

The Precipitous Quality of Shakespeare's King Lear

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1

More than once it has been said that *King Lear* is unsuited for the stage. Charles Lamb insists on its impossibility of performance, because of a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life. Swinburne asserts that *Lear* is a poor stage play, because it represents a world of unmitigated blackness, lightened only by the lurid flames of terrible passion or hideous impiety. Professor Bradley concludes that *Lear* is different in its essence from Shakespeare's tragedies: that it is really a dramatic poem, destined for the study rather than the stage, and intricately incapable of acting.

This trend owes much to Charles Lamb, from whom this current begins to flow. Lamb's point of view is that of the romantic who exalts inner over outer. He argues that Shakespeare's plays are least fitted to be performed on the stage, because acting deals only with the superficial things of passion, whereas Shakespeare reveals the internal workings and movements of a great mind. On the stage it is the act which is everything and the impulse nothing. To see *Lear* acted is to see an old man turned out of the doors by his daughters in a rainy night. His greatness is intellectual and can no more be represented on the stage than the machinery to mimic the storm can express the horrors of the elements. The stage reveals only corporal infirmities and impotent rage; but when we read we are in *Lear's* mind and sustained by its grandeur.

Taking into account Lamb's view being based on the theatrical techniques in the nineteenth century, and the bad text adopted by Nahum Tate, it has long been out of fashion. We must suggest that men on this planet consist of mind and body, that each may be used to express and develop the other, and every thought of the mind has its counterpart in external nature. He forgets two important truths: that the business of art is to suggest, not affirm; and the imagination of the spectator may be moved by the actor's skill to do its working.

The fact is as follows, as if endorsed our view:

Shakespeare Production in the United Kingdom

Plays	Year											
	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961 (Total)	
<i>The Twelfth Night</i>	5	2	10	4	2	4	5	3	6	9	7	57
<i>Merchant of Venice</i>	1	1	7	6	3	3	2	2	4	11	4	48
<i>As You Like It</i>	5	4	4	2	6	2	4	4	1	4	7	43
<i>Macbeth</i>	4	5	3	4	2	5	3	5	2	2	8	43

Plays	Year											
	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	(Total)
<i>Hamlet</i>	6	2	4		3	2	3	5	5	4	3	35
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	4	3	2	2	2	2	3	5	5	4	2	34
<i>Othello</i>	3	4		2	5	8	1	1	4		2	30
<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>	3	3	4	6	2		1	1	1	4	2	27
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	5	5	3	1	1	3	2	1	5	1	2	24
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	2	2	4	4		2		3	1	2	3	23
<i>The Tempest</i>	3	1	2	1	2	4	1	1	1	4	2	22
<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>		3		5	2	1		4		2	3	20
<i>King Lear</i>	2	1	3	1	2	2	1	2	1	3	1	19
<i>Henry IV, Pt. 1</i>	1	1	1		1		2	1	2	4	4	17
<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	1	2	2		1	2	3			1		12
<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>	1	1			3	1	1		2		3	12
<i>Henry IV, Pt. 2</i>	2			1	1		1	1	1	2	2	11
<i>Lover's Labour's Lost</i>	2		2	1		1		1	1		1	9
<i>Coriolanus</i>	1	2		1		1			2		1	8

* The plays less than eight times are omitted.

This scheme, relied upon the data from *Shakespeare Survey*, published by the syndics of the Cambridge University Press, (1952-62) proves that contemporary English theatre has been several magnificent *Lears*, in spite of the assertion of the Lamb's school that the *Lear* of Shakespeare cannot be acted. But these symphonies of suffering—for that is what a good performance of *Lear* must always be—have not always helped to put aside many obstacles in the case of its performance and to understand the play. Abstracted from their context they have fortified the suspicion that *Lear* is a formless, naïve, chaotic composition; that here, for once, Shakespeare was in less than perfect command of his material; that the terrible theme was too much for him; that what we admire in the play are spurts and jests, guts and ground-swells of genius—not the rounded artwork of the conscious, shaping mind.

For all these faults, the new devices have been brought at least in the field of theatrical techniques. For example, Gabriel Toyne's production¹⁾, reported by Charles Landstone, was that it presented a tale which actively sustained one's interest in its development. The set, a blasted rocky heath reminiscence of Stonehenge, was unchanged throughout, and the dim-out at the end of scene, followed by the varying uses of exits and entrances, really gave the illusion of changing locale. Only the lighting was here and there at fault, the storm scene having no sense of brooding doom. Sir Laurence Olivier produced too by a décor of nursery bricks, with the actors dwarfing them like children moving among their toys²⁾.

These recent two productions, I think, belong to the same theory. Comment has always emphasized the stiffness and irrationality of the play's opening, and this has been excused on the ground that *Lear* is a fairy-tale³⁾. On this concep-

tion, we might well say that the realistic presentation of *King Lear* in the nineteenth century has transformed into the symbolic one in the twentieth century. But the invention was not a happy one. The story of *Lear* being buried deep in popular legend, a folk story is not necessarily a fairy-tale. We must remember that a folk story may be fabulous, but it need not be confined to 'fantasy'.

2

The characteristics of recent *Lear's* production might seem to start from how to solve the problem of its opening scene, for it has been regarded as a golden key to dissolve the irrationality of the play's opening. Like Olivier's, many producers, at this point, have taken the means to dissolve its irrationality into 'fantasy' implied in its plot-sources. For *King Lear* there is a large number of plot-sources.⁴⁾ One of the sources of *King Lear* was an old chronicle play which had been published in 1605, *The True Chronicle History of King Lear*. From its nature this play would seem to belong to the sixteenth century; and it so happens that a *King Leare* was performed at the Rose Theatre by the combined Queen's and Sussex's men during an successful season early in April 1594. It was not then a new play and it probably belonged to the Queen's men. On 14 May of the same year the play was entered in the Stationers' Register, though no edition is known to have appeared for eleven years. Through such a close examination of the plot of *King Leir*, Kenneth Muir concludes that there are some resemblances between the two plays in thought and expression, though the extent of Shakespeare's echoes has been variously estimated. Moreover Sir Walter Greg details some forty verbal parallels, but some of these might easily be accidental. It is likely that the old play gave Shakespeare the idea of writing on *King Lear*; but he had long been familiar with the various versions of Holinshed, Spencer and *The Mirror for Magistrates*.

Shakespeare created a unity from heterogeneous materials. When he amplified and complicated his original fables, he pressed into his service incidents, ideas, phrases, and even words from books and plays. Therefore the tragic tone used by Shakespeare is alien to all of them. A brief summary of the plot of *King Leir* will show the extent to which Shakespeare deviated from it. In the first scene Leir plans a sudden stratagem to trick Cordella into marriage. The honest Perillus (Kent) comments on this scheme. Leir's plan is betrayed to Gonorill and Ragan by the time-serving Skalliger (Sc. 2). The wicked sisters, who are jealous of Cordella, flatter their father and promise to marry anyone he may appoint. Cordella refuses to flatter and Leir, though not banishing her, determines to divide the kingdom between her sisters (Sc. 3). The Gallian King decides to visit Britayne in disguise to see whether Leir's three daughters are as beautiful as they are reputed to be (Sc. 4). Accompanied by the bluff Lord Mumford he woos and weds Cordella, whom he meets bewailing their shares of the kingdom, and Perillus makes an ineffectual attempt to prevent Cordella from losing her share (Sc. 6). These seven scenes of the old play Shakespeare condenses into one.

This abridgement is likely to have given birth to the lack of seduction scene,

which has been the very cause of *Lear's* irrationality. But the lack of seduction scene is of particular significance. The problem is that it's in Act I and Act II where the hero's moral choice and the evil unleashed throughout the whole universe as a result of seduction are present, while in *Othello* the same two acts are in service as a prologue leading to the central episode of seduction: that is, in *Lear* Shakespeare seems not to be concerned with merely an individual case-study in the single world of man but with humanity at large in its corresponding planes in the scheme of creation: the family, the state, and the physical universe. This is Elizabethan conventional view of life, in which the state was middle link between the physical universe and individual man, and that all three planes of creation were in close harmony with one another. This has been argued most convincingly by J.F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*⁵⁾. The universality of theme is reinforced by 'the vagueness of the place setting and the transcendentality of the time setting'; the audience watches not only *Lear's* little kingdom, but the great world itself, where time has no importance.

From this point of view, we think it necessary to reevaluate the opening scene of *King Lear*. This, as Danby has indicated (pp. 183-4), does result in a 'reversal of the judgment we have been making on *Lear* in the first two acts'⁶⁾. If *King Lear* is viewed as the story of a foolish old man tortured by those he loves, the play loses its comic scope and becomes little more than a pathetic melodrama. But *King Lear* is not merely the story of a foolish old man suffered from his daughters' ingratitude, but man's damnation, suffering, and regeneration in the world regarded as a part of harmonious system controlled by a benevolent God. Irving Ribner argues as follows:

a triumph of dramatic construction which in its total effect like *Hamlet* and *Othello* affirms justice in the world, which it sees as a harmonious system ruled by a benevolent God.

(*Patterns in Shakespearian Tragedy*, p. 117.)

If Shakespeare, as Ribner indicates, is to assert the power of man to overcome evil, the forces of evil must be shown in their most uncompromising terms. *Lear* himself has unleashed the forces of evil which cause his suffering, and, what is more, he has not yet recognized his initial lack of self-knowledge, which in the scheme of regeneration he must come to know. It is in the first two Acts that emphasizes *Lear's* initial lack of self-knowledge. For this purpose the opening scene deliberately exhibits *Lear* not so much as the victim of evil forces, but as the instigator of the evil forces in the play. The illogic in the opening scene is what is called a deliberate reflection of the general chaos and irrationality into which society has been plunged by *Lear's* initial decision to divide his kingdom and abandon his responsibility to God.

Here we might well say that upon his transformation of *Lear* Shakespeare's intention was neither to revive faithfully the actual fact in the old chronicle play nor to reproduce 'fantasy' of a fairy-tale. B. H. Carnero de Mendonça expresses an interesting opinion as follows:

To give his story the heightened tone required by the tragic form, the decisive change introduced by Shakespeare was the establishment of a relationship between the story and the world in general, both through a profound study of the very nature of man, and though the political implications of the division of a kingdom and of the disregard for hierarchy and the law of primogeniture.

(*Shakespeare Survey*, 13 (1960), p. 42)

Namely out of a large number of plot-sources, he created a unity world alien to all of them, where time has no importance. In spite of his rash decision about the division of the kingdom and of the grave injustice done to Cordelia, the earlier Lear is eventually restored to the throne, and in the same version of the story he continued on his throne for several years before he dies of old age, the crown being handed to Cordelia, who, in some of the stories, dies in prison after a struggle with her nephews. In all the sources, the chronicle or romance tone has set a rather leisurely pace to the development of the story⁷). In Holinshed we read of a process of time and then two years of reign after Lear's restoration to the throne; In Geoffrey of Monmouth Lear spends two years with Goneril, one year with Regan, and has three years of reign; in *Gesta Romanorum* there is a stay of almost a year with Goneril, scarcely a year with Regan, one month in France and, again, three years of reign; in the *Faerie Queene* the stay with Goneril was long, and a similar stay with Regan is suggested, and although no mention of the length of his reign after Lear's restoration is made, he dies of old age. Even in John Higgins, who has the shortest stay with Goneril (six months), there is one year with Regan and a three-year reign.

This leisurely pace is unknown to *King Lear*. There is a quality of urgency, and action is precipitous, event falling hard upon event, in a mounting tension that leads inexorably to a tragic ending.

3

The revaluation of *Lear's* opening scene becomes obvious that it's the world beyond the limits of actual time which Shakespeare was concerned with in *King Lear*. To depict such a world, Shakespeare invented a new and incomparable form of drama, worth while calling it the real *Nouvm Organum* of Elizabethan thought: that is, such a drama of ideas⁸) not as the Morality play had been, a drama of abstractions; nor such a drama of amusing talk about these as Bernard Show's is.

We must remember that Shakespearian drama has long roots in the conventions of the so-called medieval drama—the Morality plays based on the book of Nature as well as the Cycle plays based on the book of Scripture. Of much greater importance is the second main type of medieval drama, the Morality play. It was a characteristic medieval invention; allegorical and didactic, it became an excellent medium for portraying the various elements which compose man's nature. It made the description of the second of Nature's books native to drama; it was a direct expression of the familiar ideas which everyone took for granted. Elizabethan drama took enormous stride in passing through the Interlude from the Morality into

the kind of drama Shakespeare was writing—a drama of ideas and Shakespeare own creation. We might well say that the sixteen-century view of man's place in the universe could be made essential part of drama, and the tradition of the morality be awakened to a new and magnificent life by Shakespeare. The individual hero, no longer a mere abstraction, is seen against the background of the cosmos, and the dramatic conflict, no longer a mere battle of virtues and vices, take place inside a man's soul. The Morality could not depict processes; it could only handle products. It could not suggest growth, the dynamic of ideas passing into and out of people; it could only present a thesis, and never get beyond its initial premises. On the other hand, Shakespeare's concern was to portray growth. Irving Ribner says:

Shakespearian tragedy must be approached as a dynamic and not a static phenomenon, one which shows growth and change and is full of variety.

(*Petterns in Shakespearian Tragedy*, p. 11)

Without throwing aside Morality earnestness, or the Morality concern with abstract ideas, to these Shakespeare added flesh and blood: that combination of his own wise observation of particular instances with the traditional picture of man's nature and the conflict suggested by it which was implicit in the time and which gives the wide grandeur of universality to the later tragedies.

Of significant importance, at this point, is that in *King Lear* the seduction process is now omitted, and the play opens with the hero already fallen. In the first two acts Shakespeare shows us the equivalent of final acts of *Othello*: the results of hero's moral choice and evil it unleashed through creation, and while doing so Shakespeare develops the parallel career of Gloucester. With the third act begins Lear's regeneration, which it didn't complete until his death in a moment of insupportable ecstasy. At the same time, in a lower note, is developed the regeneration of Gloucester, of whose similar death is told by Edgar.

The illogic in the opening scene, as a natural result of the lack of the seduction process, would be useful enough to prevent the audience from sympathizing with Lear before he storms out on the heath at the end of the second act, because they would feel that however unkind his treatment, it has not been so unkind as what he has meted out to others. The very illogic is a symbol of Lear's sin in itself. The illogic in the opening scene is an ironic underscoring of what he has meted to others or of his own violations of order, with his responsibility for his own misfortune as yet unaware at all. At this point, the illogic in the opening scene is dissolved without transforming this play into a fantastic fairy-tale. And the audience's eyes must be focused on the process of Lear's regeneration, who had kept a firm hold on the so-called 'the lack of intellectual humility' as his original sin.

Since *King Lear* is a sort of drama of ideas, the emphasis is upon the process of Lear's regeneration: it starts from Lear's recognition of the lack of intellectual humility and through his recovery of intellectual humility, results in his achievement of regeneration. There have been many discussions about where the

Turning-Point of Lear is. As it is, the story of Lear's suffering is the story of his redemption. The first sign of unselfishness which he displays appears when he checks his anger against Cornwall:

Tell the hot duke that—

No, but not yet; may be he is not well;
 Infinity doth still neglect all office
 Whereto our health is bound; we are not ourselves
 To suffer with the body. I'll forbear;
 And am fallen out with my more headier will,
 To take the indispos'd and sickly fit
 For the sound man. (II, iv, 105 ff)

But the above passage is not sufficient enough to acknowledge his own lack of intellectual humility, and the following dialogues between Lear and Regan reflects a locus which is drawn by a nucleus of his intellectual humility, buried deep in the core of his heart. We are moved by the spectacle of an aged man, unaware of his own violations of order, striving for patience while he holds back his tears:

Gon. Hear me: my lord:
 What need you five and twenty, ten, or five,
 To follow in a house where twice so many
 Have a command to tend you?
 Reg. What need one?
 Lear. O, reason the need: Our basest beggars
 Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
 Allow not nature more than nature needs,
 Man's life's as cheap as beast's; thou are a lady;
 (II, iv, 265 ff)

Such a recognition as 'in the poorest thing superfluous' (II, iv, 269) is as yet superficial and not essential, because we can not help allowing the pathos of these lines to be their ironic underscoring of Lear's lack of intellectual humility. Here our eyes must be turned to the following stormy scenes. Lear glories in the savagery of nature, not knowing that the storm is nature's reflection of his own sin. It is part of his tragic delusion that he sees the forces of nature as hostile to human life:

Blow, wind and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeple, drown'd the cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!

Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
That make ingratifful man! (III, ii, 1 ff)

In his delusion Lear sees the forces of nature as agent of the evil within man, as 'servil ministers/That have with two pernicious daughters join'd' (III, ii, 21-22). There is no justice in the world, but the brute forces of nature will execute a kind of poetic justice out of their destructive impulses which make no distinction among various kinds of human life. The forces of wind and rain thus become powerful summoners who can execute justice upon a corrupt society:

Let the great gods,

That keeps this dreadful pother o'er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
(III, ii, 50 ff)

and then follow the penetrating exclamation 'cry/These dreadful summoners grace' (III, ii, 57-58). His own corruption, however, Lear still cannot perceive, and then follow the irony 'I am a man/more sinn'd against than sinning' (III, ii, 58-59).

And yet, while Lear dwells on the baseness of men and the corruption of nature, at the same time his suffering causes him feel a sympathy and love for his fellow men which before he had not known. The piteous suffering of the Fool arouses Lear's first sign of human feeling:

Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
That's sorry yet for thee. (III, ii, 72 ff)

Here, then, counterpoised against his violent rejection of nature and his fellow men is an acknowledge of God, and it is followed up by a welling up of tender feeling for his followers, and it suddenly burst over his clouded spirit with the force of a great new discovery in the quick flash of sympathy for the unknown poor:

Poor naked wretches, wheretso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of his pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
You loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
For seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. (III, iv, 28 ff)

And then Lear tries to tear off his clothes and reduce himself to the level of 'unaccomodated man' (III, iv, 111). It's from the lowest point of delusion that our sympathy for Lear increases through the pathos of the wonderful scene of reconciliation with Cordelia to the august end.

4

So long as *King Lear* is a drama of ideas, of much greater importance is the

process of how the hero already fallen to proceed to his redemption, through his discovery of the lack of intellectual humility. Therefore, it is too much to say that whether or not *King Lear* proves successful on the stage, indeed, depends on how to interpret and to produce its Turning-Point, which is in existence between the end of the second act and the beginning of the third act: what is called 'the stormy scenes'.

The stormy scenes are, of course, those which are most commonly adduced by those who believe that *King Lear* cannot effectively be presented in the play-house. Basing their views on productions which they have seen, the writers who hold to such an opinion come to the double conclusion (1) that the storm scenes, central to the tragedy, can never be adequately shown in the theatre, and (2) that therefore *King Lear* should be read and not seen. But from the standpoint of 'a drama of ideas', we should endeavour, in *King Lear*, not to introduce the elements of a real storm, with lashing rain and leaves shivering in the wind, but rather to suggest a storm by means merely of light and music, with scrupulous care for fear that these means should lead to a drowning of the actors' words, and thus they should interfere with the exposition of the text. After Charles Landstone had gone and seen Abraham Sofaer's *Lear*, produced by John Fernald, at Liverpool Playhouse, he commented on:

The storm scene he played with gusto—there is no other word for it. He attacked and mastered the storm. His concentration as he speaks the line "I will talk with this philosopher" was a beautiful piece of work. The argument of the spirit is all that matters at that moment, and lighting, tempest, thunder, bodily anguish are all immaterial. Throughout this scene the raging of the elements was only incidental to the raging of Lear, even though his soul is already wandering. Some critics may feel this to be utterly wrong; Sofaer made it seem completely right. For the first time I felt that I understood Shakespeare's analogy between the tempest beating without, and the tempest within the royal mind.

(*Shakespeare Survey* 1, (1948), p. 101)

Even if it is acted without a storm at all, without a drop of rain or a single dishevelled hair on Lear's head, so long as it is played according to the essential quality of 'a drama of ideas', it must move and stir us in the theatre.

One thing has to be recognized. The realism, and particularly the naturalism, which reigned in the theatre at the end of the nineteenth century and still persists on many stages today, can, and indeed must, ruin every production of *King Lear* to which it is applied.

Another thing has to be recognized. *Lear* is a long work and it cannot be easy at any time to play for what amounts to eight hours at a stretch only a short pause half-way. There is raised, at this point, a problem as to where we should make a short pause. And it is true that we must, at least, keep a kind of precipitousness between the end of the second act and the beginning of the third act, without making a short pause between them. Moreover, it is proper that we

should remember the following fact that in *King Lear* there is a quality of urgency, and action is precipitous all over the play. Oliphant Smeaton, in his *Life and Works of William Shakespeare* (Everyman's Library, 1937), quotes the following time scheme for *King Lear* from P. A. Daniel, transactions of the New Shakespeare Society, 1877-9:

Day	I	I, i.
Day	II	I, ii, an interval of about a fortnight or less.
Day	III	I, iii-iv.
Day	IV	II, i-ii.
Day	V	II, iii-iv, III, i-iv.
Day	VI	III, vii, IV, i.
Day	VII	IV, ii, perhaps an interval of a day or two.
Day	VIII	IV, iii.
Day	IX	IV, iv-vi.
Day	X	IV, vii, V, i-iii.

This scheme indicates clearly the precipitous quality. *King Lear* develops against a sort of timeless background; actions and their consequences are of such moment that their actual duration in chronological time has no importance. A particular event leads inevitably to the next, and from an initial rash decision to divide his kingdom during his lifetime, King Lear is driven to extreme grief and death, and his state suffers the horror of civil war⁹⁾.

And, finally, we must remember that I have argued about 'intellectual humility' of King Lear. But the lack of intellectual humility is not the problem of a particular individual but that of all human beings living in the world where they are exposed to the coincidence of both faith and scepticism. It is the very world that, before our eyes, is evolved throughout *King Lear*. In the opening scene, we are presented the two sets of characters who embody two distinctive philosophies of life, as has been argued most convincingly by J.F. Danby. Lear, Edgar, Cordelia, Kent and the Fool represent a Christian humanist view of life which sees all of nature as a harmonious order controlled by a benevolent God, and which allows for the natural bonds of filial affections, loyalty, duty, obligation to family and state, kindness to fellow men; as its greatest good it deifies love, the love of man for man which can unite humanity to an ever-loving God. But by the sixteenth century the argument for unconditional obedience becomes more and more an ideology and less and less a way of spirit. It seems to us as if a candle of Orthodox Christian Faith were being blown off in a storm of Renaissance Scepticism. Lear is located at the top of such a social triangle, whose sclerosis reflects that of orthodox world. Opposed to this stands the doctrine of Renaissance Scepticism. Edmund is its chief symbol, and Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Oswald live like him by its precepts. Edmund sees nature as a Godless mechanism, governed by impersonal laws. The universe is without divine purpose or guidance; man and beast are alike. Edmund denies the system of correspondences between the mind of man and the phenomena

of nature which was so integral a part of the Elizabethan doctrine of order and degree. We might well say that *King Lear* is a conflict between the two views of life. This is where the lack of intellectual humility comes in. As a natural result of the lack of intellectual humility is caused the sclerosis of medieval custom—a formula wholesome in its origin, but no longer capable of adaption and generally restrictive in its scope.

In spite, then, of its black pictures of meanness and hypocrisy—or even because of these—*King Lear* is a play of good cheer, a powerful witness to the presence and potency in this world of faith, hope, and clarity. And thus the lack of Lear's intellectual humility is, at least, possible to be recovered at the lowest point of 'unaccommodated man' through his suffering, because it is temporal and not eternal. Lear's four score years of pride and self-deception were merely the prelude to life, and not true life at all. All the elements of *King Lear* are shaped by the theme of regeneration which dominates the whole. All the characters perform symbolic functions. The primary focus is upon Lear, and to a lesser extent upon Gloucester; they stand together for humanity at large. The other characters serve secondary functions.

5

If Shakespeare's *King Lear* proves successful on the stage, it may be not because of the new devices of theatrical technique, but because of the precise interpretation and the satisfactory production of its Turning-Point between the end of the second act and the beginning of the third act.

The denial of authority through the storm scenes can grow the intellectual humility necessary for redemption. When awakens from his sleep, he is a regenerated soul. There is a new humility in his words to Cordelia, and new awareness of his own nature as a man :

Pray, do not mock me :

I am a very foolish fond old man,
 Fourscore and upward, not an hour more less ;
 And, to deal plainly,
 I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
 Methinks I should know you, and know this man ;
 Yet I am doubtful : for I am mainly ignorant
 What place this is ; and all the skill I have
 Remembers not these garments ; nor I know not
 Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me ;
 For, as I am a man, I think this lady
 To be my child Cordelia
 (IV, vii, 59 ff)

The dominant note of the passage is Lear's awariness of his own ignorance and imperfection. This awariness makes burnt up the diminishing flame of Orthodox

Christian Faith before a storm of Renaissance Scepticism. But he must forgo the things of the world which are evanescent vanities for the required reality of love—a reflection of the love of God and of the perfection and harmony of the universe. Here is one more valuable point of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It is that the world required by Lear through his terrible sufferings is only suggested as a Utopia. Lear's Utopia is not preached by a garrulous *raisonneur*, like old Gonzalo in *The Tempest*; it is not round the corner; it is only the tremulous articulation of a desperate and persisting hope:

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 knell down
 And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and her poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
 Who loves and who wins; who's in, who's out;
 And talk upon's the mystery of things,
 As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
 In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
 That ebb and flow by the moon.

(V, iii, 8 ff)

Thus we can be allowed only to spy 'In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,/That ebb and flow by the moon' (v, iii, 18) together with Lear, because men must' endure/Their going hence, even as their coming hither:/Ripeness is all' (V, ii, 9 ff).

But it is a philosophy which can reveal itself on the stage only to the spectator capable of reading behind the superficial hyperboles of tragic usage a particular simple and universal story of everybody humanity. Last but not least, such an effect is owed much to the ability of an actor who fills the role of Lear on the stage:

Well, all we need is a man who, in addition to his own sense of poetry, will embrace within himself the magnetism and quicksilver brilliance of Olivier, the unsoiled honesty of Morant, the four-square solidity of Devlin, the self-assurance Sofae.

(*Shakespeare Survey*. 1 (1948), p. 102)

Namely, the fact that *Lear* can be acted on the stage does not mean at once that it is easy to act *Lear*—the greatest tragedy of Shakespeare's works, on the stage. But we need not despair.

NOTES

[1] C. Landstone, 'Four Lears', *Shakespeare Survey* 1, (1948), pp. 99.

- [2] R. Speaight, *Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy*, (Hollis & Carter, London, 1955), p. 91.
- [3] *Ibid.*
- [4] I owe much to the 'Introduction and Appendices' of *King Lear* (Arden edition, edited by Kenneth Muir, 1961) its plot-sources.
- [5] This has been argued most convincingly by J. F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*. See also V. K. Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning*, pp. 300-13; Robert Speaight, *Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy*, pp. 87-121; Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*.
- [6] This statement, as Danby has indicated (pp. 183-4), is a 'reversal of the judgment we have been making on Lear in the first acts'.
- [7] Barbara Heliodora Carneiro De Mendonça, 'The Influence of Gorboduc on King Lear', *Shakespeare Survey* 13, (1960), p. 47.
- [8] For a much fuller treatment of this subject than I am able to give here, see, Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*, (Berkeley, Cali., 1936), and Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*, (Macmillan, New York, 1961).
- [9] *King Lear*;
 'Have you heard no likely wars toward?' (II, i, 11).
 'I hold you but a subject of this war, Not as a brother' (V, iii, 60).