world with his eyes, we are committed to his point of view. . . .

The particular experience of Lear achieves its universality when in his speech to Regan he attempts to pierce through superficialities to the realities they disguise, to expose the real as it should be; for in this he presents the universal human desire to find in the world meaning and order. Waging a heroic battle to preserve his self-control and dignity in the face of the abuses which his daughters have heaped upon him, Lear, in his great agony, turns to address the heavens themselves:

> You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
> You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
> As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
> If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
> Against their father, fool me not so much
> To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
> And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
> Stain my man's cheeks!
> (II.iv.274)

Isolated, forsaken, despairing of men on earth, Lear can only call upon cosmic powers for help. This sense of isolation, of alienation from society, is characteristic of the tragic hero. Lear, like Job, has had his values and beliefs shaken, and finding no comfort or understanding in men of his own society, turns to the heavens. So Job, understood neither by his wife nor the comforters, had only one recourse: he carried on a monologue directed not so much to the comforters as to the heavens above, pleading to see and reason with God.

In this climactic speech Lear's thoughts focus upon the respect due to age and fatherhood. In a previous speech he poignantly summarized all the respect and honor which should have been his by right: "'Tis not in thee," he told Regan,

> To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train,
> To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes,
> And in conclusion to oppose the bolt
> Against my coming in. Thou better know'st
> The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
> Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.
> Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
> Wherein I thee endow'd.
> (II.iv.176)

Lear therefore bodies forth the traditional values which give order and cohesion to society: the offices of nature, bond of childhood, effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude. No longer, as in the opening scene of the play, is a balanced point of view maintained towards Lear, where the audience is put in the position of his

opponents, seeing the events primarily through their eyes. All the former tensions and conflicts are viewed in a new light because they are seen in a new intellectual and emotional perspective: the ideal of objective values, the order and civilized decency which Lear represents. When Goneril and Regan degrade their father, more than an individual is threatened; the civilized values of humanity are imperilled.

The gulf between the real and the ideal, between what Goneril and Regan actually do and what they should do, is so enormous that it tears Lear's reason to shreds, pitching him into insanity. Lear has come to recognize fully what his daughters are doing to him; and after appealing to the gods, he turns upon his daughters in bitterness. Stripped of his authority to command respect, his appeal to natural courtesies unheeded, the broken rhythms and thoughts of his speech reflect his impotency and aching bewilderment:

> No, you unnatural hags,
> I will have such revenges on you both
> That all the world shall—I will do such things,—
> What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth You think I'll weep:
> No, I'll not weep.
> I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
> (*Storm and tempest*.)
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
> Or ere I'll weep. O, Fool! I shall go mad!
> (II.iv.281)

The oncoming storm in the macrocosm, indicated by the Folio stage direction, "*Storm and tempest*," coincides with the storm which is beginning in the microcosm, the seething conflict within Lear's own mind. Driven to the edge of madness, Lear flees to an inhuman nature which is on the very edge of the civilized world. This nature to which he flees is a nature of chaos corresponding to the chaos in himself. Both the macrocosm and the microcosm are rent and in discord, no longer an expression of cosmic harmony and reason. . . .

At the end of Act II the powerful members of the new order retreated "out o' th' storm" and the "wild night" and the doors of the castle were shut behind Lear. At the beginning of Act III, when the action moves to the heath, we feel that we have reached the end of the human world. Nature's bounds are broken. When Kent asks, "Where's the king?" a gentleman paints in words the picture for the audience:

> Contending with the fretful elements;
> Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
> Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
> That things might change or cease; tears his white hair,
> Which the impetuous blasts with eyeless rage
> Catch in their fury, and make nothing of;
> Strives in his little world of man to out-scorn
> The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.
> This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
> The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
> Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs,
> And bids what will take all.
> (III.i.4)

What does the gentleman's speech, which prefigures Lear, stress? We see all civilization a place of storm, with Lear at the center, raging thundering defiance. The king, once regally confident in his own conception of what constituted nature, now is a prey to the elements. Lear—the gentleman emphasizes—would impose upon

nature his puny will; but nature is indifferent. Lear contends with the elements, "That things might change or cease." And the extremes of these two demands—change or complete destruction—give a most revealing insight into the king's condition. His present situation is so intolerable that it must either be temporary or give way to the end of the world.

We are concerned, then, with personality in conflict with the existing universe. Because of this monumental struggle, Lear's spiritual stature is greatly magnified; and because he represents civilized values which are threatened, all men are endangered. If we concentrate on the remarks made about Lear, we see that these form a significant pattern. Kent talks of the "hard rein" which Albany and Cornwall have "borne/ Against the old kind king" (III.i.27); of "how unnatural and bemadding sorrow/ The King hath cause to plain" (III.i.38). Gloucester predicts to Edmund that "These injuries the King now bears will be revenged home" (III.iii.12). To Regan's demand to know why Gloucester sent the king to Dover, he replies, "Because I would not see thy cruel nails/ Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister/ In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs" (III.vii.56). Going beyond Act III, we find Albany indicting Goneril:

> Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd?
> A father, and a gracious aged man,
> Whose reverence even the head-lugg'd bear would lick,
> Most barbarous, most degenerate! . .
> (IV.ii.40)

Cordelia explains her military expedition in this way:

> O dear father,
> It is thy business that I go about;
> Therefore great France
> My mourning and importun'd tears hath pitied.
> No blown ambition doth our arms incite,
> But love, dear love, and our ag'd father's right.
> (IV.iv.23)

And later, in the French camp, Cordelia speaks these impassioned words in reviewing Lear's experience on the heath:

> Had you not been their father, these white flakes
> Did challenge pity of them. Was this a face
> To be oppos'd against the warring winds? . . .
> 'Tis wonder that thy life and wits at once
> Had not concluded all.
> (IV.vii.30)

[All these] references to Lear's misfortune direct our attention to the king's value, and this value remains constant; it does not shift according to the point of view of the onlooker. The accidents of personality recede, and we confront not particular man or ideal man, but the image of Lear embodying institutions and obligations necessary to the continuance of a moral society. The opposition between moral systems has brought about this plight of values. While the conscienceless fail to remember obligations, Lear and Gloucester vainly invoke that memory. Instead of holding to the bonds of gratitude, the leaders of the new amoral world greedily batten on others, their abuse finally turning into horrors. And this clash of opposing worlds brings into focus the overriding concern of players and audience alike: once man is free from memory and responsibility, can there be any limits to presumption? At stake is the most pertinent question of all: from this conflict what mode of life will finally prevail? . . .

In his speeches Lear continually refers his own situation to the problem of universal justice. The particular repeatedly gives way to the universal. At one moment he would seek personal recognition from nature's forces, calling upon them to obliterate the world. In this he would find satisfying retributive justice. At another moment he would find the seat of justice, search out the meaning of the universe—but in this too he is thwarted: he can only envision corruption festering everywhere, for his degradation is testimony of a lawless universe:

> Let the great gods,
> That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads,
> Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch
> That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
> Unwhipp'd of justice! Hide thee, thou bloody hand;
> Thou perjur'd, and thou simular of virtue
> That are incestuous! Caitiff, to pieces shake,
> That under covert and convenient seeming
> Has practised on man's life! Close pent-up guilts,
> Rive your concealing continents, and cry
> These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
> More sinn'd against than sinning
> (III.ii.49)

Whenever Lear calls attention to the concern of the moment, it is only briefly; he is continually seeing in the particular a higher meaning. Even when he thinks of simple things, when he asks the Fool, "Where is this straw?" he proceeds to translate the immediate concern into a recognition of values: "The art of our necessities is strange/ And can make vile things precious" (III.ii.70). On the heath Lear continually pushes his thoughts beyond his present moment to universal questions. He is concerned with the reason, the justice of an event. His terror, for example, is for that which is out of time:

> Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm
> Invades us to the skin—

he tells Kent;

> so 'tis to thee;
> But where the greater malady is fix'd,
> The lesser is scarce felt. . . .
> (III.iv.6)

Serving as a perfect contrast to Lear is the Fool, for the Fool feels terror for that which is in time, for the immediate occasion:

> O nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain water out o'door. Good nuncle, in; ask thy daughters' blessing. Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools.
> (II.ii.10)

For Lear the storm and his own physical hardship are significant only because they reveal the spiritual chaos of the time. The Fool, ever practical, sees only the bare facts.

That Lear now sees more meaning in things than the Fool is a significant reversal of what had previously taken place. Before the heath scene the Fool served as *raisonneur* [reasoner], continually pointing out the significance of happenings of which Lear was hopelessly unaware. Before, the Fool asked questions of Lear;

now it is Lear who asks many questions. He wants to know whether Edgar's daughters have reduced him to the level of a beast. He would talk with the disguised Edgar, calling him "philosopher," "learned Theban," "good Athenian" (III.iv). He asks Edgar, "What is the cause of thunder?" (III.iv.160) and "What is your study?" (III.iv.163) And when the Fool sings out the moral of an occasion:

> "He that has and a little tiny wit,—
> With heigh-ho, the wind and the rain,—
> Must make content with his fortunes fit,
> For the rain it raineth every day."
> (II.ii.74)

Lear replies, "True, boy"—a remarkable change from his previous reactions to the Fool's utterances. Before the heath scene Lear never recognized the Fool's pointed moralizing. He either threatened to whip the Fool for his words or paid them no heed.

All this points to the significance, in dramatic terms, of Lear's wanderings on the heath. His is a quest for knowledge and certainty, a journey to find, somehow, a way back to order and civilization. While many critics have treated Lear as the study of the unstoical man, Lear's unstoical conduct must be related to the dramatic movement of the play—his search for justice. Lear repeatedly tries to reconcile himself to the rending occasions. He strives for stoic endurance, for this would lead to freedom from pain and suffering. "You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!" (II.iv.274) he cries out when his daughters would deprive him of all his retainers. "No, I'll not weep" (II.iv.286) he steadfastly maintains. On the heath, overwhelmed with grief and on the edge of self-pity, he steels himself with these sentiments: "No, I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing" (III.ii.37). "I will endure" (III.iv.18) is his continual resolve.

That Lear does not unalterably continue in these stoic thoughts is to be explained in terms of the dramatic concern of the action: his main preoccupation is with justice, not his physical condition. To accept a stoic morality would involve a hardening to suffering, an attainment of peace through withdrawal and indifference. It would mean the acceptance of Marcus Aurelius' counsel: "When you are grieved about anything external it is not the thing itself which afflicts you, but your judgment about it. This judgment it is in your power to efface" [*Meditations*]. Lear can not do this, for Shakespeare has focused all attention on the problem of man who seeks justice in a world that has no justice. And this is the basis of the dramatic conflict. To argue that Lear is completely unstoical is to give the impression that Shakespeare is advocating in the play a support for stoic conduct: that Lear brings on his misfortunes because he has not the discernment of a stoic. Such analysis neglects dramatic structure and technique and turns drama into moral and philosophical formulas.

Lear's search for values and justice on the heath is also an attempt to regain his identity and once again recognize his former figure. "Who am I?" Lear insistently repeats this question in various ways, endeavoring to clutch at the shadow of his former being. Does this not explain his repeated references to himself as king even in his most desperate moments of madness? When, completely deranged, he makes his appearance late in Act IV, his first words are: "No, they cannot touch me for coining;/ I am the King himself" (IV.vi.83). The blind Gloucester recognizes him by his voice, "The trick of that voice I do well remember./ Is't not the King?" And Lear replies with great majesty in his madness:

> Ay, every inch a king!
> When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.
> I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?
> Adultery?
> Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery! No:
> The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly
> Does lecher in my sight.

(IV.vi.109)

Completely isolated, alone with himself, speaking to himself, Lear creates his own world where none are guilty, for all are guilty. Yet he must have justice; and in Act III, scene vi, he sits as judge of all humanity. Before the Fool, Edgar, and Kent he arraigns Goneril and Regan in a mad judgment day where he can still demand justice and assert the prerogatives of kingship. Finally, his pathetic statement, "Come, come, I am a king,/ My masters, know you that?" (IV.vi.203) is a desperate attempt to hold on to his identity. . . .

At the beginning of the play Shakespeare portrays Lear as a proud man who lacks the humanity of thinking beyond himself; he even values love only as a means of adding to his own vanity. On the heath there comes to Lear an emotion which has not shown itself in him before: a concern for others. We first see this in Lear's words to the Fool:

> My wits begin to turn.
> Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
> I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?
> The art of our necessities is strange
> And can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.
> Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
> That's sorry yet for thee.
> (III.ii.67)

For the first time Lear reaches out to touch another human being. Seeing the Fool's suffering, he makes a sympathetic connection, "I am cold myself." He notices the Fool's adversity first; and through sympathetic identification he comes to recognize his own condition. In spite of innumerable outward differences, in one respect Lear and the Fool are equals: they share a common fate; and in their humanity they are kin. No longer do we see Lear as proud and vain. He recognizes other human beings and shows compassion for them. When Kent bids him seek refuge in the hovel, Lear would torture himself further by remaining out in the storm; but he shows concern for Kent, counselling him, "Prithee, go in thyself; seek thine own ease" (III.iv.23). And when he does decide to go into the hovel, he bids the Fool enter first, "In, boy; go first." There follow significant statements which show his concern for the sufferings of "poor naked wretches" everywhere:

> Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm.
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just.
> (II.iv.28)

Lear's whole personality undergoes a complete transformation. From a desire to find personal vindication and personal recognition, his thoughts turn to sympathy for each individual being. He approaches the view that a moral society depends on the recognition of each man's value. This stress on the responsibility of one man for all makes Lear one with all humanity and binds all humanity into oneness. In his speech he strips away all thoughts of comforts and superficialities to lay bare basic truth, the human condition which underlies the world of fleeting appearances. In an unforgettable moment on the heath Lear translates his verbalization of this necessity for bare truth into a physical act as he asks the tormenting question:

> Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! come, unbutton here.
> (III.iv.107)

And he tears off his clothes.

Two interpretations may be offered for Lear's action. First, consider Lear's statement to Regan when she argued that he had no need of any retainers:

> O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
> Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
> Allow not nature more than nature needs,
> Man's life is cheap as beast's.
> Thou art a lady;
> If only to go warm were gorgeous,
> Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
> Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need,—
> (II.iv.267)

If man's life is as cheap as beast's, if it is only clothes which make a man, which separate him from the beast, then it is unnecessary for man to borrow from animals the clothes which cover his nakedness. Thus, one can say that in stripping off his clothes Lear dramatically acts out his words to Regan. Casting off his lendings, he makes a radical return to nature, becoming one with the beasts. And we can only ask: is this the bare truth about man? Is this reality, naked man, man as beast?

One can also view Lear's trearing off his clothes as the stripping away of all the superfluous values by which fhe has lived. One can say that he is acting out his words,

> O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just.

If one views this act of the stripping of clothes as an act of purgation, a return to essential man, then a new Lear will emerge from such torments.

These two interpretations have equal validity, for one is part of the other. What we are concerned with now, it is quite obvious, is more than the personality of a particular king; it is a confronting of the universe, and in that crisis, a questioning and a recasting of one's vision of reality. Previous to the division of kingdom, reality for Lear consisted of the values in his mind, and these he imposed upon the external world. As long as he had power to control nature, he could project his expectations, and, with a high degree of success, have them realized. But the will to believe does not constitute reality. Power is accidental and temporary; things can appear to be what they are not; man can seek more justice in the world than there is. Consequently, the most urgent problem— the concern of the greatest works of art—is to learn to see reality as it is. In tearing off his clothes Lear divests himself of the husks of appearance, the accidents of power and rank. The reduction to unaccommodated man puts him on an equal basis with all men; he is, therefore, akin to all men. . . .

Lear's recognition of his kinship with all men makes him see more sympathy and understanding in the world than before. Through sympathy he discovers himself. We have a moral reorientation, a shift from individual power to the principle of universal justice. We have a different vision of society, which is now seen as organic. Each individual is so intimately united to another that the misery of all is the misery of one. And we approach a recognition that the most important bonds of society are inner and spiritual, not merely the external and the formal.

The stripping of Lear suggests even more levels of significance. It is the culmination of his daughters' stripping him of honor and dignity, the final dismantling of the king. It suggests that man by himself, against nature's forces, is insignificant; that he is not . . . the measure of all things; that he derives his strength from his dependence on his fellow men. It is a suggestion that all men, at one time or another, are outcasts and wanderers. It is a recognition that man's worth is independent of rank and power. . . .

Nevertheless, Lear's insight into truth and happiness is not negotiable in this tough world. He cannot convert his experience into saving advantages. To give the play a Christian interpretation and make of it a divine comedy is to distort the work. By the end of the play Lear's world has narrowed to Cordelia, but she is dead in his arms. "Is this the promis'd end?" (V.iii.263) Kent cries out in anguish; and Edgar joins in, "Or image of that horror?" "Fall, and cease!" is Albany's tortured utterance. Evil is in the world and there is no escape. It is much better, says Kent, that Lear die:

> Vex not his ghost; O, let him pass! He hates him
> That would upon the rack of this tough world
> Stretch him out longer.
> (V.iii.313)

In *King Lear* Shakespeare takes us to the edge of the human world to front the terrors of life and the viciousness of man's brutality. He offers no solution to the ungraspable phantom of life. However, in the midst of terror we see the nobility and greatness of man's spirit. Keats gives us one of the most illuminating insights into the nature of tragedy: "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth. Examine 'King Lear,' and you will find this exemplified throughout . . ." [a letter to George and Thomas Keats]. From the time of Aristotle, men have maintained that great art has a civilizing function: it tells us, like history or science, what is; but even more, it can tell us what ought to be. Lear's suffering, his search for justice and identity, is a facing of the fearful elements of the world. His vision of truth and his complete change of character give us a sense of the nobility of spirit which can transcend the confinements of man's condition. "There lies within the dramatic form," Arthur Miller tells us with great conviction, "the ultimate possibility of raising the truth-consciousness of mankind to a level of such intensity as to transform those who observe it." ["The Family in Modern Drama"].

SOURCE: "King Lear," in *Shakespeare and the Craft of Tragedy*, 1960. Reprint by Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 1-51.

Judd Arnold

[*Arnold asserts that although other characters in the play—including Edgar, Gloucester, Albany, and Cordelia—are transformed, Lear's own progress toward self-knowledge and spiritual regeneration is never completed. The king is certainly more sinned against than sinning, the critic admits, and he doesn't deserve to suffer as he does. However, Arnold maintains, Lear's self-righteous, self-pitying temperament is evident throughout the drama, and he never fully apprehends or acknowledges that his egoism and passion for vengeance have contributed significantly to his plight. The critic also shows how the speeches of Lear's "comforters," especially Kent and the Fool, heighten our understanding of the king; and he argues that Goneril and Regan, before their shrewd rationality becomes excessive viciousness, are reasonably concerned*

about their father "disrupting the order he is supposed to embody."]

As [William] Hazlitt said [in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*], final judgments about *King Lear*, its protagonists, or its "effect upon the mind" are "mere impertinence." But we can say something definite about the way Lear is viewed in the play, especially by those who love him best—Cordelia, Kent, the Fool, Gloucester, Edgar, Albany. All come to agree that Lear's spiritual renewal depends on his learning to see himself as more than simply a victim of a loveless universe. Not one of these comforters ever expresses the conviction that Lear achieves such saving insight. Their sense of frustration seems justified by what happens in the play and particularly by the carefully developed contrast between the resolutions of the Lear and Gloucester plots.

Lear's comforters provide a well-developed set of reliable perspectives that are unique in Shakespearean tragedy. . . .

Focusing on these perspectives may not yield any startling new conclusions about the larger meaning of the Lear story. But a full appreciation of what these characters observe and achieve makes some old conclusions questionable. Obviously they lend little support to the view that Lear, through a spiritual regeneration, reveals a purposeful, triumphant providential order. But neither do they illustrate nor declare the "decay and fall of the world" felt in Lear by Professor [Jan] Kott [in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*], nor the "grim pagan universe annihilating faith in divine justice" that is so painstakingly defined by William Elton [in *King Lear and the Gods*]. Lear's onstage observers would tend to support that critical camp which sees in Lear's story a painful problem. As Richard Sewall puts it: ". . . though the good cannot be said to triumph, neither can evil. . . . If the play denies the comforts of optimism, it does not retreat into cynicism." [*The Vision of Tragedy*]. A more recent critic urges, even though he sees signs of an amoral, even malignant universe in the play, that Lear is primarily a "savage and beautiful confrontation of the ambiguity of human experience" [John Rosenberg, in "King Lear and His Comforters"]. In learning the offices of love, Lear's servants are ennobled and transfigured and reveal the beauty of the Lear universe. In the dashing of their love-borne hopes for Lear's spiritual rebirth we learn of its terrors.

The problem of perspective in Lear challenges us as soon as the king broaches the love test as an instrument for deciding the division of a kingdom. Should we judge the king by the literal absurdity of the test, and the division itself from the point of view of a conservative Elizabethan who has just lived through the uneasy years prior to the accession of James? Or do we respond to it as to some strange fairy tale existing beyond historical or "realistic" perspectives? . . .

The opening exchange between Kent and Gloucester reveals that the partitioning of the kingdom is already the subject of court gossip. Though Lear is later told by Kent and the Fool that he has made an extraordinary political blunder, everyone seems at least resigned to Lear's retirement. But the immediate response to his subsequent behavior, from the broaching of the love test to the exiling of Cordelia and Kent, is astonishment and outrage. Even Goneril and Regan, who initially maintain their composure and flatter the king, reveal, in their first private moment, surprise and concern:

> *Gon*. You see how full of changes his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little: he always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath cast her off appears too grossly.
>
> *Reg*. 'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.
> (I, i, 288-94)

The sisters are also disturbed by the treatment of Kent. If we can shed 300 years of viewing Goneril and Regan as simply demonic figures in a morality pattern—the Evil Sisters—we could better appreciate, if not the

kindliness of their remarks, at least the sanity of them. They are rationally concerned with preventing an unpredictable old man from courting invasion or in any other way disrupting the order he is supposed to embody. If we view them only as monsters we become less sensitive to the drama of their spiritual disintegration and the extent of Lear's responsibility for it. More important, we feel less strongly the validity of their pointed analysis. Lear's behavior causes it; all other witnesses to his public performance anticipate it. Burgundy, who is in attendance only to exploit opportunity, makes no overt statement of anger. He does, however, make a hasty and politic withdrawal from the uncomfortably strange scene. France speaks directly of the "strange," unnatural behavior of the king and violates diplomatic decorum by chiding his host. Cordelia and Kent lecture Lear at length about his failures as a king, a father and a friend. Cordelia is caught off guard by Lear and fumbles at first. Her first words, uttered as an aside, reflect her confusion and dismay: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I, i, 62). Later she expresses a peculiar mixture of love for her parent and contempt for his wayward behavior. Kent leaps to Cordelia's defense and to an impassioned assessment of Lear's "hideous rashness." Kent must be "unmannerly / When Lear is mad" (I, i, 145-46). He is no more impressed with Lear's grandeur than Cordelia. His self-sacrificing opposition to the king is testament to his love, but his opposition is not to any heroic frenzy but to heart-breakingly shrill, willful senility. His childing, loving question—"What would'st thou do, old man?"—strips Lear of his official dignity and stands as a plaintive rebuke, sadly forced when "majesty falls to folly" (I, i, 146-49).

The opening scene then is strange and unrealistic. But the "realistic" perspectives of Kent, Cordelia, France, Goneril and Regan remove the scene from the world of fairy tale or wooden allegory and make it a painful, shocking exhibition of the moral and emotional condition of the declining king. The degree to which we surrender to the literal scene and to the harshest judgments of Lear makes, I think, an extraordinary difference in our response to the meaning and dramatic effect of the story which ensues. Ironically, the meanly irrelevant love test Lear contrives out of his self-indulgent folly is, by the very nature of that folly, transformed into the desperately real test of love and service that the rest of the play records. Lear's irresponsibility, his imperviousness to reason, his vicious abuse of Cordelia and Kent make him difficult to love. His performance makes clear that he can be served only by the most selfless devotion. The very order that Lear represents as king depends now on the strength of others to grant it under the most trying circumstances.

The love Lear needs is not easily granted. Obviously, Goneril and Regan are incapable of giving it. They judge, condemn and reject Lear. Cordelia, at the outset, presents a minor problem. She has been held a rendering of moral perfection in an allegorical mold. The psychologizing [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, however, detected in her "some little faulty admixture of pride and sullenness" and his point has recently been remade by Sears Jayne who calls attention [in "Charity in *King Lear*"] to her lack of charity. How severely we ought to judge Cordelia is perhaps a moot point. Her refusal to humour her father can be read not only as a measure of sound moral judgment, but also, by what it presupposes about Lear's capacity to heed reason, as a mark of respect. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the well-developed contrast between the responses of Kent and Cordelia to Lear. Cordelia's major speech prior to her departure is full of self-justification and self-congratulation:

> I yet beseech your Majesty,
> (If for I want that glib and oily art
> To speak and purpose not, since what I well intend,
> I'll do't before I speak), that you make known
> It is no vicious blot, murther or foulness,
> No unchaste action, or dishonored step,
> That hath depriv'd me of your grace and favour,
> But even for want of that for which I am richer,
> A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
> That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
> Hath lost me in your liking.

(I, i, 223-33)

Kent, however, leaves no doubt that his sole concern is the well-being of the man he has "ever honour'd as my King, / Lov'd as my father, as my master follow'd" (I, i, 140-41). His words are full of astringent instruction, but instruction borne of compassion. He courts death and banishment because

> My life I never held but as a pawn
> To wage against thine enemies; nor fear to lose it,
> Thy safety being motive.
> (I, i, 155-57)

Perhaps Shakespeare gives Cordelia no lines in support of Kent—not even a thank you—to heighten the contrast between the responses of the two. Or perhaps we are to understand that she has been rendered heartbreakingly inarticulate by a flood of emotion. Yet after Kent's departure she seems almost grimly composed, makes her self-justifying claims, cooly and bitterly consigns her father to her sister's care and sweeps off to France. All we can note with certainty is that when Cordelia reappears in Act Four, her language suggests that she has arrived at a larger understanding of the selfless offices of love and she says to Kent then: "O thou good Kent! how shall I live and work / To match thy goodness? My life will be too short, / And every measure fail me" (IV, vii, 1-3).

To feel what nearly every character in the play, except Goneril and Regan, comes to learn about the trials of love and service we must continue to feel how severely Lear tests them. Maynard Mack raises the problem of perspectives on Lear by complaining of a number of productions which "rationalize" the treatment given him by Goneril and Regan [in *"King Lear" in Our Time*].

> Something like a climax in this rationalizing mode was reached in Peter Brook's [Royal Shakespeare Company] production [featuring] Paul Scofield in 1962. There in I, iv, evidently to justify Goneril's complaints about her father's retinue and thus motivate her insolence to him, Lear's knights literally demolished the set, throwing plates and tankards, upending the heavy table on which presumably the king's dinner was soon to be served, and behaving in general like boors—as if the visible courtesy of their spokesman earlier (I, iv, 54-78), Albany's significant unawareness of what Goneni is complaining about, and Lear's explicit description of his knights:
>
> My train are men of choice and rarest parts,
> That all particulars of duty know, . . .
> had no existence in the play.

Mack then accuses the production of depending on "what is called in today's theatrical jargon, the subtext."

> The most obvious result of subtextualizing is that director and (possibly) actor are encouraged to assume the same level of authority as the author. The sound notion that there is a life to which the words give life can with very little stretching be made to mean that the words the author set down are themselves simply a search for the true play, which the director must intuit in, through and under them. Once one has done so, the words become to a degree expendable.

Yet there is a good deal of evidence in the words of the text to justify Brook's approach. Time passes between I, i and ii. In that time Lear has apparently been granted his retirement on his own terms. Gon-eril has apparently had cause to complain that "His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us / On every trifle" (I, iii, 7-8). Why should we not believe her? In spite of what Mack says about Albany, the Duke does not seem

unaware of a problem. Later he only cautions his wife that she "may fear too far," and to her accusation of his "milky gentleness," "want of wisdom" and "harmful mildness" he responds only with the timorous suggestion that in "Striving to better, oft we mar what's well" (I, iv, 338-56). Lear himself, in such acts as striking Oswald, shows he is at least capable of indecorum. The manner in which he adopts the services of the disguised Kent is suspicious. Earlier he had failed to heed the wisdom of Kent. Now he is cool to the simple offer of honest service. Not until Kent plays Lear's games is he accepted. Oswald enters and is again slapped by Lear. Kent enters the sport and trips Oswald. (It is perhaps to such antics that Edgar later refers when he recounts how Kent "in disguise / Follow'd his enemy king, and did him service / Improper for a slave" (V, iii, 219-21). Only after Kent's delightfully crude gesture does Lear embrace him and then, I suspect, with a schoolboyish glee. My use of the term *schoolboyish* may be my response to an imaginary subtext. But in the light of the succeeding observations of the Fool it is at least defensible. Precisely at this point the Fool begins to lecture the unheeding Lear on his childishness—on his having made his daughters his mothers, on his having put down his own breeches and given them the rod. Lear's on-stage observers at least make credible Goneril's declaration that Lear is "an idle old man, / That still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away. Now by my life, / Old fools are babes again!" (I, iii, 17-20).

It is not surprising that there has been less critical attention given to Lear's errors than to his suffering. His anguish is overwhelming. Goneril's and Regan's rational, self-serving shrewdness quickly gives way to gratuitous viciousness. Their savagery reaches an early climax as they mockingly subject him to public humiliation by stripping him of his remaining privileges and allowing him to flee into the storm. Nothing Lear has done deserves this. So at this stage in the drama those most sensitive to Lear's condition emphasize his undeserved plight. Albany's cautious criticism of his wife gives way to bitter anger. Gloucester is moved to risk his life to solace his king. Kent turns from instructing Lear to anatomizing Lear's tormentors—the "smiling rogues" who "bite the holy chords a-twain" (II, ii, 74-75).

But the more judgmental perspectives on Lear are maintained chiefly by the Fool who knows that Lear's regeneration and his achievement of patience must begin with his understanding of his own guilt, understanding that he must expect neither to exercise an authority he has

The Fool

Enid Welsford

[*In this excerpt from her classic study of the social and literary tradition of the Fool figure, Welsford describes Lear's Fool as both a commentator on dramatic events and a tragic figure in his own right. He is a "sage-fool" who intuitively knows the truth and doesn't hesitate to speak it, the critic observes, and his focus on the connection between a wise man and a fool underscores Lear's tragedy. In Welsford's judgment, the Fool disappears from the play when the king, in his madness, becomes a "wise fool" himself. Having lost his rational wits, she contends, Lear now sees the truth: that patient acceptance is the only possible response to a world in which there is no guarantee of divine or human justice*.]

[When] Shakespeare made Lear and his Fool companions in misfortune, he may have broken the canons of classical art, but he certainly was not destroying verisimilitude. On the contrary, if he was catering for the popular taste for clownage, he was doing so by creating a figure who was sufficiently life-like to be tragically convincing. The human truth and pathos of the situation is indeed so appealing that it has sometimes distracted attention from the deeper purpose of the dramatist in this juxtaposition of King and Clown. Lear's Fool is not merely a touching figure who might easily have been drawn from life, he is also the fool of the sottie [Satirical farce], and, although evidently half-witted, is endowed with a penetration deeper and more far-reaching than that superficial sharp-wittedness and gift for smart repartee which went to the making of a successful court-jester. He is in fact the sage-fool who sees the truth, and his role has even more *intellectual* than emotional significance. For *King Lear* is not merely a popular play. If it offends against classical

decorum, it is nevertheless true to a definitely intellectual tradition and makes use of the conventions of 'fool-literature' which were . . . clerical rather than popular in origin, and were used as the vehicle for a reasoned criticism of life. The Fool, therefore, as I shall endeavour to prove, is here used both as a commentator whose words furnish important clues to the interpretation of a difficult play; and also as a prominent figure caught up into the drama, whose role and nature form a vital part of the central tragic theme.

Lear's Fool, like Touchstone [in *As You Like It*] and Feste [in *Twelfth Night],* is an 'all-licensed' critic who sees and speaks the real truth about the people around him. His business, however, is not to deal out satirical commonplaces, but to emphasize one peculiarly dreadful instance of the reversal of position between the wise man and the fool; indeed he labours this point with a maddening reiteration which is only excusable because his tactless jokes and snatches of song spring so evidently from genuine grief. The sorrow underlying his shrewd sarcasm rises to the surface when he interrupts Goneril's plausible scolding to give us a sudden glimpse of the horror lurking behind an apparently ludicrous situation:

> For, you trow, nuncle,
> The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
> That it had its head bit off by its young.
> So, out went the candle, and we were left darkling.

When King Lear made his daughters his mothers he committed an act of indubitable folly of which his fool is only too ready to remind him; but the same fool comments on folly of a very different order, when the disguised Kent offers his services to his helpless master:

> *Fool*. Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb.
> *Kent*. Why, fool?
> *Fool*. Why, for taking one's part that's out of favour.

The same point is made even more forcibly when the Fool finds Kent in the stocks:

Kent. How chance the king comes with so small a train?
Fool. An thou hadst been set i' the stocks for that question,
thou hadst well deserved it.
Kent. Why, fool?
Fool. We'll set thee to school to an ant, to teach thee there's no labouring i' the winter. All that follow their noses are led by their eyes but blind men; and there's not a nose among twenty but can smell him that's stinking. Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following it; but the great one that goes up the hill, let him draw thee after. When a wise man gives thee better counsel, give me mine again: I would have none but knaves follow it, since a fool gives it.

That sir which serves and seeks for gain,
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain,
And leave thee in the storm.
But I will tarry; the fool will stay,
And let the wise man fly:
The knave turns fool that runs away:
The fool no knave, perdy.

Kent. Where learned you this, fool?
Fool. Not the stocks, fool.

This whole passage proved so puzzling to [Samuel] Johnson—whose mind was not attuned to the nuances and complex ironies of fool-literature—that he wished to straighten out the reasoning by emendation, and in particular to alter the last two lines of the song into:

> The fool turns knave who runs away;
> The knave no fool perdy.

This version does, perhaps, make better common sense, but then is it common sense that the Fool is trying to convey? Dr Johnson might have been saved from his bewilderment if he had used [Erasmus's] *The Praise of Folly* as a commentary; for, in his conversation with Kent, the Fool is being as subtle, ambiguous and volatile as Erasmus himself in his play upon the various meanings and relations of the words 'fool' and 'knave'. Folly is the opposite of wisdom, how *unwise* it is to pursue a policy which in this world of ours must lead you to the stocks. I am only a Fool, but I can teach you better than that. But after all, do I want you to follow my advice? No, let it be followed only by knaves, for it is the advice of a fool—a contemptible vicious being, as all men acknowledge. But who is this Fool who not only desires none but knaves to follow his advice, but also defiantly proclaims that he will himself disregard it:

> I will tarry, the fool will stay
> And let the wise man fly.

After all which is which? The knave who runs away, comes out into the open, and is at once seen as the abject contemptible ludicrous creature that he has always really been. The fool is at least true to himself. He has never professed to be wise, he will not now act as though he were worldly wise. If Dr Johnson's reading is accepted the meaning of the passage remains much the same, only it closes with a shrug and a wink instead of on a note of exalted defiance. In both cases the Fool suggests that there is ambiguity in the words 'wisdom' and 'folly', but that at any rate the Fool would seem to be a man devoid of worldly wisdom. Here the Fool is hinting at thoughts beyond the range of Feste and Touchstone, thoughts which are vitally connected with the central theme of the tragedy.

In treating the Fool as the disinterested truth-teller, the *punctum indifferens* [neutral commentator] of the play, Shakespeare was not making any new departure from his earlier comic method as shown in the handling of Touchstone; and, as a piece of realistic character-drawing, Lear's 'Good boy' with his lovable, sympathetic qualities is only a profounder study of a type already exemplified in the jester of *Twelfth Night*. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's tragic fool differs very profoundly from his comic brethren. In Arden and Illyria [the dramatic settings of *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*] it is regarded as a sufficiently good joke that the madman should be the spokesman of sanity, that the ostensible fool should find it so easy to draw out the latent folly of the wise. But Lear's Fool goes further than this. Like others of his profession he is very ready to proffer his coxcomb to his betters, but in doing so he does not merely raise a laugh or score a point, he sets a problem. 'What am I? What is madness?' he seems to ask, 'the world being what it is, do I necessarily insult a man by investing him with motley?'

With this apparently comic question the Fool strikes the keynote of the tragedy of Lear. . . .

It has often been pointed out that Lear has a more passive role than most of Shakespeare's tragic characters. Nevertheless he is involved in an event, and his relationship with the Fool is no mere static pictorial contrast, but part of the tragic movement of the play; the movement downwards towards that ultimate exposure and defeat when the King is degraded to the status of the meanest of his servants. We watch the royal sufferer being progressively stripped, first of extraordinary worldly power, then of ordinary human dignity, then of the very necessities of life, deprived of which he is more helpless and abject than any animal. But there is a more dreadful consummation than this reduction to physical nakedness. Lear hardly feels the storm because he is struggling to retain his mental integrity, his 'knowledge and reason', which are not only, as he himself calls

them, 'marks of sovereignty', but the essential marks of humanity itself:

> O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
> Keep me in temper, I would not be mad! . . .
> O fool, I shall go mad!

Lear's dread is justified, 'sweet heaven' rejects his prayer, and the central scenes on the heath are peopled by a blind, half-crazy nobleman, guided by a naked beggar supposed to be mad, and by an actually mad King served by a half-witted court-jester. . . .

But now that the worst has happened, now that Lear has lost his sanity, he has enlarged his vision. As his wits begin to leave him, he begins to see the truth about himself; when they are wholly gone he begins to have spasmodic flashes of insight in which, during momentary lulls in the storm of vengeful personal resentment, he sees the inner truth about the world. 'Thou wouldst make a good fool', said the Fool to his master at the beginning of his misfortunes, and he spoke as a prophet. In his amazing encounter with the *blind* Gloucester, the *mad* Lear has something of the wit, the penetration, the quick repartee of the court-jester. From the realistic point of view it is no doubt a dramatic flaw that Shakespeare does not account more clearly for the fate of the real man in motley; but his disappearance was a poetic necessity, for the King having lost everything, including his wits, has now himself become the Fool. He has touched bottom, he is an outcast from society, he has no longer any private axe to grind, so he now sees and speaks the truth.

And what is the truth? What does the mad Lear see in his flashes of lucidity? . . . Certainly his vision is a grim one. He sees not one particular event but the whole of human life as a vast sottie:

> *Lear*. What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes, with no eyes. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?
>
> *Gloucester*. Ay, sir.
>
> >*Lear*. And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. . . .
>
> . . . Plate sin with gold,
> And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
> Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
> None does offend, none,—I say, none; I'll able 'em:
> Take that of me, my friend, who have the power
> To seal th' accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes;
> And, like a scurvy politician, seem
> To see the things thou dost not.

Already we have watched king and noblemen turned into fools and beggars, now the great reversal of the Saturnalia is transferred from the action of the tragedy into the mind of the tragic hero, who discovers in his dotage, what the evil have known from their cradles, that *in this world there is no poetic justice*:

> When we are born, we cry that we are come
> To this great stage of fools.

. . . [The] blind Gloucester and mad Lear have come to know that to see truly 'how the world goes' is to 'see it feelingly'. And when the world is seen feelingly, what then? Why then we must be patient. That is all.

'Patience', like 'wisdom', 'folly', 'knavery', 'nature', is one of the key words of this tragedy. As soon as Lear begins to realize the nature of his misfortune, he begins to make pathetic attempts to acquire it, and when his mental overthrow is complete he recommends it as the appropriate response to the misery of life:

> If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
> I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester:
> Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:
> Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air,
> We wawl and cry.

Edgar takes the same point of view:

> What! In ill-thoughts again? Men must endure
> Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
> Ripeness is all.

What is meant? Something different from tame submissiveness or cold stoicism, but completely opposed to that restless activity in pursuit of our own ends which Edmund thinks so preferable to passive obedience to fortune or custom. Patience, here, seems to imply an unflinching, clear-sighted recognition of the fact of pain, and the complete abandonment of any claim to justice or gratitude either from Gods or men; it is the power to choose love when love is synonymous with suffering, and to abide by the choice knowing there will be no Divine Salvation from its consequences.

And here, I think, is the solution of the problem set by the Fool; the problem of apparent moral relativity, 'Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile, filths savour but themselves', so that Albany and Goneril have not even sufficient common ground to make a real argument possible. Nevertheless, Shakespeare does not allow us to remain neutral spectators of their debate, he insists that although Goneril's case is as complete and consistent as that of Albany it is *not* equally valid, *not* equally true. In the first place Shakespeare's poetry persuades and compels us to accept the values of the friends rather than of the enemies of Lear. Secondly, Shakespeare makes the fullest possible use of the accepted convention that it is the Fool who speaks the truth, which he knows not by ratiocination but by inspired intuition. The mere appearance of the familiar figure in cap and bells would at once indicate to the audience where the 'punctum indifferens', the impartial critic, the mouthpiece of real sanity, was to be found.

Now the Fool sees that when the match between the good and the evil is played by the intellect alone it must end in a stalemate, but when the heart joins in the game then the decision is immediate and final. 'I will tarry, the Fool will stay—And let the wise man fly.' That is the unambiguous wisdom of the madman who sees the truth. That is decisive. It is decisive because, so far from being an abnormal freakish judgment, it is the instinctive judgment of normal humanity raised to heroic stature; and therefore no amount of intellectual argument can prevent normal human beings from receiving and accepting it, just as, when all the psychologists and philosophers have said their say, normal human beings continue to receive and accept the external world as given to them through sense perception. 'They that seek a reason for all things do destroy reason', notes the judicious [Richard] Hooker [in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*]; our data, our premises, we must simply receive, and receive not only through our heads but also through our senses and our hearts. To see truly is to 'see feelingly'.

It would seem, then, that there is nothing contemptible in a motley coat. The Fool is justified, but we have not yet a complete answer to his original query: 'What is folly?' Which is the wise man, which is the fool? To be

foolish is to mistake the nature of things, or to mistake the proper method of attaining to our desires, or to do both at once. Even Edmund and Edgar, even Goneril and Albany, could agree to that proposition. But have the perfectly disinterested made either of these mistakes and have not the self-interested made them both? The evil desire pleasure and power, and they lose both, for the evil are mutually destructive. The good desire to sympathize and to save, and their desires are partially fulfilled, although as a result they have to die. Nor have the good mistaken the nature or 'mystery of things' which, after all, unlike Edmund, they have never professed either to dismiss or to understand. It is, indeed, as we have seen, the good who are normal. Lear, in his folly, is not reduced, as he fears, to the level of the beasts, but to essential naked humanity, 'unaccommodated man', 'the thing itself'. It is the evil who 'be-monster' themselves, it is the sight of Goneril which makes Albany fear that

> It will come,
> Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
> Like monsters of the deep.

In this connection it is not without interest that the Elizabethan playwrights made conventional use of the inherited belief in thunder as the voice of the Divine Judge, and that the Divine inspiration of madmen has always been a widespread and deeply rooted popular superstition.

Not that I would suggest that this great tragedy should be regarded as a morality play full of naïve spiritual consolation. That Shakespeare's ethics were the ethics of the New Testament, that in this play his mightiest poetry is dedicated to the reiteration of the wilder paradoxes of the Gospels and of St Paul, that seems to me quite certain. But it is no less certain that the metaphysical comfort of the Scriptures is deliberately omitted, though not therefore necessarily denied. The perfectly disinterested choose loving-kindness because they know it to be intrinsically desirable and worth the cost, not because they hope that the full price will not be exacted. It is Kent's readiness to be unendingly patient which makes him other than a shrewder and more far-calculating Edmund. If the thunder had ceased at Lear's bidding, then Lear would not have become a sage-fool. What the thunder says remains enigmatic, but it is this Divine ambiguity which gives such force to the testimony of the human heart. Had the speech of the gods been clearer, the apparently simple utterances of the Fool would have been less profound:

> *Fool*. He that has a little tiny wit,
> With key, ho, the wind and the rain,
> Must make content with his fortune's fit,
> For the rain it raineth every day.
> *Lear*. True, my good boy.

And so we reach the final reversal of values. 'Ay every inch a king', says Lear in his madness, and we do not wholly disagree with him. The medieval clergy inaugurated the Saturnalia by parodying the Magnificat: Shakespeare reverses the process. Lear's tragedy is the investing of the King with motley: it is also the crowning and apotheosis of the Fool.

SOURCE: "The Court-Fool in Elizabethan Drama," in *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, Farrar & Rinehart Incorporated, 1936, pp. 243-70.

Robert Hillis Goldsmith

[*Goldsmith calls Lear's jester a "wise fool" and distinguishes him from traditional fools known principally for being half-witted or cunning, satirical or ironical. The Fool's chief characteristic is devotion to the king, the critic declares, and in this steadfastness he demonstrates the virtues of "patience, humility, and love." Goldsmith notes that this devotion sometimes clouds the Fool's reason, a paradoxical situation since the Fool's principal task is to help Lear clarify his own judgment. But nursing the mad king back to sanity is*

beyond his skills, the critic asserts, and when it becomes apparent that others will take on this responsibility, the Fool departs.]

The Fool in *King Lear* has become so enmeshed in the play's meaning that it is difficult to disentangle him. Several recent critics have approached the play's theme through the character of the Fool and the concept of wise folly which he brings into the play. One of these . . . critics, William Empson, refers to Lear's Fool as a lunatic ["Fool in *Lear*"]. But is this fool mentally defective? If the Fool and his "folly" are so important to our full understanding of *King Lear*, then the question is not academic. Except for the bizarre diagnoses of a few scattered writers, the consensus of the critics is that Touchstone, Feste, and Lavache [in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*] are clever artificial fools, not naturals; that they are conscious humorists, not unwitting instruments. However, when they come to examine Lear's Fool, the critics are far from agreed on the state of his mind. The preponderant opinion since the beginning of the nineteenth century seems to have been that this fool is a naive natural or even a half-wit boy. . . .

There is some justification for this reading of the Fool's character in the light of a confused popular tradition. [The court fool] Triboulet was little more than a babbling idiot who belonged successively to two French kings, yet he was endowed by the folk imagination with wisdom and intelligence far beyond the reach of his reason. Popular fancy is constantly distorting and disregarding the facts of history when building its legends. Shakespeare went not to history but to the popular and literary tradition (or to [the Elizabethan Comic actor Robert] Armin, which was the same thing) for the stuff of which he created Feste and Lear's Fool, but the poet refined upon the fool of tradition. Even in conceiving his most ambiguous characters, Shakespeare was ever firm and dramatically sure. Can we say then that in his conception of Lear's Fool the dramatist abandoned his usual methods, that his fool wavered between an unconscious simpleton and a penetrating, ironical commentator? Since the best and only reliable arbiter in all such matters of interpretation is the text itself, let us turn to it.

Midway through the play, the disguised Edgar addresses the Fool as "innocent" (III, vi, 8). There is little to be gleaned from the context in which the term appears. However, in a passage which closely follows, there are speeches which strikingly contrast the Fool, the crazed King, and the feigned madman:

> *Fool*. Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman.
> *Lear*. A king, a king!
> *Fool*. No, he's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son; for he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman before him.
> *Lear*. To have a thousand with red burning spits
> Come hizzing in upon 'em—
> *Edgar*. The foul fiend bites my back.
> *Fool*. He's mad that trusts in the lameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath.
> (III, vi, 10)

Of the three, the Fool alone speaks to the point, and he speaks the language of proverbial wisdom, the language of [the satirical fool] Marcolf. Edgar has as much and no more reason for calling Lear's Fool an "innocent" as Rosalind has for terming Touchstone a "natural." Both gentlefolk accept the gold coin for a copper penny, for so it passes current. As with the ambiguous title "Fool," the names "Innocent" and "Natural" seem to have been titles of office as frequently as they were descriptive epithets. . . .

Paradoxically, Lear's Fool is nobody's fool. He seldom lapses into nonsense or irrelevance; when he does, he does so to save himself from a beating. The Fool obliquely taunts Goneril: "The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it had it head bit off by it young" and then skips off into quasi-nonsense: "So out went the candle, and we were left darkling" (*Lear* I, iv, 235). This seemingly irrelevant last line may echo several

verses from Spenser's version of the tale of Lear: "But true it is that, when the oyle is spent, / The light goes out, and weeke is throwne away; / So when he had resigned his regiment, / His daughter gan despise his drouping day, / And wearie wax of his continuall stay" ([*Faerie Queene*] II, x, 30). The similarity can hardly be coincidental when both passages refer to Goneril's treatment of Lear. A little further on the Fool makes another sharp thrust at Goneril but immediately blunts its effect with what sounds like the refrain from an old song: "May not an ass know when the cart draws the horse? / Whoop, Jug, I love thee!" (I, iv, 244). If we remember that "Jug" was not only a diminutive variant for Joan or Jane but was also a cant term for a common trull, we are not at all sure that the exclamation is really pointless. Can it not be that the Fool uses this mock declaration of love and loyalty to Goneril merely to deride those turncoats and time-pleasers who, like Oswald, shift and veer with every wind of favor? Such an interpretation would fit some later speeches of the Fool as well. Certainly he does not expect the loyal Kent to heed his cynical advice to "Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill, lest it break thy neck with following it" (II, iv, 72). The Fool habitually hides his meaning in metaphor.

Another passage which has troubled the explicators combines paradox, metaphor, and a bit of proverbial lore:

> The codpiece that will house
> Before the head has any,
> The head and he shall louse:
> So beggars marry many.
> The man that makes his toe
> What he his heart should make
> Shall of a corn cry woe,
> And turn his sleep to wake.
> (III, ii, 27)

Commentators have noted the obvious reference in the first stanza to the imprudent behavior of beggars and its logical consequences, but they have not always remarked on the relevance of the Fool's gibe to Lear's plight. Furness explains that Lear in preferring Regan and Goneril to Cordelia is like the man who covers the meaner members of his body and leaves his head and heart unprotected and as a result suffers pinching and pain in those very parts he sought to protect. A careful reading of this verse is not only rewarding in itself but will help to throw light upon a sequent passage. As Kent enters, the Fool remarks, "Marry, here's grace and a codpiece; that's a wise man and a fool" (III, ii, 40). Grace is, of course, a gentleman, the King in this instance. Or has he, the wise man, by his irrational behavior toward Cordelia changed places with the Fool? Has he not acted the part of a codpiece covering and protecting those baser parts—his lecherous and ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan? The Fool suggests that it may be the King who is the real fool.

So well does he disguise his thoughtful comments in the veiled language of imagery and old songs that he has misled some observers into actually taking him for a fool. Such a misunderstanding does not disturb him any more than it troubles Touchstone. To Kent's grudging admission that "This is not altogether fool, my lord," the Fool responds with characteristic insouciance: "No, faith; lords and great men will not let me. If I had a monopoly out, they would have part on't. And ladies took, they will not let me have all the fool to myself; they'll be snatching" (I, iv, 166). Critics have been led astray not always by an unperceptive literal-mindedness but sometimes by a desire to superimpose their own patterns on Shakespeare's design. Coleridge speaks of "the overflowings of the wild wit of the Fool" [*Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*], and [A. C.] Bradley complains that regarding the Fool in Lear as wholly sane "destroys the poetry of the character" [*Shakespearean Tragedy*]. But whose poetry are we here considering—Coleridge's, Bradley's, or Shakespeare's? Shakespeare's conception of the timid but faithful fool, torn from his natural element—the banquet hall—and thrust shivering upon the wild, stormy heath is poetic enough for our imagination, particularly when we remember that the Fool follows his King against the promptings of his own common sense. He gives shrewd advice to others but does not heed it himself. . . .

Many of the Fool's comments betray a shrewd knowledge of the world, not what one would expect from a brilliant half-wit:

> *Fool*. O nuncle, court holy water in a dry house is better than this rain water out o' door. Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters blessings! Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools.
> (III, ii, 10)

The Fool has wit enough to come out of the rain but is restrained by a stronger power—loyalty to his sick King. Which of his five wits does the Fool lack? Certainly he has abundant store of fantasy and imagination—else he would not be constantly speaking in metaphor. His memory is long as we may see from his continual harping upon Lear's past ana his injustice to Cordelia. The Fool does not lack common sense. His urging the King to come to terms with his daughters and the shrewd but cynical advice he gives Kent prove that he sees the world as it is. The only one of his faculties about which there may be any doubt is his judgment. We have already noted how his loyalty gets the better of his common sense. That lapse may be construed as a weakness in judgment—if we adopt the point of view of Goneril.

What about the Fool's heckling the King into madness? An anonymous Gentleman tells Kent and us that the Fool "labours to outjest his [Lear's] heart-struck injuries" (III, i, 16). But, these very jests are neither wise nor psychologically sound when applied as remedy for Lear's malady. Nay, even more; they are downright harmful. Professor [Oscar James] Campbell observes that the Fool's "jests, far from mitigating his master's woes, intensify them by forcing the King to realize the depth of his folly" [*The Living Shakespeare*]. The Fool then bears some of the responsibility for driving Lear mad. From this observation, one might argue that Lear's Fool is either malicious or stupidly naive. What then are we to say of the behavior of Kent? No one has seriously questioned his loyalty to his King or his sanity. And yet Kent's rash and headstrong righteousness is equally unwise and injudicious as a physic for Lear's choleric temper. Bradley notes that it is Kent who brings Lear's quarrel with Goneril to a head, and in falling upon the detestable Oswald and beating him, "he provides Regan and Cornwall with a pretext for their inhospitality." Kent therefore must share with the Fool any responsibility for hurrying Lear out of his wits. If Kent demonstrates by his loyal-hearted blundering that he has "more man than wit" (II, iv, 42) about him, then the Fool shows by his probing metaphors that he has no less of either quality. Both the Fool and the loyal Kent are too emotionally attached to the King to be good physicians to his sick mind.

About the Fool's doglike fidelity to Lear, a few further words are needful. Much has been written in praise of his utter, blind devotion to his master. Perhaps, we ought to recall, parenthetically, that the Fool wavers in his loyalty for a long moment and only hurries after his King when commanded by Goneril: "You, sir, more knave than fool, after your master!" Immediately afterwards he throws off all prudence and sings:

> A fox, when one has caught her,
> And such a daughter,
> Should sure to the slaughter,
> If my cap would buy a halter.
> So the fool follows after.
> (I, iv, 337, 340)

The incident should temper but not destroy our belief in the Fool's loyalty. Whether he follows Lear, at first, out of faithfulness or merely from necessity matters little. He follows and stays with his master until forced to drop out of the play. And in remaining by Lear, the Fool violates his own sense of prudence. If this is not devotion, it is the next best thing. Walking clear-eyed into the stormy night and to his probable death on the heath, he comes as close as any fool ever does to the heroic.

With the prophetic sense so often attributed to fools and madmen, Lear's Fool sings a stave and makes a prediction:

> That sir which serves and seeks for gain.
> And follows but for form,
> Will pack when it begins to rain
> And leave thee in the storm.
> But I will tarry; the fool will stay,
> And let the wise man fly.
> The knave turns fool that runs away;
> The fool no knave, perdy.
> (II, iv, 79)

The first part of this jingle is a clear forecast of the course of the play and of the Fool's relation to it. The last two lines, however, have caused some confusion. That eminent rationalist, Dr. Samuel Johnson, solved the problem by emending the text to read: "The fool turns knave, that runs away; / The knave no fool,—." But, although his revision makes easier reading, it is too pedestrian for the Fool's meaning. Johnson's changed reading not only alters the words but rudely violates the character and spirit of Shakespeare's wise fool. . . . The ironical fool is playing ambiguously with the term "fool." The knave who runs away from a friend in adversity is accounted prudent, even wise, in the eyes of the world and such worldings as Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. But he is no more than a fool in the eyes of God, for, as Saint Paul says, "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (I Cor. iii, 18). The Fool emphatically declares that he is no such knave, and we are left to infer that he may be truly wise in the sight of God.

This fool has come a long way from the railing Marcolf and the scheming Cacurgus [in the anonymous *Misogonus*]. How far he has progressed beyond his shrewd ancestors and his cunning contemporaries may be seen in the almost contemptuous twist which he gives to the prudential wisdom of Solomon. When he cynically advises Kent: "We'll set thee to school to an ant, to teach thee there's no labouring i' th' winter" (II, iv, 68), he is echoing:

> Go to the ant, thou sluggard;
> Consider her ways, and be wise:
> Which having no chief,
> Overseer, or ruler,
> Provideth her bread in the summer,
> And gathereth her food in the harvest.
> (Prov, vi, 6)

But he does not really wish Kent to follow his advice, for as he remarks a little later, "I would have none but knaves follow it, since a fool gives it" (II, iv, 77). He has become a wise fool in the Erasmian or Pauline sense.

The Fool has also become Lear's alter ego, his externalized conscience, or, as he puts it himself, "Lear's shadow" (I, iv, 251). In this role he chides the King:

> *Fool*. If thou wert my fool, nuncle, I'ld have thee beaten for being old before thy time.
> *Lear*. How's that?
> *Fool*. Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise.
> (I, v, 44)

It is his task with his probing, sometimes caustic comments to cut away the cataracts of illusion which cloud Lear's eyes. What though the process be painful! What though the Fool, and later Edgar, must lead the old

King through the darkness of unreason! The cure begun by the Fool is completed by Edgar and Cordelia, and Lear sees better through the eyes of a chastened spirit. The Fool's manner grows gentler as the King's madness increases. But it is not his business, nor has he the skill, to nurse the old man back to mental health. And so he goes to bed at noon in the play.

[Harley] Granville-Barker justly warns that the Fool ought not to be "all etherealized by the higher criticism." The actor who plays the role must still "sing like a lark, juggle his words so that the mere skill delights us, and tumble around with all the grace in the world" [*Prefaces to Shakespeare*]. Such is the professional duty of the court and stage fool. But he must be so portrayed that we may perceive the Fool's real wisdom and the central position he takes in the meaning of the play. Shakespeare, by giving him another stanza to sing from Feste's old song, links this fool with the wise fool of comedy but at the same time points up the difference between the two. Lear's Fool has had to learn patience in adversity.

> He that has and a little tiny wit—
> With hey, ho, the wind and the rain—
> Must make content with his fortunes fit,
> For the rain it raineth every day.
> (III, ii, 74)

Although it would be a mistake to regard Shakespeare's fools as mere personifications of wisdom, it is nevertheless true that each possesses his special virtue. Touchstone, by the air of realism which he breathes into the antique forest of romance, may be said to embody the Aristotelian virtue of truthfulness. Feste, by his advocacy of moderation in loving and laughing, adds to truthfulness the virtue of temperance. He lives in and expresses the golden mean. Lear's Fool, however, transcends his fellows in the quality of his wisdom. He is the supremely wise fool who expresses in his heartfelt devotion to Cordelia and to his king the Christian virtues of patience, humility, and love.

SOURCE: "Shakespeare's Wise Fools" in *Wise Fools in Shakespeare*, 1955. Reprint by Michigan State University Press, 1963, pp. 47-67.

Lear's Daughters

A. C. Bradley

[*Bradley's remarks about Cordelia have been frequently cited by subsequent critics, even by those who profoundly disagree with his perspective on Lear's youngest daughter. He views her as a superlative figure who combines many of the individual virtues of Shakespeare's other heroines: a loving nature, a tender heart, resolution, and dignity. In Bradley's judgment, Cordelia ought not to be blamed for her imperfections—touches of pride and personal antagonism, an inability to speak of love, and her insistence on telling the truth rather than showing compassion—for these are all part of Shakespeare's unalterable tragic situation. The critic finds some degree of reconciliation in Cordelia's death. Bradley suggests that although she is an innocent victim, in her spiritual perfection she is beyond the reach of the evils committed by others; she seems not so much deprived of life as liberated from it.*]

The character of Cordelia is not a masterpiece of invention or subtlety. . . . [She] appears in only four of the twenty-six scenes of *King Lear*; she speaks—it is hard to believe it—scarcely more than a hundred lines; and yet no character in Shakespeare is more absolutely individual or more ineffaceably stamped on the memory of his readers. There is a harmony, strange but perhaps the result of intention, between the character itself and this reserved or parsimonious method of depicting it. An expressiveness almost inexhaustible gained through paucity of expression; the suggestion of infinite wealth and beauty conveyed by the very refusal to reveal this beauty in expansive speech—this is at once the nature of Cordelia herself and the chief characteristic of

Shakespeare's art in representing it. Perhaps it is not fanciful to find a parallel in his drawing of a person very different, Hamlet. It was natural to Hamlet to examine himself minutely, to discuss himself at large, and yet to remain a mystery to himself; and Shakespeare's method of drawing the character answers to it; it is extremely detailed and searching, and yet its effect is to enhance the sense of mystery. The results in the two cases differ correspondingly. No one hesitates to enlarge upon Hamlet, who speaks of himself so much; but to use many words about Cordelia seems to be a kind of impiety.

I am obliged to speak of her chiefly because the devotion she inspires almost inevitably obscures her part in the tragedy. This devotion is composed, so to speak, of two contrary elements, reverence and pity. The first, because Cordelia's is a higher nature than that of most even of Shakespeare's heroines. With the tenderness of Viola [in *Twelfth Night*] or Desdemona [in *Othello*] she unites something of the resolution, power, and dignity of Hermione [in *A Winter's Tale*], and reminds us sometimes of Helena [in *All's Well That Ends Well*], sometimes of Isabella [in *Measure for Measure*], though she has none of the traits which prevent Isabella from winning our hearts. Her assertion of truth and right, her allegiance to them, even the touch of severity that accompanies it, instead of compelling mere respect or admiration, become adorable in a nature so loving as Cordelia's. She is a thing enskyed and sainted, and yet we feel no incongruity in the love of the King of France for her, as we do in the love of the Duke for Isabella.

But with this reverence or worship is combined in the reader's mind a passion of championship, of pity, even of protecting pity. She is so deeply wronged, and she appears, for all her strength, so defenceless. We think of her as unable to speak for herself. We think of her as quite young, and as slight and small. 'Her voice was ever soft, gentle, and low'; ever so, whether the tone was that of resolution, or rebuke, or love. Of all Shakespeare's heroines she knew least of joy. She grew up with Goneril and Regan for sisters. Even her love for her father must have been mingled with pain and anxiety. She must early have learned to school and repress emotion. She never knew the bliss of young love: there is no trace of such love for the King of France. She had knowingly to wound most deeply the being dearest to her. He cast her off; and, after suffering an agony for him, and before she could see him safe in death, she was brutally murdered. We have to thank the poet for passing lightly over the circumstances of her death. We do not think of them. Her image comes before us calm and bright and still.

The memory of Cordelia thus becomes detached in a manner from the action of the drama. The reader refuses to admit into it any idea of imperfection, and is outraged when any share in her father's sufferings is attributed to the part she plays in the opening scene. Because she was deeply wronged he is ready to insist that she was wholly right. He refuses, that is, to take the tragic point of view, and, when it is taken, he imagines that Cordelia is being attacked, or is being declared to have 'deserved' all that befell her. But Shakespeare's was the tragic point of view. He exhibits in the opening scene a situation tragic for Cordelia as well as for Lear. At a moment where terrible issues join, Fate makes on her the one demand which she is unable to meet. . . . [It] was a demand which other heroines of Shakespeare could have met. Without loss of self-respect, and refusing even to appear to compete for a reward, they could have made the unreasonable old King feel that he was fondly loved. Cordelia cannot, because she is Cordelia. And so she is not merely rejected and banished, but her father is left to the mercies of her sisters. And the cause of her failure—a failure a thousand-fold redeemed—is a compound in which imperfection appears so intimately mingled with the noblest qualities that—if we are true to Shakespeare—we do not think either of justifying her or of blaming her: we feel simply the tragic emotions of fear and pity.

In this failure a large part is played by that obvious characteristic to which I have already referred. Cordelia is not, indeed, always tongue-tied, as several passages in the drama, and even in this scene, clearly show. But tender emotion, and especially a tender love for the person to whom she has to speak, makes her dumb. Her love, as she says, is more ponderous than her tongue:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth.

This expressive word 'heave' is repeated in the passage which describes her reception of Kent's letter:

Faith, once or twice she heaved the name of 'Father'
Pantingly forth, as if it press'd her heart:

two or three broken ejaculations escape her lips, and she 'starts' away 'to deal with grief alone.' The same trait reappears with an ineffable beauty in the stifled repetitions with which she attempts to answer her father in the moment of his restoration:

Lear. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.
Cor. And so I am, I am.
Lear. Be your tears wet? yes, faith. I pray, weep not;
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause, they have not.
Cor. No cause, no cause.

We see this trait for the last time, marked by Shakespeare with a decision clearly intentional, in her inability to answer one syllable to the last words we hear her father speak to her:

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies. . . .

She stands and weeps, and goes out with him silent. And we see her alive no more.

But (I am forced to dwell on the point, because I am sure to slur it over is to be false to Shakespeare) this dumbness of love was not the sole source of misunderstanding. If this had been all, even Lear could have seen the love in Cordelia's eyes when, to his question 'What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?' she answered 'Nothing.' But it did not shine there. She is not merely silent, nor does she merely answer 'Nothing.' She tells him that she loves him 'according to her bond, nor more nor less'; and his answer,

How now, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,
Lest it may mar your fortunes,

so intensifies her horror at the hypocrisy of her sisters that she replies,

Good my Lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour 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.

What words for the ear of an old father, unreasonable, despotic, but fondly loving, indecent in his own expressions of preference, and blind to the indecency of his appeal for protestations of fondness! Blank astonishment, anger, wounded love, contend within him; but for the moment he restrains himself and asks,

But goes thy heart with this?

. . . Cordelia answers,

Ay, good my lord.
Lear. So young, and so untender?
Cor. So young, my lord, and true.

Yes, 'heavenly true.' But truth is not the only good in the world, nor is the obligation to tell truth the only obligation. The matter here was to keep it inviolate, but also to preserve a father. And even if truth were the one and only obligation, to tell much less than truth is not to tell it. And Cordelia's speech not only tells much less than truth about her love, it actually perverts the truth when it implies that to give love to a husband is to take it from a father. There surely never was a more unhappy speech. . . .

Cordelia's hatred of hypocrisy and of the faintest appearance of mercenary professions reminds us of Isabella's hatred of impurity; but Cordelia's position is infinitely more difficult, and on the other hand there is mingled with her hatred a touch of personal antagonism and of pride. Lear's words,

Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her!

are monstrously unjust, but they contain one grain of truth; and indeed it was scarcely possible that a nature so strong as Cordelia's, and with so keen a sense of dignity, should feel here nothing whatever of pride and resentment. This side of her character is emphatically shown in her language to her sisters in the first scene—language perfectly just, but little adapted to soften their hearts towards their father—and again in the very last words we hear her speak. She and her father are brought in, prisoners, to the enemy's camp; but she sees only Edmund, not those 'greater' ones on whose pleasure hangs her father's fate and her own. For her own she is little concerned; she knows how to meet adversity:

For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down;
Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown.

Yes, that is how she would meet fortune, frowning it down, even as Goneril would have met it; nor, if her father had been already dead, would there have been any great improbability in the false story that was to be told of her death, that, like Goneril, she 'fordid herself.' Then, after those austere words about fortune, she suddenly asks,

Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

Strange last words for us to hear from a being so worshipped and beloved; but how characteristic! Their tone is unmistakable. I doubt if she could have brought herself to plead with her sisters for her father's life; and if she had attempted the task, she would have performed it but ill. Nor is our feeling towards her altered one

whit by that. But what is true of Kent and the Fool is, in its measure, true of her. Any one of them would gladly have died a hundred deaths to help King Lear; and they do help his soul; but they harm his cause. They are all involved in tragedy.

Why does Cordelia die? I suppose no reader ever failed to ask that question, and to ask it with something more than pain,—to ask it, if only for a moment, in bewilderment or dismay, and even perhaps in tones of protest. These feelings are probably evoked more strongly here than at the death of any other notable character in Shakespeare; and it may sound a wilful paradox to assert that the slightest element of reconciliation is mingled with them or succeeds them. Yet it seems to me indubitable that such an element is present, though difficult to make out with certainty what it is or whence it proceeds. And I will try to make this out, and to state it methodically.

(*a*) It is not due in any perceptible degree to the fact, which we have just been examining, that Cordelia through her tragic imperfection contributes something to the conflict and catastrophe; and I drew attention to that imperfection without any view to our present problem. The critics who emphasise it at this point in the drama are surely untrue to Shakespeare's mind; and still more completely astray are those who lay stress on the idea that Cordelia, in bringing a foreign army to help her father, was guilty of treason to her country. When she dies we regard her, practically speaking, simply as we regard Ophelia [in *Hamlet*], or Desdemona [in *Othello*], as an innocent victim swept away in the convulsion caused by the error or guilt of others.

(*b*) Now this destruction of the good through the evil of others is one of the tragic facts of life, and no one can object to the use of it, within certain limits, in tragic art. And, further, those who because of it declaim against the nature of things, declaim without thinking. It is obviously the other side of the fact that the effects of good spread far and wide beyond the doer of good; and we should ask ourselves whether we really could wish (supposing it conceivable) to see this double-sided fact abolished. Nevertheless the touch of reconciliation that we feel in contemplating the death of Cordelia is not due, or is due only in some slight degree, to a perception that the event is true to life, admissible in tragedy, and a case of a law which we cannot seriously desire to see abrogated.

(*c*) What then is this feeling, and whence does it come? I believe we shall find that it is a feeling not confined to *King Lear*, but present at the close of other tragedies; and that the reason why it has an exceptional tone or force at the close of *King Lear*, lies in that very peculiarity of the close which also—at least for the moment—excites bewilderment, dismay, or protest. The feeling I mean is the impression that the heroic being, though in one sense and outwardly he has failed, is yet in another sense superior to the world in which he appears; is, in some way which we do not seek to define, untouched by the doom that overtakes him; and is rather set free from life than deprived of it. Some such feeling as this—some feeling which, from this description of it, may be recognised as their own even by those who would dissent from the description—we surely have in various degrees at the deaths of Hamlet and Othello and Lear, and of Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus. It accompanies the more prominent tragic impressions, and, regarded alone, could hardly be called tragic. For it seems to imply (though we are probably quite unconscious of the implication) an idea which, if developed, would transform the tragic view of things. It implies that the tragic world, if taken as it is presented, with all its error, guilt, failure, woe and waste, is no final reality, but only a part of reality taken for the whole, and, when so taken, illusive; and that if we could see the whole, and the tragic facts in their true place in it, we should find them, not abolished, of course, but so transmuted that they had ceased to be strictly tragic,—find, perhaps, the suffering and death counting for little or nothing, the greatness of the soul for much or all, and the heroic spirit, in spite of failure, nearer to the heart of things than the smaller, more circumspect, and perhaps even 'better' beings who survived the catastrophe. The feeling which I have tried to describe, as accompanying the more obvious tragic emotions at the deaths of heroes, corresponds with some such idea as this.

Now this feeling is evoked with a quite exceptional strength by the death of Cordelia. It is not due to the perception that she, like Lear, has attained through suffering; we know that she had suffered and attained in his days of prosperity. It is simply the feeling that what happens to such a being does not matter; all that matters is what she is. How this can be when, for anything the tragedy tells us, she has ceased to exist, we do not ask; but the tragedy itself makes us feel that somehow it is so. And the force with which this impression is conveyed depends largely on the very fact which excites our bewilderment and protest, that her death, following on the deaths of all the evil characters, and brought about by an unexplained delay in Edmund's effort to save her, comes on us, not as an inevitable conclusion to the sequence of events, but as the sudden stroke of mere fate or chance. The force of the impression, that is to say, depends on the very violence of the contrast between the outward and the inward, Cordelia's death and Cordelia's soul. The more unmotived, unmerited, senseless, monstrous, her fate, the more do we feel that it does not concern her. The extremity of the disproportion between prosperity and goodness first shocks us, and then flasnes on us the conviction that our whole attitude in asking or expecting that goodness should be prosperous is wrong; that, if only we could see things as they are, we should see that the outward is nothing and the inward is all. . . .

SOURCE: "King Lear," in *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on "Hamlet," "Othello," "King Lear," "Macbeth*", Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1905, pp. 280-330.

Edwin Muir

[*In the following excerpt from a lecture delivered at the University of Glasgow in April 1946, Muir discusses Goneril and Regan as representatives of a new political order. In the early 1600s, when the play was written, the medieval concept of communal traditions was giving way to modern notions of political rule—ones that emphasized effectiveness rather than principles, the critic observes. With their unconcern for traditional values or customs, Muir explains, Goneril and Regan embody the amorality of* Realpolitik *(politics based on practical factors rather than ethical or moral considerations) and the unscrupulous emphasis on power associated with Machiavellianism (the theory that the attainment of political power is justified by any means). The critic points out their lack of individuality and argues that they are like impersonal forces, beyond human appeal or understanding*.]

King Lear was written round about 1605-6. . . . In the interval between the first and the last of these dates the medieval world with its communal tradition was slowly dying, and the modern individualist world was bringing itself to birth. Shakespeare lived in that violent period of transition. The old world still echoed in his ears; he was aware of the new as we are aware of the future, that is as an inchoate, semi-prophetic dream. Now it seems to me that that dream, those echoes, fill King Lear and account for the sense of vastness which it gives us, the feeling that it covers a far greater stretch of time than can be explained by the action. The extreme age of the King brings to our minds the image of a civilization of legendary antiquity; yet that civilization is destroyed by a new generation which belongs to Shakespeare's own time, a perfectly up-to-date gang of Renaissance adventurers. The play contains, therefore, or has taken on, a significance which Shakespeare probably could not have known, but could only have felt, and without his being aware, he wrote in it the mythical drama of the transmutation of civilization. . . .

Of the great tragedies *King Lear* is the only one in which two ideas of society are directly confronted, and the old generation and the new are set face to face, each assured of its own right to power. *Macbeth* is a drama of murder and usurpation and remorse; it changes the succession of the crown and brings guilt upon the offender, the guilt showing that the old order is still accepted, and the old laws still valid, since Macbeth feels that he has done wrong, both as the killer of a man and the supplanter of a king. But Regan, Goneril and Cornwall never feel they have done wrong, and this is because they represent a new idea; and new ideas, like everything new, bring with them their own kind of innocence. *Hamlet*, although it deals with a dynastic and therefore a political problem, is essentially a personal drama, perhaps the most personal of them all: there is no relationship in *King Lear* so intensely intimate as that of Hamlet to his mother. Lear's own relation to his daughters is most nearly so; yet Goneril and Regan are curiously equal in his estimation, indeed almost

interchangeable; he is willing to accept either if she will only take his part against her sister; and as if his rage had blotted out their very names, he confounds them indistinguishably in his curses upon his daughters; so that we feel that daughters have become to him some strange and monstrous species. To Goneril and Regan, on the other hand, he is hardly even a father, but merely an old man who thinks and feels in a way they cannot understand, and is a burden to them. The almost impersonal equivalence of the two women in their father's eyes gives a cast to the play which is not to be found in any of the others, and makes us feel, indeed, that Lear is not contending with ordinary human beings but with mere forces to which any human appeal is vain, since it is not even capable of evoking a response. He, the representative of the old, is confronted with something brand new; he cannot understand it, and it does not even care to understand him.

There is something more, then, than ingratitude in the reaction of Lear's daughters, though the ingratitude, that "marble-hearted fiend", strikes most deeply into his heart. This something more is their attitude to power, which is grounded on their attitude to life. It is this, more than the ingratitude, that estranges Lear from them. His appeals cannot reach them, but, worse still, his mind cannot understand them, no matter how hard he tries. As this attitude of his daughters violates all his ideas of the nature of things, it seems to him against nature, so that he can only cry out against them as "unnatural hags". "Unnatural" is the nearest he can come to a definition of the unbridgable distance that divides him from them; his real struggle is to annihilate that distance, but he never succeeds; in his most intimate conflict with them he never comes any closer to them. When Regan shuts him out in the storm her action is symbolical as well as practical. His daughters are inside; he is outside. They are in two different worlds.

The story of *King Lear* tells how an old man parts his kingdom between his daughters when he feels no longer able to rule. He retains to himself only

> The name and all th' addition to a king,

and leaves to them and their husbands

> The sway, revenue, execution, of the rest.

His daughters, having got what they want, that is the power, and not caring much for the name or the addition, turn against him. As daughters, their act is one of filial ingratitude; as princesses and vice-regents, it is an act of "revolt and flying off". These two aspects of their policy are inseparable; in turning against their father they subvert the kingdom; by the same deed they commit two crimes, one private and one public.

But there is a complication. For Goneril and Regan's idea of rulership is different from their father's and so on the anguish caused by their ingratitude is piled the bewilderment of one who feels he is dealing with creatures whose notions are equally incomprehensible to his heart and his mind. In the later stages of the conflict it is the tortures of his mind that become the most unbearable, since they make the nature of things incomprehensible to him, and confound his ideas in a chaos from which the only escape is madness. The note of Lear's tragedy is to be found in another play [*Othello*]:

> Chaos is come again.

The note of the play itself, the summary judgment on the whole action, is expressed in Albany's words:

> If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
> Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
> It will come,
> Humanity must pertorce prey on itself,
> Like monsters of the deep.

Yet this is the world which Lear's two daughters and Cornwall and Edmund and Oswald freely accept as theirs; it is their idea of a brand new order; and the play therefore deals not only with a conflict between two daughters and their father, and two vice-regents and their king, but with two conceptions of society.

In the new conception of society, that of Goneril and Regan, Nature plays an important part; the number of references to Nature in the play, almost always as images of cruelty or horror, has often been commented upon. [A. C.] Bradley in his book on Shakespearean Tragedy tries to make a list of the lower animals which are mentioned in the drama. . . . "These references are broadcast through the whole play", he says, "as though Shakespeare's mind were so busy with the subject that he could hardly write a page without some allusion to it. The dog, the horse, the cow, the sheep, the hog, the lion, the bear, the wolf, the fox, the monkey, the polecat, the civet-cat, the pelican, the owl, the crow, the chough, the wren, the fly, the butterfly, the rat, the mouse, the frog, the tadpole, the wall-newt, the water-newt, the worm—I am sure I cannot have completed the list, and some of them are mentioned again and again. . . . Sometimes a person in the drama is compared, openly or implicitly, with one of them. Goneril is a kite; her ingratitude has a serpent tooth: she has struck her father most serpent-like upon the very heart: her visage is wolfish: she has tied sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture on her father's breast: for her husband she is a gilded serpent: to Gloster her cruelty seems to have the rangs of a boar. She and Regan are dog-hearted: they are tigers, not daughters; each is an adder to the other; the flesh of each is covered with the fell of a beast. . . . As we read, the souls of all the beasts in turn seem to us to have entered the bodies of these mortals; horrible in their venom, savagery, lust, deceitfulness, sloth, cruelty, filthiness" [*Shakespearean Tragedy*].

After looking on this picture of nature, turn to the first speech of Edmund, the mouthpiece of the new generation:

> Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
> My services are bound. . . .
> Well then,
> Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
> Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
> As to the legitimate. Fine word, 'legitimate'.

Goneril and Regan and Cornwall, though they do not have Edmund's imaginative intellect, worship Nature in the same spirit. For it gives them the freedom they hunger for, absolves them from the plague of custom, justifies them when they reflect that their dimensions are well-compact and their shape true, as if that were all that was needed to make human a creature in human shape. They rely confidently on certain simple facts of nature: that they are young and their father old, strong while he is infirm, and that their youth and strength give them a short-cut to their desires. They are so close to the state of nature that they hardly need to reflect: what they have the power to do they claim the right to do. Or rather the power and its expression in action are almost simultaneous. When Lear pleads with Goneril she replies:

> Be then desir'd
> By her that else will take the thing she begs
> A little to disquantity your train.

Regan says a little later:

> I pray you, father, being weak, seem so.

After Cornwall puts out Gloster's eyes, and Regan stabs the servant who tried to prevent it, he says:

Turn out that eyeless villain; throw this slave
Upon the dunghill.

And Regan adds,

Go thrust him out at gates, and let him *smell*
His way to Dover.

The most repulsive thing about these words, apart from their cruelty, is their triteness. The two daughters ignore all the complexities of the situation, and solve it at once by an abominable truism. They are quite rational, but only on the lowest plane of reason, and they have that contempt for other ways of thinking which comes from a knowledge of their own efficiency. As they are rational, they have a good conscience, even a touch of self-righteousness; they sincerely believe their father is in the wrong and they are in the right, since they conceive they know the world as it is, and act in conformity with it, the source of all effective power. They do not see far, but they see clearly. When they reflect, and take thought for the future, their decisions are rational and satisfactory by their own standards. When Goneril wants an excuse for reducing her father's retinue, she instructs her servant Oswald how to behave towards him:

Put on what weary negligence you please,
You and your fellows: I'd have it come to question . . .
And let his knights have colder looks among you;
What grows of it, no matter: advise your fellows so:
I would breed from hence occasions, and I shall,
That I may speak.

This is a technique which we have seen much practised in our own time.

The members of the new generation are bound together by common interest, since they all wish to succeed in their individual ambitions, which they cannot achieve without help; but their most immediate bond is a common way of thinking, a spontaneous intellectual affinity resembling that of a chosen group to whom a new vision of the world has been vouchsafed. They feel they are of the elect and have the sense of superiority which fits their station. They are irresistibly driven to choose as confederates men and women of their own stamp, even though these are likely in the long run to thwart or destroy them. Having renounced morality as a useful factor in conduct, they judge others with a total lack of moral discrimination, being confined irretrievably to the low plane of reason on which they move. Accordingly Cornwall can say to Edmund:

You shall be ours;
Natures of such deep trust we shall much need;
You we first seize on.

And of honest Kent:

This is some fellow,
Who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect
A saucy roughness, and constrains the garb
Quite from his nature: he cannot flatter, he;
An honest man and plain, he must speak truth:
An they will have it, so; if not, he's plain.
These kind of rogues I know, which in this plainness
Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends
Than twenty silly-ducking observants

That stretch their duties nicely.

Lear could not have made these mistakes, for he had some knowledge of the moral nature of men; but Cornwall and Goneril and Regan can and do; for while they have worked out the equation of life with complete satisfaction to themselves, they have done so by omitting the moral factor.

The new generation may be regarded then as the embodiment of wickedness, a wickedness of that special kind which I have tried to indicate. . . .

Shakespeare was acquainted with the Renaissance man, and . . . his plays abound in references to "policy", which stood in his time for what the Germans dignify by the name of *Realpolitik*, that is political action which ignores all moral considerations. . . . It was an age in which Italian princes, and others too, permitted themselves a liberty of action which one would have expected to disrupt or destroy the state; yet it did not. Instead, the subject conformed to a rulership which itself seemed impossible because antisocial; he conformed by becoming the mere instrument of his ruler. The Macchiavellian became a stock figure in later Elizabethan drama; Shakespeare must have met many a man like Edmund who refused to be deprived by the plague of custom. Bradley calls Edmund a mere adventurer, yet afterwards describes him as a consummate politician in the new style. "He acts in pursuance of a purpose", says Bradley, "and if he has any affections or dislikes, ignores them. He is determined to make his way, first to his brother's lands, then—as the prospect widens—to the crown; and he regards men and women, with their virtues and vices, together with the bonds of kinship, friendship, or allegiance, merely as hindrances or helps to his end. They are for him divested of all quality except their relation to his end; as indifferent as mathematical quantities or mere physical agents.

A credulous father and a brother noble, . . .
I see the business,

he says, as if he were talking of x and y" [*Shakespearean Tragedy*].

To regard things in this way is to see them in a continuous present divested of all associations, denuded of memory and the depth which memory gives to life. Goneril and Regan, even more than Edmund, exist in this shallow present, and it is to them a present in both senses of the word, a gift freely given into their hands to do with what they like. Having no memory, they have no responsibility, and no need therefore to treat their father differently from any other troublesome old man. This may simply be another way of saying that they are evil, for it may be that evil consists in a hiatus in the soul, a craving blank, a lack of one of the essential threads which bind experience into a coherent whole and give it a consistent meaning. The hiatus in Lear's daughters is specifically a hiatus of memory, a breach in continuity; they seem to come from nowhere and to be on the road to nowhere; they have words and acts only to meet the momentary emergency, the momentary appetite; their speech is therefore strikingly deficient in imagery, and consists of a sequence of pitiless truisms. Bradley complains of the characters in the play that, "Considered simply as psychological studies few of them are of the highest interest." This is true of Goneril and Regan, for the human qualities of highest interest are left out of them. But this was Shakespeare's intention; he had to interest us in two characters who were both evil and shallow. Their shallowness is ultimately that of the Macchiavellian view of life as it was understood in his age, of "policy", or Realpolitik, whichever we may choose to call it. The sisters are harpies, but as rulers they act in the approved contemporary Macchiavellian convention.

SOURCE: *The Politics of "King Lear"*, Jackson, Son & Company, 1947, 24 p.

King Lear: Selected Quotes

Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty
(1.1.56)

Goneril introduces a long series of eye and sight references which reverberate around Gloucester's blinding (3.7). Her formal rhetoric of love is manifestly insincere, but satisfies the vain and foolish Lear, who gives her half the Kingdom. Cordelia cannot compete with her sisters lies. Lear consistently misunderstands love, thinking it can be quantified – when Goneril and Regan combine to reduce his following he says 'Thy fifty do yet double five and twenty, And thou art twice her love' (2.2.448-449).

nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
(1.1.90)

Lear, finding his vain-glorious set-piece of flattery falling flat, tries to wheedle some more fitting compliments from Cordelia. 'Nothing' is one of the key words in the play, and Lear's chilling formulation introduces the grim nihilism which is Lear's central mood. It is already a proverb when Shakespeare uses it.

O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
(1.5.43)

Perhaps Lear's mind begins to go as he struggles with the consequences of giving away his power. He has already had difficulty in understanding the treatment he now receives in 1.4. He has always been King, and now he is not, he no longer recognises himself. To the Fool, he is already 'Lear's shadow' (1.4.222). Lear's madness may be thought to predate the beginning of the play, (or he would never have given everything away0, and this may be a lucid moment. Is it that the behaviour and expectations of a King are mad in someone without actual power?

O, reason not the need !
(2.4.53)

Lear's point is that he should be allowed something not out of need, but love, or at least politeness and custom. He carries on: 'Allow not nature more than nature needs / Man's life is cheap as beasts' (2.2.455-456). If we have only what we truly need, we are no better than animals. Lear is shortly to extend this critique, taking the other side of the argument, standing in the rain and shouting, and decrying wealth and privilege.

I am a man / More sinned against than sinning
(3.2.59-60)

Lear, now cast out on the heath, attempts to claim the storm as part of a scheme of divine justice, but the storm is apparently indifferent. He is probably wrong about sin: it is his pride that has got him into this mess. He still does not see himself, and the remark is merely self-pitying. However, as the surrounding evil continues to mount, we come to feel sorry for Lear ourselves.

the rain it raineth every day
(3.2.77)

The Fool, (as does Edgar later), preaches stoicism; endurance in the face of life's difficulties. There is a humorous resignation in his song which accords with the British climate. The song is related to Feste's at the end of Twelfth Night. Both Feste and the Fool were probably played by Robert Armin, a dwarfish clown noted for his wit.

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport
(4.1.20-21)

Gloucester is in the depths of despair, and resolved on suicide. Improbably, he decides to walk to Dover, guided by a madman (actually Edgar, his son, in disguise), and throw himself off a cliff. Gloucester is now entirely cynical about divine influence, seeing the gods as malicious.

'Tis the time's plague when madmen lead the blind.
(4.1.49)

Gloucester's irony sums up his outlook. The time is plagued, or cursed. There is a Biblical echo in the proverbial 'blind leading the blind' (Luke 6.39). The nihilism of the play darkens to reach its first peak at Gloucester's tragi-comic 'fall'.

Humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep.
(4.2.50)

Albany predicts what already seems clear to other characters, that if heaven does not intervene, humanity (in the sense of civilised behaviour, at least) will perish. The chain of events caused by Lear's abdication -or his rejection of Cordelia- is running out of control. Gloucester is blind, Lear running around mad, France has invaded, and his wife is having an affair with the bastard Edmund, by now Duke of Gloucester, although he doesn't know about that yet. Albany is stirred to action rather than despair.

O dear father / It is thy business that I go about
(4.4.23-24)

Cordelia does her best to soften the fact of a French invasion (never very popular in England, and certainly not in Shakespeare's time) with this further Biblical echo ('I must go about my Father's business', Luke 2.49). That she is fighting against England with a French army presents a difficulty for audience sentiment. Shakespeare is usually Nationalistic, although only occasionally militaristic. The Biblical echo is daringly close, creating a saintly aura around Cordelia.

But to the girdle do the gods inherit
(4.6.122-123)

Lear means that women are the evil's below the waist. The alarming misogyny of this speech is in part justified by Lear's daughter fixation, and is in part a reflection of contemporary religious disapproval of sexuality, and patriarchal denigration of women. Lear's sexual revulsion seems somehow doubly indecent in an old man, but starts with traditional-sounding complaints, perhaps revealing the foulness beneath contemporary morality; more likely a general underlying male fear of female sexuality. Shakespeare's own stress on female chastity is considerable, and increases as time goes on.

Plate sin with gold / And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks
(4.6.161-162)

Lear's moral satire on wealth and privilege is reminiscent of the Protestant reformer Hugh Latimer, and the pamphleteers of the English Civil War. There is a strong thread of satire on wealth in English Protestantism, as in the Gospels, and this runs through King Lear. Edgar calls Lear's speech 'Reason in madness' (4.6.171), and Lear has become an example of the 'Holy Fool', a prophetic figure. Lear (3.4.28-36) and Gloucester (4.1.73-74) have both already attacked social injustice, and Lear philosophised on 'unaccommodated man' on meeting Edgar as 'Poor Tom'(3.4.105).

Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire.
(4.7.46-47)

One of many references to wheels, as in the wheel of fortune. (Fool: 'Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill' (2.2.261); Edmund: 'The wheel is come full circle' (5.3.172). Lear, recovered by Cordelia's men, wakes from his sleep to find himself in a strange place with music playing and Cordelia bending over him. He believes himself dead, and by some error in Heaven, mistaking Cordelia for an angel. G. Wilson Knight entitled his contentious Christian-redemptive study of Shakesperean Tragedy The Wheel of Fire.

Ripeness is all.
(5.2.11)

Edgar counsels his father against suicide, an example of his stoicism which has been taken as a moral for the play.

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?
(5.3.305-306)

Lear mourns Cordelia with this unanswerable question. Some of the most moving lines I have read, especially in their context. Lear dies shortly after. Cordelia's death could easily have been avoided, had Edmund spoken sooner, or anyone bothered to enquire where she was. Cordelia's unnecessary death hardens the play's nihilism, leaving little room, one would think, for a redemptive reading.

King Lear: Suggested Essay Topics

Act I, Scene 1
1. In the play, King Lear requests his daughters' public profession of love to him. Cordelia is often criticized for being too proud to give her father the response he wants to hear. Analyze the incident where Cordelia responds with "Nothing, my Lord." Discuss her obedience to her father as it relates to the philosophy of the hierarchy of all beings. Support your answer with examples from the play.

2. Goneril and Regan both please King Lear with flowery speeches of love and devotion to him. Compare and contrast their attitudes before the division of the kingdom with their attitudes at the end of Scene 1. Are they completely evil? Do they show some signs of rational thought regarding the King's future? Cite examples from the play to support your answer.

Act I, Scene 2
1. In his soliloquy, Edmund addresses issues of equality and free will. Analyze these issues in the light of our modern-day society. Do you agree with Edmund? Do you disagree? Did Edmund present a law of nature with harmony and order? Use examples from the play to support your answer.

2. Act I, Scene 2 starts the action of the subplot of *King Lear*. Explain the subplot and tell how it parallels the main plot of the play. Describe the characters in the subplot and tell who they are analogous to in the main plot, giving examples from the play to support your answer.

Act I, Scene 3
1. Act I, Scene 3 is a short scene, but it is essential to the understanding of the play. Explain what purpose it serves. Why are Goneril's speeches important? In what way does the scene help to clarify the deterioration of relationships? Explain your answer.

2. The theme of old age is at the heart of Goneril's attitude toward her father. Discuss Goneril's attitude toward old people in general. How does she view their worth? Cite examples from the play to support your answer.

Act I, Scene 4

1. Lear's Fool is often seen as a wise character in the play. Discuss the way in which he acts as a commentary on Lear's folly. Explain why Lear tolerates his truths. Why were Kent and Cordelia banished for telling the truth? Cite examples from the play to support your view.

2. The Duke of Albany has a "milky gentleness" that annoys his wife Goneril. Explain their marriage relationship in light of the hierarchy of nature prevalent in Shakespeare's time. How does this hierarchy apply to Goneril's attitude toward her husband and father. Give examples from the play to support your answer.

Act I, Scene 5

1. Lear has lived in a world of deception and illusion thus far in the play. Discuss Lear's illusory world in relation to his three daughters. Compare these illusions to the new insights he is gaining at the end of Act I. How does he feel about his daughter Cordelia at this point in the play? Cite examples from the play to support your answer.

2. Lear has made a decision to leave his daughter Goneril's palace and live with Regan instead. How do you think he feels as he contemplates this move? Does he feel sure Regan will welcome him? Discuss his guilt abut Cordelia. Explain your answer.

Act II, Scene 1

1. The subplot often functions to give depth and a clearer perception of the characters and the action in the play. Compare this scene to the first scene of the play. In what way do Lear and his daughters compare to Gloucester and his sons? Discuss the analogy between Edgar and Cordelia. Cite examples from the play to support your argument.

2. Edmund's speeches in this scene are filled with irony. Discuss the irony in his account of his alleged conversation with Edgar. Why are these lines in opposition to Edgar's beliefs? Use examples from the play to support your answer.

Act II, Scenes 2 and 3

1. Kent has been portrayed as an honest character thus far in the play. Discuss his honesty in the light of his banishment and his time in the stocks. Compare the honest characters to the deceitful characters in the play. Is Kent's blunt honesty necessary? Cite examples from the play to support your answer.

2. Kent and Edgar both assume disguises in the play. Compare and contrast their reasons for the disguise. Discuss the differences in their physical disguises. How are their disguises alike? Is Edgar in greater danger than Kent? Explain your answer.

Act II, Scene 4

1. The Fool's purpose in the play is to comment on the action. Discuss the poem that begins "Fathers that wear rags." Explain the metaphors in this poem. How do they apply to Lear and his daughters? Cite examples from the play to support your answer.

2. Lear's daughters have usurped his power by depriving him of his entire train of followers by the end of the scene. Compare and contrast the characters of Goneril and Regan in this scene. How are they alike? How are they different? Why does the King call them "unnatural hags? Give examples from the play to support your answer.

Act III, Scene 1

1. The Fool has been censuring his master for his lack of judgment as a king but stays with him and helps alleviate his suffering in the storm on the heath. Write an essay discussing the Fool's loyalty to the King in the storm. Why is he critical of the King? Why does he stay with him when others desert him? Cite examples from the play to prove your point.

2. Cordelia seems to be associated with Kent thus far in the play. Both have been banished, but she has stayed in touch with Kent. Compare and contrast the characters of Cordelia and Kent. How do they personify the good or evil inherent in the play? Explain your answer using examples from the play.

Act III, Scene 2

1. In Shakespeare's day, there were relatively few stage props in the theater. Discuss the way in which Shakespeare sets the scene through the character of King Lear. Discuss Lear's use of metaphorical language to depict the storm. Relate the outer storm to Lear's inner turmoil in this scene. Give examples to support your answer.

2. The storm on the heath is viewed by Lear as a punishment to the people for their wrongdoings. Write an essay analyzing the idea that storms were a punishment by God. Discuss the storm in relation to the loss of King Lear's power and the resulting chaos after he divided his kingdom between his two daughters. Cite illustrations from the play to support your view.

Act III, Scene 3

1. Edmund is seen as a depraved character throughout the play. Write an essay comparing his behavior in this scene to his first speech in Act I, Scene 2. What were his aspirations in this soliloquy? Is he beginning to fulfill his desires in life by Act III, Scene 3? Cite examples from the play to support your view.

2. Gloucester's actions are commendable in this scene. Discuss Gloucester's courage in defying Cornwall and Regan. Why is he courageous? What are his motives? Is he a loyal subject of the King? Explain your answer.

Act III, Scene 4

1. Lear's prayer is a turning point from self-pity to compassion for the "houseless heads" and "unfed sides" who are left to fend for themselves in the storm. Write an essay comparing and contrasting Lear's prayer with his speeches in the rest of the scene. Does he show compassion to others in this scene? If so, in what way? Cite examples from the play to support your view.

2. Lear sees Edgar, disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, representing "the thing itself; unaccommodated man." Write an essay explaining the meaning of these words in relation to the rest of the scene. Why does Lear wish to become like Edgar? Why does he tear off his clothes? Give examples from the play to defend your answer.

Act III, Scene 5

1. Edmund is the epitome of deception, manipulating Cornwall for his own advantage. Write an essay demonstrating the irony of his relationship with Cornwall in this scene. How does Edmund deceive the Duke? Why is this deception ironic? What does Cornwall gain from his contact with Edmund? Cite examples from the drama to support your point.

2. Cornwall plans to avenge Gloucester for supplying secret information to the King of France. Discuss Gloucester's threat to Cornwall. Why has Cornwall forbade him to see King Lear? How would Gloucester's loyalty to Lear affect the new divided kingdom? Explain your answer.

Act III, Scene 6

1. The Fool is considered to be Lear's conscience in the play. Write an essay explaining this concept. In what ways does he represent Lear's conscience? How does he use paradox to bring out truth in the play? What forms do his wisdom usually take? Why are the Fool's methods an effective way of exposing the truth? Use examples from the play to explain your answer.

2. Lear's mock trial reveals the incongruity of his actions as a king. Write an essay explaining the way in which the mock trial is incongruous behavior for a king. How do the supposed legal titles of Edgar and the Fool add to that incongruity? Cite examples from the play to support your argument.

Act III, Scene 7

1. In this scene, we see one of the most shocking expressions of cruelty in all of Shakespeare's plays. Write an essay discussing the purpose it serves. Do you think Shakespeare resorts to sensationalism for the entertainment of the audience? Relate Shakespeare's purpose to the symbolism of sight in this scene. Use examples from the play to support your argument.

2. This scene portrays the evil characters as they meet at Gloucester's castle. Compare and contrast the "evil" characters with the "good" characters in this scene. What virtues do the good characters possess? What vices do the evil characters portray? Are they entirely evil? Cite examples from the play to explain your answer.

Act IV, Scene 1

1. In Edgar's soliloquy, he feels that his fortune can only get better because he has seen the worst. Write an essay explaining the concept that things cannot get any worse because they are now at their worst. Why is this idea relative? How does it apply to Edgar? How does it apply to people in general? Cite examples from the play to support your answer.

2. Gloucester states, "I stumbled when I saw." Explicate this passage in the light of Gloucester's renewed insight. Why did his blindness contribute to his moral regeneration? How has his suffering changed him? In what ways has he changed? Draw your examples from the play to support your idea.

Act IV, Scene 2

1. Albany invokes the heavens to vindicate the good and punish the evil. Write an essay discussing the possible results of Albany's prediction that "Humanity must perforce prey on itself." Explicate the passage, relating it to the views prevalent in Shakespeare's day. What was their view of an orderly society? What did Shakespeare's audience believe was the cause of chaos in society? Cite examples from the play to support your argument.

2. In this scene, Albany is not portrayed as the "milk-liver'd man" Goneril perceives him to be. Contrast his character in previous scenes to the changed Albany in this scene. How does his change lend hope for the future of the other characters in the play as a whole. Use examples from the play to support your answer.

Act IV, Scene 3

1. Cordelia is portrayed as a vision of queenly goodness. Write an essay characterizing her in relation to her sister Goneril. Compare the sisters' attitudes toward their father. Why do you think Cordelia has forgiven her father for banishing her? Use examples from the play to support your opinion.

2. King Lear refuses to communicate with Cordelia in this scene. Write an essay explaining the reasons for his attitude. Is the King still angry at Cordelia for refusing to please him with flattering words of love in the first scene of the play? Has he had a change of heart? Explain your answer.

Act IV, Scene 4
1. Cordelia does not invoke the gods nor call on the stars to relieve the King's distress. Write an essay contrasting her view to that of Kent and Gloucester in previous scenes. Does she feel the stars "govern our conditions?" Who does she call on for help in curing her father? Cite examples from the play to support your view.

2. Cordelia justifies France's invasion of Britain as an act of love toward her father. Write an essay explaining her attempt to justify the invasion. Is it right for her to invade her homeland? How would Shakespeare's audience have felt about it? Use examples from the play to support your answer.

Act IV, Scene 5
1. Regan and Goneril have become involved in a bitter rivalry for Edmund's love. Write an essay explaining the way in which this rivalry is indicative of the evil characters preying on each other. What do you think this rivalry will eventually do to them? Cite examples from the play to support your view.

2. Oswald remains stoic in his encounter with Regan in this scene. Write an essay comparing Oswald in this scene to Oswald in Act II, Scene 2 where he claims to be a stranger to Kent. In what way does his attitude stay the same in both scenes? Why do you think he is considered an evil character in the play? To support your argument, use examples from the play.

Act IV, Scene 6
1. Through Lear, Shakespeare espouses the theme of appearance versus reality. Analyze Lear's words, "Robes and furr'd gowns hide all" and explain how this entire passage supports the theme. How does the "great image of authority" apply to this theme? Support your opinion with examples from the play.

2. Lear says that we are born into "this great stage of fools." Write an essay explaining the symbolism of these words. What does the cry of the newborn baby represent in this passage? How does it explain Lear's rebirth? Use examples from the play to support your view.

Act IV, Scene 7
1. Through suffering, King Lear has gained knowledge and insights he did not have before. Write an essay in which you discuss those insights in relation to Cordelia, his daughter. What do Lear's feelings have to do with his new perception of reality? What has happened to his illusory world regarding his role as the king? Cite examples from the play to support your answer.

2. Lear sees himself bound to the "wheel of fire" as he views Cordelia as a "soul in bliss." Write an essay explaining the validity of this incongruous image. How does the image symbolize Lear's condition in life? What is meant by Cordelia's bliss? Give examples from the play to support your opinion.

Act V, Scenes 1 and 2
1. Edgar states that he has sworn his love to both Goneril and Regan. Write an essay explaining Edmund's motive for his actions concerning the two sisters. Why does Edmund decide to choose Goneril in spite of the fact that Regan is a widow and free to marry? What does Edmund hope to gain from his relationship with Goneril? Give examples from the play to support your view.

2. Albany faces a serious dilemma in Act V, Scene 1. Write an essay explaining Albany's resolution to his conflict. How does he justify fighting against the King with whom he has no quarrel? What will he do with the King and Cordelia if Britain wins the battle? Cite examples from the play to support your opinion.

Act V, Scene 3
1. Lear has gained new insights and knowledge through suffering. Write an essay discussing the experiences

that have led to Lear's realization that vain deception leads to one's downfall. In what way had he deceived himself? What has been stripped away from Lear by the end of the play? Cite examples from the play to support your argument.

2. Kent is shocked at the death of Cordelia, thinking it might prove to be the "promis'd end." Write an essay explicating this statement. How does it explain the beliefs of the Elizabethans and the way they saw the world? Relate this passage to their attitudes concerning the hierarchy of all beings. Give examples from the play to support your view.

King Lear: Sample Essay Outlines

The following paper topics are designed to test your understanding of the play as a whole and to analyze important themes and literary devices. Following each question is a sample outline to help get you started.

Topic #1
Shakespeare has woven the subplot into the main plot in King Lear to intensify the emotional effect of the tragedy. Write an essay analyzing the way in which the subplot parallels the main plot. Discuss the areas of father-child relationships, political power, and the deaths of the protagonists in the double plot.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: *The emotional effect is heightened in King Lear with Shakespeare's use of a subplot that mirrors the father-child relationships, the corruption of political power, and the death of the protagonist in the main plot*.

II. Parallels of father-child relationships
A. Lear's daughter Cordelia parallels Gloucester's son Edgar.
1. Both Cordelia and Edgar are loyal to their fathers to the end.
2. Cordelia is banished and Edgar is forced into hiding.
B. Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan parallel Gloucester's son Edmund.
1. Goneril and Regan flatter Lear just as Edmund deceives Gloucester.
2. Both Lear and Gloucester talk of the ingratitude of their children.
C. Lear and Gloucester are both blind to their children.
1. Lear is blind to Cordelia's love and to Goneril and Regan's ulterior motives.
2. Gloucester is blind to Edmund's deceit and trickery.

III. Parallels of greed in political power
A. Goneril and Regan seek political power.
1. They strip the King of all his train of followers.
2. They reject the King's title and turn him out into the storm.
B. Edmund has high political aspirations.
1. He allows Gloucester to be blinded for his own political gain.
2. He usurps Edgar's legitimate title as the future Earl of Gloucester.
C. Kent and Edgar both lose their nobility.
1. The Earl of Kent is banished for his honest defense of Cordelia.
2. Edgar loses his claim to nobility through the deceit and trickery of Edmund.

IV. Parallels in the deaths of Lear and Gloucester
A. Both die in the presence of their loyal children.
1. Lear dies with Cordelia in his arms.
2. Gloucester dies after Edgar has revealed himself as the Duke's son.

B. Lear and Gloucester both die in “extremes of passion.”
1. Lear dies of a broken heart. “Break heart, I prithee break!”
2. Gloucester’s “flaw’d heart” bursts of “joy and grief” after his reunion with Edgar.
C. Both die with renewed insight.
1. Gloucester needs to be blinded before he can see Edmund’s deceit and Edgar’s loyalty.
2. Lear needs to suffer the rejection of his older daughters before he can see Cordelia’s loyalty
3. Both find that the loss of title and position humbles them.

V. Conclusion: The subplot intensifies the emotional impact of the main plot in the areas of child-parent relationships, the corruption of political power, and the death of the protagonist.

Topic #2
Through suffering, King Lear is transformed from an arrogant, dictatorial king and father to a man who realizes the folly of his past life. Write an essay tracing the progress of his transformation as he suffers significant losses in his life.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: *King Lear is humbled as he suffers the loss of his title as king, is deprived of common shelter from the storm which leads him into madness, and is denied the love and respect of his family that would comfort him in his old age*.

II. Loss of title and position
A. Division of the kingdom
1. Flattering the King, Goneril and Regan each win half of the kingdom.
2. Dedicated to the truth, Cordelia is banished by the King.
B. Goneril reduces Lear’s train by 50 followers.
1. Lear goes to Regan, but she turns him away.
2. Regan and Goneril reduce his train of followers to none.
C. Lear has been turned out of his daughters’ houses.
1. Regan and Goneril seek his life.
2. Near Dover, Lear makes a mockery of his title by wearing a crown of weeds on his head.

III. Loss of shelter from the storm
A. Lear wanders bareheaded through the rain, thunder, and lightning.
1. Only his Fool keeps him company, commenting on his folly.
2. In disguise, the banished Kent joins Lear and the Fool.
B. Haunted by the rejection of his daughters
1. He cannot believe his daughters would do this when he “gave them all.”
2. In the light of her cruel sisters, Cordelia’s image begins to improve.
C. Driven into madness
1. Lear’s daughters have brought him to this.
2. Lear feels that Edgar (Tom o’ Bedlam) must also have daughters responsible for his madness.
3. Lear wishes to become “unaccomodated man.”
D. Lear chides himself for his lack of care for the poor, homeless wretches out in the storm.

IV. Loss of family
A. Lear realizes the folly of trusting Goneril and Regan
1. Lear has succumbed to the flattery of his older daughters.
2. Lear realizes he is not “ague proof.”
3. Goneril and Regan have stripped him of everything.
B. Lear begins to trust Cordelia

1. Lear wants to go to prison with Cordelia where they will be together to mock the courtly vanities of his past life.
2. Loss of family has stripped Lear of the sin of pride.
3. When Cordelia is hanged in prison, Lear dies of a broken heart.

V. Conclusion: Lear's transformation has led him from a king and father whose insight has been blinded by his own ego, to a man who has learned to see "feelingly," not only for his daughter Cordelia but also for the poor, homeless wretches out in the storm.

Topic #3
Appearances versus reality is one of the major themes in *King Lear*. Write an essay analyzing this theme in relation to Shakespeare's use of disguise and imagery, and his characterization of both good and evil characters in the play.

Outline
I. Thesis Statement: *In King Lear, the theme of appearances versus reality is brought out through the use of physical disguises, the imagery of the poetic drama, and the honesty or deception of the major characters in the play*.

II. Appearance versus reality brought out through characterization
A. Evil characters
1. Goneril and Regan are characterized as flattering, deceptive daughters, who later turn against Lear.
2. Edmund is outwardly well-mannered and proper but inwardly deceitful and vicious.
3. Oswald is stoic and loyal to his mistress, but inwardly self-seeking.
B. Good characters
1. Cordelia does not flatter her father but shows the depth of her love for him through her loyalty.
2. Hiding from Gloucester, Edgar shows his devotion by caring for him after he loses his sight.
3. Kent, though banished for his honesty, shows his devotion to the King through his constant care after his daughters have deserted him.
4. The Fool brings out the biting truths in the world of the play.
C. Growth of characters
1. Lear grows from a proud, deceitful king to a humble man, caring for none of the illusory trappings that were once so important to him.
2. Gloucester grows from a man who stumbled when he saw to one whose insight improves when he loses his eyes.

III. Appearances versus reality brought out through physical disguises
A. Edgar is disguised as Tom o' Bedlam.
1. He is innocent of the crime for which he is accused.
2. Ironically, he becomes the sole leader of the world at the end of the play.
B. The noble Earl of Kent is disguised as Lear's servant.
1. He has been banished for his honesty in defending Cordelia.
2. Kent is one of the three top leaders at the end, but he declines.

IV. Appearances versus reality brought out through the imagery of the play
A. Clothing masks illusions.
1. Lear is stripped of his royal robes and appears in a crown of weeds.
2. Lear states that "Robes and furr'd gowns hide all."
B. Images of sight
1. Goneril claims falsely that Lear is "dearer than eyesight."
2. Gloucester says, "I stumbled when I saw."

3. Begging Edmund to show him Edgar's supposed letter, Gloucester says, "If it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles."

V. Conclusion: Shakespeare's use of characterization, imagery, and physical disguises in *King Lear* reveals the universal theme of the false world of outward appearances not only in the action of the play but also in the world at large.

King Lear: Modern Connections

Modern audiences of *King Lear* often observe the recurrence of images and references not only the eyes but things associated with the eyes, like crying, looking, and seeing. The numerous references to the eyes and their associated functions contribute to a thematic development which is almost certainly more than accidental to Shakespeare's purpose. We can look at several specific references to elaborate further the significance of this theme of "eyelessness" or "blindness" in the play.

First, and most obvious is Gloucester's "I stumbled when I saw" (IV.i.19). He comes to believe that when he had full use of his eyes, he still had not been able to see the truth in the situation between his two sons (Edgar and Edmund) and realizes that there is an internal sense more keen in determining the truth than eyesight, which is considered our primary sense.

While initially Lear fails to recognize the truth about his daughters' love for him, he soon realizes that Goneril and Regan, having subsumed the power that was once his, have turned against him. He asks the gods "If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts / Against their father" (II.iv.274-75). Lear's primary problem, it might be argued then, is not that he, like Gloucester, fails to see the truth about his offspring. Perhaps Lear's ultimate failure is that he cannot see through his tears. He is often moved to cry but feels that the tears he sheds are not becoming to either his gender or his position.

> Old fond eyes,
> Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck ye out,
> And cast you, with the waters that you loose,
> To temper clay. (I.iv.301-04)

When he does understand that Goneril and Regan have turned on him, he fights his tears fiercely, beseeching the gods in this manner:

> . . . touch me with noble anger
> And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
> Stain my man's cheeks ... . . .
> You think I'll weep:
> No, I'll not weep.
> I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
> Or ere I'll weep. (II.iv.276-78; 282-84)

His anger at his tears is indicative of his inability to trust and experience the truth of his feelings This inability is what caused him, in the first place, to misjudge the emotional bond that existed between him and Cordelia. He had to test her, and her response was, perhaps, an incredulous reaction to that distrust. The result was a peevish rejection of her that overlay his real feelings, prompting Kent to say, "See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye" (Li. 158-59). One might argue that Lear's petulance is an emotional truth that must be followed if the argument is that feelings, rather than sight, are the barometer of truth. But,

arguably, Lear's love for Cordelia is primary and his dissatisfaction with her only a temporary perversion of the greater emotional truth.

Lear's failure to trust in this emotional truth— that of Cordelia's love for him—is perhaps one of the most universal and timeless aspects of the play. How often is the love between parents and children tested by one, or by both, parties? Today's parents, like Lear, may often feel compelled to question their children's love, pointing out all they have done for them, especially when the children are about to embark on or have chosen a coarse of action disapproved of by the parents. Similarly, children who are being disciplined by their parents may feel the punishment unjust (as perhaps Cordelia felt her banishment was unjust), and may question their parents' love for them.

In 1681, Nahum Tate adapted Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In Tate's version, which superseded Shakespeare's until well into the nineteenth century, the ending is a happy one. Cordelia lives and Lear's crown is restored by Albany. Additionally, Tate eliminated both Lear's Fool and the blinding of Gloucester and added a love affair between Edgar and Cordelia.

Tate's happy ending, which was endorsed by critics and audiences for nearly 150 years, may make modern readers wonder why Shakespeare chose to end his *King Lear* in such a dismal fashion. In fact the issue of Shakespeare's tragic ending has been the focus of much debate for centuries. A number of explanations have been put forth. Some people believe that the play's ending is simply a natural and inevitable culmination of Lear's suffering. While some people read the ending as evidence that there is no divine existence or divine retribution for evil, others argue that the ending emphasizes the play's Christian focus on the redemptive power of love. Finally, many people maintain that the ending is not pessimistic or optimistic, but that it reflects the mystery of human existence.

King Lear: FAQs

Is Lear a good king?

In the first act of the play, Lear plainly sees himself as a good king reigning over a country that is prosperous and at peace with its neighbors and using the marriage of his daughter Cordelia to enlarge his nation's foreign alliances. Yet Lear is "blind" long before he reaches the status of unaccomodated man raging on the heath. He fails to take counsel from the loyal Kent, and he fails to realize that the relinquishment of his throne will necessarily entail a reduction in the privileges he enjoys. Indeed, Lear appears to want things both ways: he wishes to unburden himself of the responsibilities of kingship while retaining the power of a king, at least insofar as his personal circumstances are concerned. Worst of all in the eyes of Shakespeare's audiences, Lear divides his own kingdom, thereby creating the conditions for civil war. Lear thinks of himself as a good king, but he is not.

Is Lear a good father?

From the standpoint of his role as the father of three daughters, Lear's division of his kingdom into three equal parts seems fair. Yet, as noted in Q&A #1, this division is actually a recipe for discord. What strikes us though is how little insight Lear has into the basic character of his daughters. Having lived with Goneril and Regan for two decades or more, Lear is completely unaware of their capacity for deceit; he seems genuinely shocked when they begin to undermine his status as regent emeritus. By the same token, Lear's dismissal of Cordelia as an ingrate stands in sharp contrast with her actual character as his only honest progeny. On this count too, Lear's view of himself as an ideal father does not square with his lack of insight into the respective characters of his daughters.

Does Edmund have legitimate cause for complaint?

The bastard Edmund is even more villainous than Lear's unfaithful daughters. They exploit the circumstances that Lear creates; Edmund creates the circumstances that cause the break between Gloucester and his legitimate son Edgar. Nevertheless, Edmund does have some cause for complaint. Not only is he the product of his father's licentious behavior, Gloucester maligns Edmund's character. But Shakespeare assigns so many evil tasks to Edmund that the validity of his complaint against Gloucester is negated. Once Edgar has fled, Edmund moves to get rid of his father as well so that he can inherit Gloucester's estate in short order. Kent is sorely mistreated by Edmund, but above all, it is Edmund who arranges the death of the innocent Cordelia. Edmund's last minute effort to redeem himself fails. His status as a bastard provides Edmund with a cause for discontent, but his actions go well beyond the redress of any legitimate complaint.

Why did Shakespeare insert the conflict between Goneril and Regan over Edmund?

In the last scene of the play, Goneril confesses to poisoning her sister Regan and then commits suicide herself. The crux of the conflict begins in Act IV, when a "love" affair emerges between Goneril and Edmund. At the same time, upon learning of the death of her brother-in-law Cornwall, Goneril immediately suspects that the widowed Regan will try to supplant her as Edmund's lover. In the first scene of Act V, Goneril's jealousy leads her to exclaim that she would rather lose the battle at hand than see her sister get Edmund. The insertion of this odd love triangle into the plot of King Lear is intended to intensify the animal-like viciousness of the two women. Their cooperative endeavor against their father and Cordelia is a matter of sheer expediency. In the end, Goneril and Regan are so irredeemably evil that they cannot keep their unholy alliance together. Neither displays true passion for Edmund, each would rather deny satisfaction to the other than to realize a perverse love affair with the bastard.

King Lear: Bibliography and Further Reading

*If available, books are linked to Amazon.com

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