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Literary Criticism of Shakespeare's King Lear

Daniel Lee Burcham

Eastern Illinois University

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LITERARY CRITICISM

OF SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR

(TITLE)

BY

Daniel Lee Burcham

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INTRODUCTION

The nature of literary criticism is fluid and the outlooks change slightly or greatly as each individual takes it up, just as a child's kaleidoscope shanges its pattern with each handling. In the following work dealing with King Lear criticism in the last ten years, I attempt to present varying views. Rather than forming value judgement and omitting aspects that are personally displeasing, I try to present an overall picture; though various works may not be mentioned or quoted overtly, there is an attempt at synthesis. Too, the work is meant to be representative rather than comprehensive and is limited, of course, at the outset in this regard.

However, in the conclusion I comment upon various view-points, interjecting personal views. Of course, any work is prejudiced to some extent, and this one is no exception. I have nevertheless, refrained from obvious editorializing until the final chapter, contenting myself in the first four chapters, for the most part, with conclusions drawn from the body of the criticism studied.

It is also true that the main purpose of this study is concerned with the central meaning of King Lear. In other words,

whether King Lear is a traditional tragic hero is a question that involves the total significance of the play. On the other hand, discussing whether Cordelia is the physically smallest of Lear's daughters concerns only a fragmentary fact. This is not to undervalue such work; the meaning of "least," the heart of this particular study, has relevance and increases total critical knowledge. However, here the main line of inquiry, for the most part, deals with the central theme. To put it simply, an attempt is made to answer "What did Shakespeare mean?"

It is also important to point out that articles or books chosen for quoting are not necessarily examples of "new thought"--if such a thing exists. How old criticism is handled or reviewed is important and possibly revealing as the new pathways. The ghost of A. C. Bradley's influence looms large in recent criticism, and Alfred Harbage, Kenneth Muir, and various other critics often as not provide the springboards for others' thoughts. For example, Paul N. Siegel reiterates A. C. Bradley's thoughts on Lear's redemption and comments at the same time on the "value of adversity."

The first chapter deals with a single aspect of Lear criticism. With a few exceptions, the modern student comments on Lear in an endeavor to clarify the significance of suffering. The directions that this work goes are various, but a recurrent

desire is there to explain why Lear endures mind-rending torture and why Gloucester is disfigured. How these things come about superficially is an obvious part of the play, but it is important-- rather, essential-- to ascertain Shakespeare's intent and in what light we should view the play. If the work was conceived merely to create revulsion, we find an unfamiliar Shakespeare. Also, if the horrors are the stylistic requirement of a tragedy, why has the dramatist gone further in this work than in others? Lastly, if the misfortunes do have positive significance, what is it?

The division of materials between the first two chapters is, of course, completely artificial-- chapter one allows a more concise development which would otherwise be spread throughout chapter two and the rest of the study-- and, to an extent, still is.

Chapter three, since Lear is characterized, must deal with much the same problems as chapter one. However, the treatment is in a more personal vein. Since Lear can certainly not be compared to a novelistic protagonist, it is the "dramatic" effects that characterize him and make him the unforgettable personality he is. The subject undertaken, then, involves who Lear is and what he becomes.

In chapter four characters of the play besides Lear are studied in relation to their significance to the whole drama. Chapter five is a conclusion including a commentary on and evaluation of the analyses involved.

CHAPTER I
OPINIONS ON THE MEANING
OF SUFFERING

If one thing may be said unequivocally about King Lear, it is that here Shakespeare deals with suffering. Death and mental distress are integral parts of Macbeth and Hamlet, but the suffering in Lear is the play. The problem of rationalizing the suffering of pain often seems the heart of recent criticism as well as the focal point of earlier efforts. This direction of criticism seems to reflect the Christian theological problem of evil and good: Which is real? Are good and evil relative? What purpose does evil serve? What is man's relation to evil and suffering? In fact, the questions listed above are those characteristic of recent criticism. Therefore, any comprehensive study must deal basically with the meaning of human anguish and what King Lear as well as Gloucester become as a result of it.

For the most part recent criticism is somewhat optimistic in attitude though oftentimes it is hard to pinpoint the authors' true feelings; they are prone to give equivocating evidence and thoughts to escape scathing rebuttals from other critics; this of course allows them maneuvering room for their refutation of the

rebuttal. Also, the above "optimistic" might well be in quotes; these critics judge the value of suffering by the end result or lesson learned. One is occasionally struck with a feeling of horror from the interpretations. Characteristically, man is hesitant to undergo great adversity, regardless of the revelations realized.

Paul N. Siegel sees King Lear as "a Christian play about a pagan world." However, he feels that the value of adversity has been overlooked. He enumerates philosophers (Plutarch and Boethius for example) who reconciled adversity and whose beliefs were vogue in the Shakespearean age. Plutarch goes so far as to say, "Good fortune deceyveth, and evil fortune teachyth."¹

An insight to Lear comes, then, from the realization that Shakespeare dramatized the idea that "evil fortune teachyth."

In King Lear the consequences of men's bad actions seem to be in retrospect to follow so inexorably from their causes retribution appearing in a form poetically appropriate, that a sense of natural law is conveyed. The suffering of Gloucester and Lear is, however, more than punishment; it is a purgatory which burns away their previous selfishness. Adversity brings for the good the miracle of love, a heightening of their humanity, the humanity whose lack is so unnatural in the wicked. The theme is so stated by secondary characters whose words act as universalizing comment applicable to Gloucester and Lear.²

¹Paul N. Siegel, "Adversity and the Miracle of Love in King Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. VI, 1955.

²Ibid., p. 325.

Therefore, the play shows how good men err, suffer, and gain in humanity and love. Strangely enough, there appears an inherent good involved in this adversity. For example, Siegel quotes France, one of the above-mentioned secondary characters: "Tis strange that from their coldest neglect (I,ii, 257-259), My love should kindle to inflamed respect." What occurs is that Lear gives, as the fool says, "a blessing against his will"--France falls in love with Cordelia for no clear reason. Gloucester, the other person who finds a "blessing" through adversity, is basically a good man, but one who refuses to confront the king or meet the issues head on. As a matter of fact, before his blundering, "it is a delicate question whether political prudence or compassion and duty is the main motivating force in his mind."³ However, Siegel sees a change in Gloucester when Gloucester is blind and kept from killing himself; he begins to "see" right and wrong with clarity.

Lear in the storm scene becomes aware of his "proud wilfulness" even though he later loses his compassion to take the road to madness. Later, however, Lear is redeemed permanently when he kneels to Cordelia--as a child. Thus is order restored:

"His abdication to his daughters while retaining the empty pomp of kingship had been a subversion of order; his kneeling to

³Ibid., p. 327.

Cordelia, in a sense unnatural, is a miracle accompanying the restoration of order."⁴ However, Lear is redeemed for heaven, not earth. "To expect a heaven in this world of evil is seen to be a delusion."⁵ His redeemer? Cordelia, of course, the Christ figure.

The theme here is redemption through suffering. On the other hand, Nowotny feels that the true meaning of King Lear is somewhat different. She splits hairs, affirming that the suffering is to some avail but not for the same reasons.

The action of the play is tied up to the questions that Lear seeks to answer:

It is as though Shakespeare sought to write a tragedy which sets itself to present the bitterest experience of all without help of the trappings of tragic style or attitude. It is as a man, not a tragic hero, that Lear is to meet the death of Cordelia--as a man who of his own volition asked all the deepest metaphysical questions about man's conditions, suffered all he could suffer because of them and now, when nature in him stands on the very verge of her confine: confronts the one question he has so far escaped: 'Why should a god, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?'⁶

Nowotny goes on to say, "It is to this end--revelation through suffering (rather than redemption through suffering)--that the whole play moves."⁷

⁴Ibid., p. 332.

⁵Ibid., p. 333.

⁶Winifred M. T. Nowotny, "Lear's Questions," Shakespeare Survey, X, 97.

⁷Ibid., 97.

The ending is possibly the predominant cause of consternation. J. Stampfer sees the ending as the critical problem; the deaths of Lear and Cordelia call for a "healing." He asks in what sort of universe can wasteful death follow suffering and torture and why Shakespeare would choose to change the source which had a victorious Cordelia? Therefore, the dual slaying of a father and daughter is the basic problem for the critic.

Stampfer quotes A. C. Bradley, saying that Lear feels "unbearable joy" in the last scene; he realizes Cordelia will live in heaven. If this is true, order is reestablished--once again echoing Bradley; if this is not true, "Shakespeare was confronting chaos itself."⁸ This chaos is caused by or is part of the malignant evil emanating from Edmund and the true evil sisters. Two types of evil are recognized: "evil as animalism, in Goneril and Regan, and evil as doctrinaire atheism, in Edmund."⁹

Still another work concerned with the meaning of wickedness and disorder states the problem in terms of "service."¹⁰ King Lear has a feudal atmosphere, and the relation of master to servant and the character of their reciprocal bond are basic to an evaluation of the misery and the punishment received. Lear receives his due because

⁸J. Stampfer, "The Catharsis of King Lear," Shakespeare Survey, XIII, 1.

⁹Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁰Jonas A. Barish and Marshall Waingrow, "Service in King Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, IX, 347-335.

of his shirking responsibility. If Lear wants to step down, it must be in such a way that will leave his subjects in a serene state. Through the terrors he must face, Lear acquires an understanding of servitude.

Gloucester too is "reeducated," since his service was formerly only for his gain. From King Lear we learn of the fundamental interrelation of order and servitude. "As servants of God, we discover the true and whole meaning of service: that by promoting concord between individuals of different rank, it ends by minimizing distinctions of rank."¹¹

Somewhat associated with this view is the explanation of Lear through various trial scenes.¹² Though Dorothy Hockey doesn't directly mention the "feudal" relationships of the characters, she does speak of certain tests (love tests, etc.) that reveal much the same interaction that has been previously shown. At the first Lear judges the daughters, and the audience or readers judge him. The same motif continues to reappear; in the storm scene Lear asks the gods to punish, and in two scenes he serves as juror to himself. After punishment, he learns true "service" and is "restored."

¹¹Ibid., p. 348.

¹²Dorothy C. Hockey, "The Trial Pattern of King Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, X, 389-395.

An obvious method of rationalizing suffering is by showing Lear as only representative--he is not a man but a character. If he is only a symbol, the action (and therefore the horrors) need not be treated as fact, in the ordinary sense. Also, if King Lear is a tragedy in the traditional sense, the suffering is part of a stylistic approach. This phase of interpretation is discussed in the following chapter.

However, Lear as a man undergoing the terrors and realizations of a perverse universe is striking, and it is clear that modern scholars struggle with the meaning of Lear's suffering as did earlier students.

CHAPTER II

TRENDS OF INTERPRETATIONS

In the previous chapter several outlooks were sketched that dealt with the quality of adversity in King Lear . Since they are also restated in chapter three to a certain extent, it will suffice here to generalize and condense. Lear is seen to change-- he is either redeemed or re-educated. There are various interpretations outlining his transfiguration: he is taught the existence of after-life; he learns fatherly and kingly virtues; he becomes humanized; and he understands the value of service and order. This chapter will also present interpretations but with a view to the extensive rather than the intensive.

For the most part, chapter one presents an explanation that included meaning in the play's action itself. There are wider applications than the simple story, but King Lear is "real" and should be judged in respect to life.

A notable exception is the comment on Christian interpretation. Lear and Cordelia become symbols. Closely associated is the poetic allegory theory in which the action accrues through

allegorical means. "Prose is yielding to poetry, 'realism' to reality. King Lear is not true. It is an allegory of truth."¹

Harbage points out that "everything is patterned." The future is forecast in Lear's actions, and the sisters are the stock characters of the Cinderella tale. Shakespeare sets up such a simple framework so that he is free to concentrate on his poetry. Harbage says, "No other framework than this parable-myth could have borne so well the weight of what Shakespeare was compelled to say."²

Maynard Mack, much like Harbage, sees the play as a renewal of the Moral play. However, he would differ as to the reason and effect:

Though there is much of the Morality play in Lear, it is not used toward a morality theme, but as I have tried to suggest in this essay, toward building a deeply metaphysical metaphor, or myth, about the human condition, the state of man, in which the last of many mysteries is the enigmatic system of relatedness in which he is enclosed.³

If the poetic allegory direction is taken, one can, to a certain extent, pass over the agony of Lear. What Lear and his actions represent is the focal point. In other words the suffering

¹Alfred Harbage, "King Lear: An Introduction," Shakespeare: The Tragedies, ed, Alfred Harbage (2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 113.

²Ibid., p. 114.

³Maynard Mack, King Lear in Our Time (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), p. 115.

of Lear and the effect it has on him is no longer all-important; certain "poetic" truths have taken ascendancy, and it is to this end that criticism is diverted.

It is well to speak of the antithesis of the allegorical explanation of King Lear. Geoffrey Bush, for example, compares allegoric poetry and Shakespeare's plays:

There is no such correspondence in Hamlet and King Lear; our pity and terror are for the events as they are. Hamlet and King Lear are not statements about action and belief; they are acting, and make-believe, and the vision, in Bacon's words, is "a dream of learning."⁴

Also, many critics (as already mentioned) accept the action of the play as real action. If there are incongruities, then life is incongruous or the incongruities are meaningful in themselves. (A third comment could be that Shakespeare has erred, but this isn't the nature of such criticism.)

Carolyn S. French offers a clarification of irrational action. She says that it is the "framework of the play itself which makes it rationally incomprehensible and even ridiculous to the modern playgoer."⁵ One must view the play from an Elizabethan viewpoint; it is a story of Christian folly. At this time it was felt

⁴Geoffrey Bush, Shakespeare and the Natural Condition. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 16.

⁵Carolyn S. French, "Shakespeare's Folly: 'King Lear,'" Shakespeare Quarterly, X, 523.

that reason is foolish--one was forced to rely on revelation from God. Edgar plays the part of a bedlamite--partially for comic relief, since that was a common device; however, Edgar, as all good men, is not "rational," the two evil sisters are "rational;" they are worldly wise." In brief, Shakespeare purposefully places his good characters in irrational action. It is through God that they learn; they feel rather than think.

Such criticism, then, stems from the belief that "there is a rationale behind the dramatic structure of Lear, a rationale which gives intellectual significance of probability."⁶

Just as the "symbolic" interpretations become varied, so are the themes of the commentators that view the action of King Lear as rational. One more illustration is R. H. West's article concerning "Sex and Pessimism in King Lear." The king is dazed by his daughters' treatment of him. He begins to feel that "the act of generation has come to seem an inhuman abyss of the human will."⁷ He says, "But to the girdle do the gods inherit, Beneath is all the fiends."

The monarch, in thinking of the origin of his progeny, realizes that lust is natural--it promotes procreation. Therefore, Lear sees

⁶Ibid.

⁷R. H. West, "Sex and Pessimism in King Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, XI, 56.

his grief as stemming from a perverse nature. Gloucester learns that his blinding is a result of an unlawful pairing; and, if we believe Goneril and Regan, Lear's knights are "debosh'd." Therefore, the bad characters illustrate sex as evil, and the good characters comment upon it. West feels that although many questions are not answered (why does Cordelia die?), Shakespeare shows love as a force that makes all things confrontable.

What for the delirious Lear, then, is a frantic intuition of universal depravity in sex, is for the audience the recognition with pity and terror of a corruption the world may show--or of Lear's distressed way of seeing whatever it is that the world does show.⁸

There is, of course, Lear's madness. The point at which he becomes mad is disputed and the object of a great amount of criticism. Also, the discussion rages on the dramatic effect of lunacy. In other words, it is debatable whether there can be dramatic development of a madman--the meaning involves the allegorical. However, there is some reason in the speech of the mentally ill, and Lear's speech is commonly used for explication purposes.

J. W. Bennett sees the madness as the main theme:

Lear cannot achieve truth and grow in understanding while he is insane. But the dramatist had an expository problem of probing and exhibiting to

⁸Ibid., p. 57.

his audience the cause and nature of Lear's insanity (for it is not his daughters' ingratitude, but Lear's reaction to their ingratitude which produced the insanity.) The process by which Shakespeare exhibits Lear's reaction, the conflict in Lear's mind, might well be described as "the development of a character in terms of lunacy."⁹

It is Lear's struggle with himself that unfolds.

The cause of Lear's madness is "his bitter, futile resentment, his frustrated will which has driven him to insane hatred."¹⁰

Whether modern critics actually see King Lear as stemming from the Greek tragedy prototype is difficult to appraise. However, isolated segments of the "tragic theory" are discussed (catharsis, tragic flaw, etc.), and often under the specific traditional titles. At least four questions arise: Was Shakespeare incorporating certain elements of the Greek tragedy into his play? If he was not, to what extent is Lear a tragic hero, or for that matter, to what extent is King Lear a tragedy?; can Lear, as a tragic hero (if he is), also truly be Everyman?; Is one category a valid point from which to proceed when there is no evidence of other related characteristics?

The answer to the first question can be only equivocal; old dramatic theories are often invoked, but there is a lack of comprehensive explanation with regard to them. However, though

⁹ J. W. Bennett, "The Storm Within: The Madness of Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, XIII, 138.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 143.

the appellation may remain, King Lear is now given much more complexity than a tragedy. It is well also to add that the term "tragic" used is usually not defined and may have any shade of meaning. Question number two, then, is equally difficult. Two quotations from the same article alternately calling the king "simply a man" and "a tragic hero" occur on pages six and eight of chapter three. In dealing with this query, one might point out that a tragic hero is Everyman. However, can this tragic hero-Everyman be also a redeemed Christian or allegorical figure at the same time; can he be constantly be described in contrast to a tragic hero rather than compared? Obviously, the term "Tragic" no longer carries with it the rigid standards it once did. Depending on various shades, of course, its meaning becomes close to the everyday meaning.

This is not to say, however, that no criticism exists that treats King Lear truly as a tragedy. For example, Francis G. Schoff descredits any strictly moral interpretation. He says that by studying the lines of the play and counting the different allusions to various subjects one can evaluate different themes. In other words, if a certain subject is undertaken by Shakespeare, there will be numerous reiterations. By this method Schoff ascertains that

there is no support for "natural law," haughtiness in Lear, or any other "moral" viewpoints as more than incidental features of the play.

For King Lear is not a play about Tudor political philosophy; nor does it offer its protagonist's career as a moral "exemplum," teaching us to go and do otherwise. It is a play about the fearful power of evil, into whose grip, through misstep or accident, even the wisest and noblest man may plunge himself and us; and its protagonist is a tragic hero whose experience, thus vicariously shared, enables us to gain strength and understanding for what we may one day face ourselves.¹¹

In conclusion, one can fairly characterize most Lear criticism as expounding didactic interpretations. Even if a moral lesson is not present, we at least gain in awareness of the human condition. The old ring-giver exemplifies, whether allegorically or through the dramatic effect of his actions, the human search for truth. We are cautioned to not make Lear's mistakes, but we are to seek "revelation." Various themes are promulgated that reveal added meaning in the ambiguities of Lear. They either show Lear's deeper interaction with his environment, or they clarify the rapport that Shakespeare establishes with his reader or audience

¹¹Francis G. Schoff, "King Lear: Moral Example or Tragic Protagonist?" Shakespeare Quarterly, XIII, p. 172.

CHAPTER III
ATTEMPTS TO DETERMINE
IDENTITY OF LEAR

Any comment made about King Lear involves, of course, the character who gives the play its name. The question of who or what the king is or represents is basic to even a cursory examination of the play, to say nothing of an intensive study. Much is said, certainly, about Lear's metamorphosis, and attempts are made to explain what he was before his trials and what he is after all is finished.

There are also other questions germane to the play: Is Lear the cause of the misfortunes in entirety or is he merely the opener of Pandora's box? What blame does Lear deserve? The reasons for the questions are obvious. To ascertain any meaning of the play, a certain value system is needed. Whether Lear is fairly or unfairly treated by his daughters is a simple question. However, whether God or the gods mete out justice to the king is quite perplexing.

Therefore, in order to explicate King Lear, one must attempt to determine what kind of man Lear is, what changes occur to him, and evaluate his actions and the results of them.

In an earlier chapter the suffering of King Lear was discussed: Lear goes through a gethsemane to gain understanding; his redemption or purification begins within his failings. He is unable to balance kingly qualities against fatherly feelings, and monarchical vanities hinder him from realizing the human condition. His bond as feudal leader is broken and disorder reigns. Nevertheless, to all of the conditions listed comes alleviation and a certain elucidation. Lear, then, is seen first as a "student" who ~~falls~~ his way through life's problems with great injury and great sufferings. He is a man learning and suffering, or if a wider application is needed, he is Mankind, learning and suffering. Again, all of the criticism of Lear that seeks to give the play overall meaning deals with this problem.

It is clear from the chapter on suffering that for the most part Lear is seen by recent scholars as deserving the pain he endures, or at least as benefiting from the pain. Ivor Morris, for example, is quite specific on this subject: "Whatever view is taken of King Lear, the responsibility for its tragic events must rest in the main upon Lear himself."¹ Lear is pictured as a bad father,

¹Ivor Morris, "Cordelia and Lear," Shakespeare Quarterly, VIII, 140-158.

and bad king; he is also guilty of many other failings previously mentioned. In fact, it is hinted that he indirectly causes his two evil daughters' hate and perversity.² Since much has been said concerning the king's turpitude, it is well to consider at least one concept of Lear that exonerates him--at least frees him of serious blame.

Alfred Harbage recognizes a flaw, but would term it "hereditary." He says, "To say that Lear gets what he deserves is to share the opinion of Goneril and Regan. (Some have even implied Cordelia gets what she deserves, anaesthetizing their heads and hearts with obtuse moralisms suggested by the doctrine of 'poetic justice.'"³ Harbage asks if the old man's charge is not true; haven't his followers constantly lied to him; haven't they told him that he was wise when he is not? "Lear's errors stem from no corruption of heart. His rejection of Kent and Cordelia is the reflex of his attachment to them."⁴ In other words Lear, since he is never questioned, sees Cordelia and Kent as hatefully going against what must surely be right and for no other reason that to hurt him.

"Royal Vanities" are already mentioned. One view of Lear is that he is simply a self-centered old man who lives for his own

²Nowotny, Shakespeare Survey, X, 90.

³Harbage, p. 118.

⁴Ibid., p. 119.

glorification. Because he has this weakness, he is easily fooled: Through being fooled, he is brought to understand his common tie with mankind.

Siegel quotes IV. vi. 102-107 to show the change that Lear undergoes. The old sovereign tells of his suffering in the storm and later he says that he now sees his flatterers as liars. He calls Gloucester "Coneril, with a white beard." Not only have the two sisters lied in their avowals of love, but Gloucester and the rest of the court have so frequently praised him that the king has lost sight of his true self, including his mortality.

"Grandiose diction and imperial pomp have given way to homely colloquialism and the humility of wisdom. In his next words he proclaims himself 'every inch a king,' and so, in the grandeur of his suffering, he is, but he is a king who realizes his kinship with other men. 'Let me wipe it first,' he replies (IV. vi. 136), when Gloucester begs to kiss his hand, 'It smells of mortality.'"⁵ Similarly, E. M. Taylor depicts Lear as a man toying with the aspects of "Pomp and Poverty."⁶ In the storm scene he mistakes Poor Tom for a Greek philosopher, since cynic philosophers were poor, and

⁵ Siegel, Shakespeare Quarterly, VI, 330.

⁶ E. M. Taylor, "Lear's Philosopher," Shakespeare Quarterly, IX, 353.

Poor Tom has only a blanket. Taylor says,

If this is accepted, it need hardly be stressed how germane Lear's delusion is to the rest of the play... The central theme... is that a man who grossly overvalues material things and the outward trappings of state, virtue and affection must be schooled by disaster and suffering into truer, more adequate, and more charitable assessments.⁷

Another interesting explanation of the social implications delineates the aged master as beginning his enlightenment when he defends his one hundred knights.⁸ He realizes that the feudal bond that exists between his men and himself is made up of love as well as duty. Too, he begins to see how the need his followers had for him was reciprocal. The lesson is repeated when Lear, on the heath, is a "slave to the elements" along with "degraded servants"---Kent, Edgar and the fool.

There is much said, then, on how and why Lear becomes cognizant of a wider panorama of existence. However, there remains to detail what Lear represents. In other words, does King Lear recount the activities of an aged man only, or does the play allow more extensive applications? Winifred M. T. Nowotny sees King Lear as undertaking the "question of unaccommodated man."⁹

⁷Ibid., p. 365.

⁸Barish and Waingrow, Shakespeare Quarterly, IX, 353.

⁹Nowotny, Shakespeare Survey, X, 91.

The emperor, through his questioning, goes through a mental self-torture (to a certain extent) that is germane to the entire human condition. "Such questions however, strong the personal feelings that underlie them, are more searching than the situation itself necessitates."¹⁰ The quest that Lear makes concerning problems of metaphysics as well as what man is, "Makes him that Everyman that Macbeth with his witches, Othello with his Iago, even Hamlet with his ghost cannot be."¹¹ In his dialogue with the storm, this monarch engages in "a battle with the gods." There is the question of who is whose master--a humbling effect. He realizes also that he has not dealt well with the "needy man;" only what is felt can be called true knowledge. He says, "Take physic, pomp; Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel." Poor Tom, a man clad only in a blanket, becomes Lear's philosopher. When the hero once again sees Cordelia, he has completed his course:

"As I am a man, I think this lady to be my child Cordelia" is powerful because of all Lear has left behind him; he is no longer the wrathful dragon, the outraged king, the impotent revenger, the defiant titan, the stoic, or the madman, but simply, now a man.¹²

¹⁰Ibid., p. 91.

¹¹Ibid., p. 90.

¹²Ibid., p. 97.

Besides being a symbol for mankind finding brotherhood with mankind and serving as an allegorical figure showing the evils of materialism, Lear is also Thinking Man; he is seen as a metaphysician. How well the king carries out his role is disputed; Whether Lear ever understands anything clearly is a moot question. However, the modern critic is concerned with what problems the king entertains and what his conclusions are of these problems.

One critic sees him dealing with imponderables.¹³ One by one, his daughters answer how much they love him. Cordelia refuses to play the game of superlatives partly because she sees the old man's foolishness and partly because she resents her sister's rank praises. Love cannot be measured and Lear is foolish in his attempt to gain a quantitative formulation of any quality.

Also, certain qualities are needed by a ruler, others for a man. Lear struggles in his thought to ascertain the division. The first category of actions requires a superhuman demeanor as well as action. This is the problem in the beginning; Cordelia and Kent confront an angry monarch--not a father or friend. Lear has understood "'that kings' private passions wound their pub-

¹³Ivor Morris, Shakespeare Quarterly, XIII, 140-150.

like states,' and has found it impossible to combine the tenderness of fatherhood with the stern and superhuman demands of kingly office."¹⁴

W. M. T. Nowottny enumerates the object of the king's inquiring mind. She depicts Lear as seeking the answers throughout the action. This is of prime importance; the subject of Lear's mental process not only furnishes cohesion and theme for the work, but shows and "active" Lear.

King Lear, as far as his outward fortunes are concerned, is a passive hero, but at the same time he himself is the active cause of what is tragic (as distinct from pathetic) in his experience, and is indeed more truly the maker of his own tragedy, by virtue of his questions he himself raises than any other Shakespearean tragic hero.¹⁵

Again, Lear experiences an adventure of the mind. The action of the rest of the play is in conjunction with the king's thought processes or determines their direction. Lear also asks "the nature of his own status and identity, the nature of need, the nature of the gods, and Lear has also raised, though not as a direct question, the problem of the inherent guilt of the flesh...."¹⁶ Is this quest all dementia? Alfred Harbage says no--"The king-figure surrogate is an understandable

¹⁴Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁵Nowottny, Shakespeare Survey, X, 90.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 91.

product of the human mind in its early attempts at abstraction, since the most imposing of single men best lends his image to the difficult concept of man."¹⁷

Another facet of the protagonist is expounded by Harbage. His description is convincing. After the storm scene, "Lear's anguish now represents for us Man's horror and sense of helplessness at the discovery of evil-- the infiltration of animality in the human world, naked cruelty and appetite."¹⁸ There certainly is the element of horror in King Lear and there is much to fortify Harbage's statement. In various trial scenes Lear is clearly confronting naked evil--an evil to which he was apparently a stranger. What would Lear do to evil things? "His instinct is to rip them from the universe, to annihilate all things if it is the only way to annihilate these things."¹⁹

The old man cannot of course accomplish his wishes. He is helpless before his adversary possibly because his innocence permits his malignancy to gain an early stranglehold. Obviously, since the monarch was a monarch, he was in command. The holocaust which follows his early actions is demonstrably bad. Therefore, the hero has erred. Although the commentators on this drama usually do not name their goal, they search for the "tragic

¹⁷Harbage, p. 117.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 120.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 121.

flaw." However, whether the specific imperfection which each writer identifies as the flaw is tragic or not is a question of definition. Earlier efforts to explicate Lear were often pointed to the end of proving the parts of the traditional Greek tragedy and the accompanying tendencies. The vestiges of this type of study are still present. However, since the criticism of King Lear in relation to the tragic theory has been previously discussed, it suffices to say that all shades of meaning are given, and in combination with somewhat incompatible material.

This leaves Lear's madness. On this point the commentators agree: he is mentally ill. However, when and why he becomes mad is much under discussion. Nevertheless, the acquisition of knowledge and the alterations previously cited are roughly the same regarding madness. As mentioned in the second chapter, mania is sometimes used to discredit the monarch as a dramatic character as well as to fortify the "poetic allegory" theory.

Therefore, the main character of the play is one who through variously listed errors of judgment and of acuity of perception unleashes discord and confronts chaos itself. However, he does gain a certain comprehension and salvation. If he is fairly treated by fate does not seem important. More than simply a man suffering, he is representative of man who suffers to learn; his thought reveals a

common bond in all human thought and is reflective of man's war against evil. Although who or what exactly he is remains ambiguous, it is certain that he is memorable and even in insanity possesses "dramatic" qualities almost frightening in their titanic proportions.

CHAPTER IV

EXPLANATION OF LEAR'S SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Numerous allusions have been made to the other characters in King Lear; though to effectuate the purpose of presenting extensive explications, the protagonist is, of course, the subject of most of the exposition. Nevertheless, the other figures in the play lend meaning not only in themselves but in their interactions with Lear and each other. How these personalities complement, expand, or alter the main theme is a portion of any final judgment.

Cordelia, the one faithful daughter, is the core of controversy. It need not be reiterated that she, as well as Lear, holds the means to retain order. Her replies regarding her affection for her father facilitate the resulting horrors as surely as Lear's fateful decision to apportion the land. However, Cordelia's traditional role has been one of a "healer."

In any Christian interpretation Cordelia usually serves as the all-important saving device which effects Lear's redemption. There is no doubt, for example, that Lear is a "child-changed father."

In his own family are found the two poles of human nature-- Goneril and Regan representing base evil and Cordelia, a lady of goodness. The cruelty the old landgiver undergoes is alleviated by his realization of Cordelia's love. However, the "redemption" theme deals with more than a simple earthy quality.

Siegel, relying heavily on A. C. Bradley's interpretations, repeats that in the last scene Lear realizes Cordelia is in heaven.¹ The old man understands that there can be no idyllic life like the one he describes before he and Cordelia go to prison; his hope is in the afterlife. Therefore, not only does his daughter succor her father while alive, but she serves him in death. This line of thought of course leads to the expected conclusion.

The analogy between Cordelia and Christ, who redeemed human Nature from the curse brought on it by Adam and Eve ... is made unmistakable, although not crudely explicit, by the choric comment of her gentleman: "Thou has one daughter/ who redeems nature from the general curse/ which twain have brought her to."²

Conversely, as hinted previously, there is a dark side to Cordelia's nature. She capriciously refuses to soothe her father with testimonials of love and seemingly invited his chagrin. Ivor Morris treats this problem thoroughly.³ He points out her

¹Paul N. Siegel, Shakespeare Quarterly, VI, 335n.

²Ibid., p. 335.

³Ivor Morris, Shakespeare Quarterly, VIII 140-158.

purposeful lackluster statement of affection. He says

This is no reply for a king, however wayward and misguided--nor even for a father. We know, from what we learn later on, that Cordelia's answer belies her true feelings; and we infer that the motives that make her do as she does, whatever they are, cannot but be of the best. But the attitude they make her adopt is as unexpected as it is painfully inapt. Lear is not wholly to blame for the tragedy that is to be played out.⁴

Cordelia, then, by holding to a rather obtuse and needlessly rigid moralism actually aids her sisters in their quest for power.

Does she do so because of adherence to truth? No, because in her attempt to discredit her sisters, she causes her father to misunderstand--she fails to communicate at the most inopportune time. She does not answer well because "she cannot rise to a rock that is higher than she and answer purely from love."⁵

Though it is ridiculous like Nahum Tate to rewrite the play, it is interesting to note what changes Cordelia's judicious answering would have wrought: Lear would have a haven; the evil sisters' military power would be impaired; and Kent would possibly be in good graces. Obviously, for the play to retain any semblance of itself, Cordelia must err in such a matter. On the other hand, such

⁴Ibid., p. 140.

⁵Dorothy C. Hockey, Shakespeare Quarterly, X, 390.

action from such human perfection raises not only questions about Cordelia's nature but the nature of the play. Paradoxically, the one person capable of assuagement is instrumental in loosing the corrupt forces that cause the wounds.

If Cordelia's ambiguous actions supplement the main plot, Gloucester and his misfortunes certainly complement it. Shakespeare uses the usual plot and subplot which ultimately become entangled. The obvious similarity between Gloucester's condition and Lear's reinforces the main theme. Gloucester, is also fooled by his offspring. As a result, he forces Edgar away in the same manner Cordelia is sent. Robert Speaight in an excellent work, Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy, charges Gloucester thus;

If Gloucester had possessed a little more of the 'Wisdom of Nature'--if in short, he had been capable of reason--he might have looked twice at the forged letter; he might have given Edgar a chance to extricate the truth. But Gloucester was blind according to the spirit before he became blind according to the flesh. From the casual mement of Edmund's begetting, and earlier, he had obeyed the first unconsidered impulse. This had often led him into lust as it was now to lead him into injustice. Yet in his ignorance, he tells us what the play is all about. "The king falls from the bias of nature"--it is all there. And he too, had fallen.⁶

Of course, Lear cannot be convicted of promiscuity, but his error in judgment creates the same effect. Also, Speaight hints at a

⁶ Robert Speaight, Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy, (London: Routledge, 1962), 97.

question that would serve well in considering Lear: after his eighty-some years can he not judge his daughters? Obviously, Lear's mistake, like Gloucester's is a result of past judgment. Here again, another parallel adds to the theme.

In addition Gloucester fails in his obligation to Lear. He, as well as Kent, has a duty to temper the judgment of the monarch. Until the earl feels the terrors that his liege lord does, he neither goes to his aid nor feels compassion for him. Gloucester, then, must go through a purification before he is capable of understanding or aiding his fellow human beings; he too transformed through adversity.

There is more than simple interaction here: there is an obvious parallel that allows Shakespeare constantly to echo his main action. Further examples of this technique are the juxtapositions of Goneril and Ragan with Edmund, and Cordelia with Edgar. Thus, not only does Shakespeare contrast the "evil" children with their "good" sibling, he shows them in relation to their counterparts of the opposite sex.

What of these workers of woe? First of all, one is struck by the abject evil of these persons. Alfred Harbage reveals Shakespeare's attitude: "The workers of evil are stylized in a way not quite typical of Shakespeare. He could not love these

characters even as characters, except perhaps Edmund a little"⁷ How true it is that these perverse creatures are stylized; they are veritable worshipers of Satan. In this sense they take on the aspects of allegorical figures of evil much like those in Pilgrim's Progress. Their cause or reason for existence cannot be explained simply in terms of power: Their evil is malign and sadistic; they are as unexplainable as a plague of locusts, and more destructive. True, Edmund has some reason for attempting to be an heir, but his tacit approval to maim his father is beyond reason.

E. W. Block deals with Shakespeare's treatment of his personae and the interaction between them:

In effect, through the superbly fair representation of opposing and apparently irreconcilable points of view and through consistent and significant modifications of characters, he was succeeded in creating that tension on the part of the audience which results from their sympathies being so equally divided that they become the victims and suffer all the throes of what may fairly be termed schizophrenic frustration.⁸

Therefore, not only does Shakespeare increase in this way the dramatic effect of his play, he allows constant restatement. Also, the main personalities become more significant through methods

⁷ Harbage, p. 116.

⁸ E. A. Block, "King Lear: A Study of Balanced and Shifting Sympathies," Shakespeare Quarterly, X, 499.

of comparison and contrast. (Even Kent has his foil in Oswald.)

Finally, the minor design is important in itself and enriches the play individually.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

What, then, is the meaning of King Lear? We can only list suggestions, generalize possibilities, and comment.

The first impression one receives is one of expediency. As George Orwell put it, "First of all, therefore, there is the vulgar, common-sense moral drawn by the Fool; 'Don't relinquish power, don't give away your land.'¹ Foolish generosity is, therefore, a fault. Also there is an obvious element of parent-child relationships. William M. Main quotes Thomas Jefferson (of all writers!) in a comment he calls "cogent" and "didactic," "A lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectively impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading King Lear, than by all the dry volumes of ethics, and divinity, that ever were written."²

Even in a cursory reading appears the element of didacticism. The play as a Christian drama has already been

¹George Orwell, "The Moral' of King Lear," Shakespeare's Tragedies, ed. Laurence Lerner (Baltimore: Penquin Books, Inc., 1963), p. 128.

²William M. Main (ed.), The Tragedy of King Lear, (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1962), Introduction, p. xiii.

discussed. The earth is but a "proving-ground" for humanity. Lear sees the uselessness as well as the putrescence of the world. He is aided in finding a heavenly vision by a harbinger of the afterlife --his daughter. Also, just as the Christ she allegorically represents, she brings goodwill and reassurance in life.

Closely associated are allegorical viewpoints that point to truths besides the Christian experience. In such a theory it is pointed out that King Lear is not true; however, through the dramatic effects we experience or become cognizant of truth. The many incongruities that we become aware of are merely the results of "poetry." The real action is not explainable, but representative of "higher action."

Others who accept the event or part of the events in Lear as real often retain the idea of redemption or show Lear as going through a process of "re-education." He may learn humility, the "Nature" of things, a sense of order, servitude, or simply meet the horror of naked evil. Whatever he becomes or feels, he is pictured as either deserving his plight or growing "larger" because of it. In short an attempt is made to show relevance of misfortune. "What becomes of us is not important, but what we become."³

³Mack, p. 117.

Lear is portrayed in at least three different ways: First of all, he symbolizes the "seeking" churchman who finds the redeemer; secondly, he is the main character of a miracle play as Maynard Mack portrays him; and last of all, a "real" human being whose existence is meaningful and lends itself to wider applications.

In a few words this is an overview of Lear criticism.

Harking back to the depiction of Lear as a Christian play, one must admit that there are few if any, specifically Christian references and that the expositions of the last scene which shows a redeemed king are not only weak but strained to the breaking point. First of all, the lines used to fortify such a conclusion do not imply such an interpretation and are ambiguous at best. Only by conscious effort can one stretch the imagination to be convinced. Much is made of Lear's last words---"Look there, Look there!" Supposedly, this portrays an afterlife. However, the line immediately before this speech is "look on her, look, her lips." Lear still "sees" Cordelia breathing! If this is not so, then no speech of Lear's can have meaning; Shakespeare has a mad speech that not only is completely illogical (which is not realistic), but that is so ambiguous that only certain words from a sentence have

a pertinence and this out of context with the rest of the sentence. On the other hand, that Cordelia relieves her father and partially restores his faith in nature in general cannot be disputed.

One reason for such an attitude is that the play is an object of study in a traditionally Christian society; the attempts to "christianize" Shakespeare are many. Another reason is the result of bardolatry. Anyone who attempts to define the spirit of a play is usually enamoured, and the respect for Shakespeare is such a part of the culture that there is the tendency "to do well by him." In brief, King Lear criticism is definitely pointed toward praise of the man, and this must of course color the criticism.

The modern critic will simply not allow Shakespeare to "confront chaos," and he is quite possibly right. Certainly, those who explain Lear as a man confronting certain metaphysical and epistemological questions have a strong case, as do the scholars who would portray the humanization of the king.

One aspect of Lear's fall is that he is innocent and not schooled in disputing with evil. Because of his favored position, he has for over eighty years been allowed to look through "rose-

tinted" glasses. When the king from his own volition, steps from the throne, he is instantly caught and carried in a whirlpool of calamity. At the same time he has lost the means to do something about it; this cognizance and helplessness leave Lear like any "needy man."

It must be said in the old monarch's favor that he places himself on the side of right. His friend, Gloucester, is at first the perfect "organization man." We cannot truly believe that the earl is totally naive concerning Goneril and Regan. A certain myopia may be excused in judging a family matter, but Gloucester should know the royal family because knowing it is his civil duty. However, it seems that Gloucester rises with the wind, not against it. He would overlook the obvious sad condition to which the country would decline merely to retain favor. Nevertheless, he is for the first time in his life forced to take sides. In the same manner as Lear, he has coasted through an equivocating life; now however, he has the way decided. There is an obvious indication of the inescapable quality of misfortune, there comes the time when you can no longer "sit the fence;" you are thrown into a contest where only your own mettle will serve.

Too, the best way to escape anguish is personally to increase the sum total of the positive forces. Lear treats his daughter wrongly

and must suffer the pangs of hell before the breach is healed. Gloucester had years before begotten an illegitimate son. Not only is his act irresponsible in itself, but he has not changed or gained any deeper insights; he accepts things at face value, and does not wrestle with deeper meanings. Edmund needs only to present the most flimsy of charges for his father to be convinced.

Closely associated to the idea of facing the "dark" forces in the world is the clarification of the qualities of characteristics of nature. Edmund, a natural son, says he will gain his end naturally; and, in his context he strives to do so. When Lear pleads with his daughters to permit him to retain his knights, he calls them "most unnatural." However, in the storm scene he finds that they are in a sense "natural." For man to do "good," he must use intellect and have a true desire to accomplish his ends. Edmund is natural; like the animals (animal imagery is rampant; there are supposedly one hundred thirty three uses), he acts only for his pleasure. Obviously, Goneril and Regan, the two "pelican" daughters, are equally "natural."

Much of the horror that is realized is the result of inherent evil. An almost Manichean vision is projected by Shakespeare: Though it is true that he portrays the evil personalities as "cardboard

characters with little vital personality, the effect that these people have is enormous, and it is real in any sense it might be construed. Pain is not assuaged by philosophical intricacies; and its existence is authenticated on most convincing grounds -- human suffering.

How must King Lear be judged? He is guilty of an error so common and yet so difficult to detect. He mistakes the word for the fact. He asks his daughters how much they love him and rewards them according to their answer. Obviously, there is no correlation between a verbal reply and love, and in this case two of the three replies are deliberate lies. How foolish to apportion land according to such answers! Also, the frightening aspect of the play is that Lear continues to err in the same way. At the last he still refuses fact and babbles about Cordelia's breath. Lear is human; he commits no stranger sin than a garbageman who calls himself a "sanitation engineer." It is after his first mistake that confusion reigns -- the gods shower Lear with bricks, and it is this aspect that is ambiguous and poignant.

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