Reading Journal on Lear & Review of Criticism

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For my text I used the New Cambridge Shakespeare: The Tragedy of King Lear (updated edition) rather than the Riverside edition used in class because the notations were more detailed.

Act 1

1.1: We are introduced to Gloucester and his bastard son Edmond, and to another, the Duke of Kent. The affection of Gloucester to Edmond is immediately expressed ("no dearer in my account" (1.1, 16) than to his legitimate son. The premise of the play is set forth quickly: Lear announces his intent to divide the Kingdom in the presence of the principals concerned. From the moment of his arrival Lear is commanding. He wishes to be "unburdened" of his "cares and business."(1.1, 34-5) He has set a will and defined dowries. This is a retirement plan. He does not think he will die and is not ill, but says as jest that he will "crawl toward death" (1.1, 36) meaning slowly go, but this has ironic portent to something more infirm and miserable. He sets up the *love test* as it has been called. He issues it in the royal third person, "we," and does *not* address his daughters with the intimate "thou." Goneril, addressed as the eldest, avows her love first; she addresses him formally as "you." Now while this is supposed to be a contest, he rewards her immediately for her sentiments. This is no real contest; he has the divisions already in mind. Then daughter Regan speaks with no personal reference to Lear at all and she gets her right share. Then Cordelia is invited to speak and Lear straightaway tells her she is his favorite: she will get "a third more opulent than her sisters" (1.1, 81). So the test does not concern the rewards per se but the gratuitous expressions: Cordelia needs only express her heart, but she cannot: "I cannot heave my heart into my mouth" (1.1, 87). But more than this, she is principled to that divided love, fealty to the male superiors of her life, which she says must needs be her husband before her father, though father was first. "Why have my sister husbands, I they say / They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed, / Half my love with him, half my duty and my care." Lear's response seems disproportional. There is nothing, but maybe Cordelia's asides, to hint that there would be trouble in such a reply. She loves her father, but must owe love to husband as well. Does Lear think this unjust? Does Lear think he has lost his Cordelia's love? Is Lear's ego such that he cannot accept this natural love of his daughter for her husband, so threatened by it, so implicitly pathological and incestuous as that may seem?[i] He gives her a chance to recant but he makes no pleading of hurt feelings on his own part; it is like the way he would treat an ungrateful officer of his court. So his sudden edict is shocking. It seems arbitrary, based entirely on wounded pride. Or for what cause might he be impulsively enraged? An answer peeks out at line 118: "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery." He had hoped she would nurse him in his old age, again the awful portent of the misery to come in aging, a misery that he perhaps did anticipate and fear. He hoped to stay continuously with her, rather than divide himself between his daughters, it seems. But this is quickly said, with no more sentiment, than the allusion to his anger. At any rate he disowns Cordelia. This sets in motion the problem of the play: *betrayal* and *alienation*, their consequences and their resolution. Lear invokes the language of alienation expressly: "I disclaim all my paternal care, / Propinquity and property of blood, / And as a stranger to my heart and me, / Hold thee from this forever" (underlined for emphasis: 1.1.107-110). This is not simply withdrawal of dowry; it is *alienation*

– literally, making a "stranger" – in the social relationship, of even *natural parent/child* relationship. This is a two-sided and ironic problem because both Lear and Cordelia feel betrayed. The problem of the play (*betrayal & alienation*) will be shared with others as the play progresses. Lear divides his lands in two, lays down conditions for his two sons-in-law to rule. Kent intercedes: here someone at least speaks with a tender heart to the matter, speaking with the intimate "thou": "Be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man? (1.1.139-40). Lear warned him, "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (1.1.116), but Kent persists and Lear, enraged, banishes him: this is the first of several **parallels in the dramatic structure** on the *betrayal & alienation* problem. The problem here acts upon the *master/servant relationship*, rather than *parent/child*, but there is a social similarity between the two relationships in the nature of their interdependence and the expected mutual fealty; Shakespeare draws implicitly upon these and will invert the relationships ironically during the play, as he works the problem of *betrayal & alienation*. This impetuous judgment of King Lear proves his powerful ego: "That thou hast sought to make us break our vows, / Which durst never yet; and with strained pride, / To come betwixt our sentence and our power / Which nor our nature nor our place can bear." The psychology of Lear may not be the only meaning here: there may also be political/social commentary on arbitrary power that will thread this play. The introduction of France and Burgundy to choose whether to marry Cordelia despite the revocation of her dowry starts up a coherent pattern of **polar themes in paired opposites**: here *Honesty↔Falsity* and *Faithfulness↔Opportunism*. To these polar themes will be added *Altruism↔Egoism*, *Human↔Bestial*, and *Natural↔Corrupt*, already hinted in this opening scene. [For a full sketch of this polarity in themes, see appended table of analysis.] I think a good deal of the dramatic tension is owed to the use of structural parallels and polar themes, reinforced abundantly by imagery and irony. It is one of the things I want to focus on in these notes. Kent already is set on the poles of *Honesty* and *Faithfulness*, as is Cordelia and France. Her sisters are set to the negative poles; their husbands seem conflicted. Lear himself is the very height of *Egoism*. Of herself Cordelia says "No unchaste action or dishonoured step / That hath deprived me of your grace and favour / But even for want of that for I am richer" (1.1, 223-5) – richer by her character. So France says: "Fairest Cordelia, thou art most rich being poor / Most choice forsaken, most loved despised. / Thee and thy virtues do I seize upon" (1.1 245-7). France also introduces the usage of "monster" (1.1.217ff), which shall play upon the polar theme of *Human↔Bestial*; this polarity defines society and the meaning of humanity, but also, ironically, describes the bestial aspect of the human being. It is the dramatic and philosophical content of the polar themes, that the opposing extremes do not negate each other and are not resolved; man is both human and bestial; the polarity describes a conflict but holds them equally sovereign and true. [For more about the significance of "polar themes," see the appendix.] Certain dramatic and rhetorical devices sympathize in a cluster of shared significance – *hiding*, *disguising*, *counterfeiting*, *duplicity* and *deceiving* – employed repeatedly and ironically in the play, eliciting meaning to the polar themes of *Honesty↔Falsity* and bearing action for the dramatic structure of *betrayal & alienation*. Here Cordelia warns: "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides. / Who covers faults, at last with shame derides" (1.1, 274-275) – rendered by conclusive rhyming couplet. The usage of *hiding* relates to the dramatic structure of *betrayal* that she feels and to the *Falsity* of her sisters. Regan and Goneril exchange some telling observations about Lear's mental health: Goneril, "full of changes his age is" (1.1 280); Regan, "'Tis infirmity of his age, <u>but he hath ever but slenderly known himself</u>" (1.1 285). The underlining is my emphasis because I think that along with the process of his *aging*, the process

of *self-knowledge* is going to be the principal psychic and dramatic development for Lear. The aging process, by the way, operates on the polar theme of *Natural↔Corrupt* and the self-knowledge process operates on the polar theme of *Honesty↔Falsity*, as well as inverting the devices of *disguise*, *hiding*, etc. I have written a lot on this scene but this is a heavily loaded scene, which does the job to lift the whole weight of the play up to view. Like the rapid opening sequence in It's a Wonderful Life (Frank Capra's film) all the principal characters and themes are set in motion in the span of less than ten minutes. The analysis of the play, as revealed in this first scene (and furthered as the play progresses), is summarized in a table appended to this journal. I am amending it as I go.

1.2: Edmond reenters alone and declares his wicked intrigue against his brother, Edgar. Edmond is like Iago, a craftsman of deception. He tricks his guileless father, Gloucester, easily. So Edmund is fixed to the pole of *Falsity* and *Opportunism*, his father and brother to the other. Note the prop use of a *counterfeit* letter. Edmond himself is a *counterfeit* as a bastard, though as he says about himself he has "mind as generous… shape as true / As honest madam's issue" (1.2, 9). To the cluster of polar opposites I can now add *Natural (Nature) against Unnatural (Corrupt)*. The bastard son is "base" (1.2, 10) while the legitimate son must be heir to the father in obedience to the ironically named "plague of custom", a "law" of Nature (as Edmond reflects in his opening lines of the scene). Gloucester hopes that Edgar "cannot be such a monster" as the letter seems to purport, invoking the pole of *corruption* (1.2, 85) and worries about the late eclipses of the sun and moon (imagery of *hiding*). In a dramatic parallel we have developing second pattern of *betrayal & alienation* between another relationship of parent and child; this betrayal proves not to be the one it seems to be by this *counterfeit* letter, but the relationship that Edmund *disguises* as *faithful* to his father. The play bears an overarching machinery of tension and irony – things as they seem are opposed (or apposed) to things as they are, and in a parallel to this, things as they should be are opposed (or apposed) things as they are. Gloucester gives the first good speech on this on this matter – a world that is neither as it seems nor as it should be; his entire speech is chock full of the stuff of the play.

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

scourged by the sequent effects: love cools,

friendship falls off, brothers divide: in

cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in

palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son

and father. This villain of mine comes under the

prediction; there's son against father: the king

falls from bias of nature; there's father against

child. We have seen the best of our time:

machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all

ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our

graves. Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall

lose thee nothing; do it carefully. And the

noble and true-hearted Kent banished! his

offence, honesty! 'Tis strange.

The Overarching Irony appears: things as they are *versus* things as they should be

Polar Theme: *Natural/Unnatural*

Then expression of the dramatic structures of *betrayal & alienation* and *corruption*

Polar Theme: *Honesty/Falsity*

For the sake of shorthand reference to these two uses of irony, I have defined the tension of "Things-as-They-Seem vs. Things-as-They-Are" as *Irony of Fact* (because it mocks reality of things) and the tension of "Things-as-They-Are vs. Things-as-They-Should-Be" as *Irony of Meaning* (because it mocks the intention of things). Usage of these ironies, in addition to their dramatic tension, vivifies the themes and motifs of the drama – the polar themes of *Falsity* and the *Unnatural*; and the devices and tropes that exploit *hiding, disguise, deceit,* etc. Edmond's speech at lines104ff mocks the conventions of astrological insight for affairs of men, calling them "excellent foppery of the world." The usage of "foppery" here is an allusion of *foolery* which I see repeated in rhetorical and dramatic devices, much as that cluster of various kinds of

deception noted as the primary devices. Foolery is something like a deception, but is deception that is revealed for the joke. The Fool spoofs the truth and so deceives, but tells the truth and so is honest. Edmond calls it a *deception* to use the stars and planets: "An admirable evasion of the whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star!" (1.2.111-2). Edmond's insight into the hypocrisy of conventional thinking (and social norms) makes him an ironically honest voice in the polar theme of *Honesty/Falsity*. A single speech again shows the interactive aspects of the drama: "… he comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o'Bedlam" (1.2.118). Edmond consciously assumes the *deception* of a not-so-innocent play actor, and the *foolery* of a *corrupt* mind for the purpose of *betrayal*. His words to his brother abound with malicious ironic dissembling: "I am no honest man, if there be any good meaning toward you (1.2.145-6)." Yes, he is no honest man. But, no, he means no good. Edmond closes the scene with delineation of the polar themes of Honesty and Nature and places his father and brother at those poles expressly: "A credulous father and brother noble, / Whose nature is so far from doing harms / That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty / My practices ride easy" (1.2.151-3). Note also the metaphor of making his brother like a horse that he" rides easy," making a *beast* of him; this sort of *corruption* of the natural shows up repeatedly.

1.3 and 1.4: The scenes are taken together. Scene 3 is a plot-mover telling us that King Lear "flashes into one gross crime or other that sets us all at odds." His knights are riotous. Lear himself struck a gentleman for "chiding" the King's fool. So there is a predicate for Goneril's displeasure with her imperious father. But we must remember that as scene 1 had closed, she and Regan had exchanged concerns over his "inconstant starts," and Goneril had posited misgiving that Lear might renege upon the division of authority that he has made, as he seeks to retain the deference, if not the authority, that is due a king: "Pray you let us [hit] together; if our father carry authority with such disposition as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us…. We must do something, and i' the heat" (1.1.305-7). In scene 4 Kent reappears in *disguise* and Lear's fool is introduced. The Fool plays a kind of alter ego for the King – but I want to think more about that as I go along with this journal. The fool is the one man who can tell Lear the truth to his face: his speech is the art of the *Irony of Meaning*. He is *honest*, but *hides* his truth in *foolery.* Kent in *Irony of Fact* says: "I do profess to be no less than I seem, to serve him truly that will put me in trust" (1.4.12). The mere black-and-white simplicity, good-versus-evil of polar themes is blurred by Shakespeare. He inverts the implications by use of irony. Here the seeming deception is not true *Falsity* but betrays his *Honesty*. Inversion is expressed here in an antiphrasis, the allusion to his true identity. *Inversion*, whether it be of words in phrases, of meanings or of dramatic structures, is another technique that Shakespeare uses to show us how things that are not as they should be, that is, to express *Irony of Meaning*. Of Lear's character, Kent says: "You have that in your countenance, which I would fain call master…. Authority" (1.4.24-6). Lear is snubbed by his daughter, ignored for his dinner; a knight of his thinks there has been an "abatement of kindness" and Lear agrees: "I have perceive a most faint neglect of late" (1.4.58). The Fool is said to pine for Cordelia (1.4.62-3); this sets up motivation for his relationship with Lear. The fool ridicules Lear:"…thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; for when thou gave'st them the rod and put'st down thine own breeches" (1.4.134-5). He criticizes Lear's decision to give up his property and entitlements, dividing his kingdom for his daughters: "Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing" (1.4.153-4); "He that keeps nor crust, nor crumb / Weary of all, shall want some" (1.4.157-8). It

is premonition. The Fool confronts the daughter for Lear's sake. Lear pretends to have lost his mind, mocking his daughter's challenges to his presumptive prerogatives: "Does any here know me? This is not Lear…. Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (1.4.185-189). It is premonition again. Premonition as a dramatic device places circumstance pending to the unwitting witness of the one to be affected by those circumstances. It is truth *hidden* in the future, ironically anticipated. If it were expected, it would be an expression of anxiety; because it is not expected – quite the reverse, it is not believed – the expression is *foolery*. His daughter, however, will not be bullied: she insists upon her objections to his behavior and his "riotous" retinue. Lear takes offense and predictably disavows her: "Degenerate bastard" (1.4.209). How far might he take this disavowal? Might he reverse his decision to yield his lands and rule? But if he has that intent, his daughter commands full power and executes her will. Goneril twice refers to Lear in "dotage" (1.4.248 & 1.4.280), recalling the *process of aging* that is overtaking Lear. At root "dotage" is a term of *foolery*, per the OED. Why must Lear decline to folly to be wise? Why must he lose his mind to gain *self-knowledge*? Blake in a Proverb of Hell says: "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise." Lear laments: "Life and death! I am ashamed that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus" (1.4.251-2). Goneril still fears that Lear means to retake his kingship and so enlists her sister to support her, unknown to Lear. It is an act of *betrayal & alienation* within the dramatic structure of the play, defensive though it may be. In this scene we also see ironical play upon Lear's character development toward "self-knowledge." The sarcastic challenge to Oswald – "O, you, sir, you, come you hither, sir. Who am I, sir?" (1.4.78) – is parallel to the sarcasm directed at Goneril, "Are you our daughter?" (1.4.218). Lear does not doubt who he is, but others do not see him as he sees himself; it is the beginning loss of identity, one his abdication entails, but about which he is in denial. His fool, however, sees it (and has already warned him of the consequences):

KING LEAR Doth any here know me? This is not Lear:
Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied--Ha! waking? 'tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?
Fool Lear's shadow. (1.4.224-231)

To be one's own shadow is to be one's own *counterfeit*, where identity is *false* (or unreal) to self. It is *Irony of Meaning* – things are not as they should be. Note that in the Quarto this last line is spoken by Lear; in the Folio Shakespeare gives it to the Fool. That Lear also now begins to realize the loss of identity he faces is suggested by his joking upon a physical infirmity that he pretends may be confusing him; it is an ironic portent, but perhaps it reveals a sub-conscious anticipation that gnaws upon him. Does Lear from the very beginning of the play fear that his aging is affecting his mind? Is it for that fear that he determines to divide the land in the first place?

1.5: Lear sends off his own letter to his daughter Regan. *Duplicity* and *egoism* rules this family more than love. The Fool now confronts Lear: "If thou wert my fool, nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time…. Thou should'st not have been old till thou had'st been wise" (1.5.33-6). The matters of *aging* and *self-knowledge* are referenced – the issues of Lear's character development.

Act 2

2.1: Rumors of war open the scene. Edmond preys upon these and his brother to further his *deception*, wounding himself and blaming his brother: more of false seeming, and intimations of *corrupt* nature: “mumbling of wicked charms, conjuring the moon” (2.1.38). Edmond says his brother wanted to kill his father: a *counterfeit* for his own true *betrayal*. Regan enters and Edmond feeds her suspicion that Edgar was part of King Lear’s party. The ironic *inversion* of the parent/child relationship is remarked by Gloucester: “I hear that you have shown your father a child-like office.” The “second-childhood” of old age seems to play on both aspects of Lear’s development: the *process of aging* and the *process of self-knowledge*, if childhood is associated with innocence and innocence to honesty.

2.2: Kent arrives in *disguise*. He insults Oswald for a “knave” (i.e., an agent of *deceit*) and draws his sword on him. The distinction of classes is at play here – the *master/servant* relationship in the dramatic structure of the play. Cornwall reminds Kent to assume appropriate “reverence” but Kent says, “anger hath a privilege.” Then Kent explains Oswald is a “slave” with no right to bear a weapon himself, that is, is putting on airs; but moreover, “knows naught, like dogs, but following” (2.2.71). Cornwall would intercede but can make nothing from Kent who plays first at coarse rudeness and then a pretty flattery, and finally pricks Cornwall’s anger. He is put in stocks. Was this his motive all along? Playing the *fool* to a purpose? If so, it is a *deception* to provoke Lear.

2.3: Edgar is alone; by the indications of his soliloquy he is changing his appearance: it is a *disguise* or a *corruption*, denatured by his *alienation*: “To take the basest and most poorest shape” (2.3.6). He feigns the appearance of an addled vagrant, a sad sack from Bedlam, and even so names himself “Tom” by the convention. “Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.23). *Alienation* in such extremity takes the human individual and separates him completely from society and makes him “nothing” indeed. This is the worst of all human conditions: such a one will lose even his self.

2.4: Lear arrives with his Fool and is angered by Kent’s sentence to the stocks, as Kent had intended. Kent *deceives* him as to the cause. The Fool in his ironic verse says: “Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind, / But fathers that bear bags / Shall see their children kind” (2.4.44-7) – a cynical declaration on the theme of *filial betrayal*. Lear responds in a sudden fit: “O how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio! Down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy elements below.”(2.4.52-4; see also repeated image at 2.4.114). The reference is specific to a concept of “male” hysteria which as counterpart to the “female” hysteria is associated with an internal organ that, lacking in the male, must be made up for figuratively. An inversion of gender identity is implied – Lear alludes to losing his manhood earlier (1.4.252). The lines suggest at the very least a *corruption* of nature. The naming it “mother” seems to argue something psychological but it is in fact a convention or reference that Shakespeare was specifically following. [ii] Shakespeare employed it, I suspect, for its dramatic particulars; as he had read about them, the symptoms of this condition when full-bloom are like a possession; hence, it is an acting out of *alienation* of self. But this “mother” image invokes a psychic dissonance, coming as an erupting phantom organ, like a preternatural pregnancy, alien to his

body; what it signifies remains unclear to me yet, but must at least play out subconsciously on the *parent/child* subtext of the play and upon "the child in the man" (which in modern psychological thought is the very fundament of psychic being by natural/sociological development).[iii] Kent comments on the dwindling of Lear's retinue and the Fool explains it: "Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down hill" (2.4.65). We witness the decline of fortune (wheel of fortune), a parallel decline to that of his aging. It is *betrayal* here on the axis of *master/servant*, to which *faithful* Kent (and Fool) are exceptions. In a ballad rhyme the Fool expostulates:

> 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. (4.2.71-88)

More thematic development of *foolery* and *faithfulness* is displayed here in *ironic inversions:* the servant is a fool that does not run away from a tumbling wheel, but is a knave (faithless though honest/wise) for doing so. The reference to a storm is foreshadowing again; as the term implies, intimating a *hidden* future. Following this wise song, we get this exchange on the running gag of "just-who-is-the-fool-here?":

> **KENT** : Where learned you this, fool?
>
> **FOOL** : Not i' the stocks, fool. (4.2.89-90)

The running gag is another *inversion*, an *Irony of Fact*. It is a common joke but takes on meaning; in this case, Kent is a fool precisely because he is faithful. Lear is rebuffed by his daughter and complains it is "mere fetches" (*deceit*) or "revolt" (*betrayal*). I want to stop to wonder: are his daughters really so unreasonable; Lear's behavior is disruptive, rude, and costly to a household; and if truthfully told, the behavior of his knights is unmannerly and abusive. But there is no tenderness between parent and child, no trust upon which to advance honesty, no faith in which to rest trust. The children treat their father as imperiously as he treats them. Lear asserts himself as king, disregarding his own abdication: "The king would speak with Cornwall, the dear father would with his daughter speak! Commands – tends – service!" (2.4.93-4). The Fool's jokes at 2.4.115ff are directed to Lear: what is their purpose? For that matter, what is the role/purpose of the Fool in the drama? Here at least he seems an aspect of Lear's mind, a nagging, truth-telling consciousness, almost like guilt. The exchange between Lear and Regan reveal a distempered Lear: at intervals he loses his capacity to speak, is confused, rages, pleads, is wrathful. Regan plainly but unsympathetically reduces the matter to his age as an infirmity needing care. Or else she thinks his behavior is "tricks" (*deceit*). Suddenly Goneril arrives, and Lear must feel confronted by enemies. Regan tries to reason with him, but Lear overstates his resentment: "No, rather I abjure all roofs and choose / To wage against the enmity o'the air" (2.4.199-200), invoking the worst circumstance of *alienation*. Goneril flatly calls his bluff. Lear

now curses Goneril (and shortly Regan too) who shall join the dramatic axis of *betrayal & alienation* to which Cordelia was earlier fixed. Lear summons up vile terms for Goneril – "a disease that's in my flesh," "a plague sore" – terms that play upon the *corruption* of nature.[iv] The dispute that occupies Lear and his daughters – over the number of his retinue – progresses; the daughters ever reducing it, till they reduce it to none, and he would be beholden utterly to them with no command of his own. This seems to be the problem in Lear's mind, and it is suggested by Regan at 2.4.233-5 that the real issue is the competition of command if he insists upon any command at all: "How in one house / Should many people under two commands / Hold amity?" This *parent/child relationship* then is preoccupied with *egoism* on all sides. Regan asks, "Why need one?" and Lear is pushed beyond himself. At this moment he must choose resignation to his *aging*, surrender of his *egoism*, or *alienation*; he must weep or avenge or what else? "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" (2.4.277-9) And at this moment storm and tempest break out as Lear and his company go into its element and the night. It is a classic motif of ancient tragedy that the whole world sickens with the hero's disease: in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* a plague afflicts the populace, the cattle die and birth monsters, the harvest fails, because of the transgression of Oedipus. Now the world storms as Lear raves.

Act 3

3.1 Lear's *egoism* is at the pinnacle of its madness, invoking supreme nature with vain command, as reported: "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" (3.1.4-7). Kent (still in *disguise*) enlists a party to Lear to seek out Cordelia because of fears that there is treachery (*betrayal*) working between the husbands of Goneril and Regan.

3.2: Lear raves:

> 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! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
> Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
> Crack nature's moulds, an germens spill at once,
> That make ingrateful man! (3.2.1-9)

In his bunker Adolph Hitler disclosed on the eve of his suicide that if he had a device that could destroy all mankind, at that moment he would use it. Lear's *egoism* is so extreme at this moment he would destroy the world and end human existence forever. Lear is not yet self-aware: "I am a man more sinned against than sinning" (3.2.57-8). It is not for him that these storms call for the "pent-up guilts," he thinks. The Fool in riddling song shows Lear a fool in fact. Lear himself knows: "My wits begin to turn" (3.2.65).

3.3: Gloucester complains to his son Edmond of "*unnatural* dealings," referring to the enmity between Lear and his daughters but of other matters afoot. He engages himself then in *betrayal* out of fear (and faithfulness to Lear) and yet another letter is key device in the plot. Edmond determines to *betray* his father to Cornwall for reasons of his self-interest (*egoism*): "The younger rises when the old doth fall" (3.3.22) – evoking the theme of *opportunism*.

3.4: Lear is conflicted: "Thou'dst shun a bear, / But if thy flight lay toward the roaring sea, / Thou'dst meet the bear i'th'mouth. When the mind's free, / the body's delicate. This tempest in my mind / Doth from my sense take all feeling else, / Save what beats there: filial ingratitude./ Is not as this mouth should tear this hand / For lifting food to't?" (3.4.9-16). The Fool and Kent urge him to return to his daughters, but he cannot. He sees only a choice between impossible fates. The *betrayal* he feels is likened to an *unnatural* conflict of self, invoked by metaphor. But truly he is self-conflicted – he *betrays* his own self. This is the threshold to *self-knowledge* through this tormenting passage of self-*alienation*. An imperative matter of self conflicts with or is alienated from another that is proportionately imperative; in this case, the imperative of the *parent/child relationship* (even if just his need for his children in natural fact) conflicts with or is alienated by his compelling *egoism*. How is such alienation or self-conflict to be resolved? If it is an essential pain, how is the pain to be relieved? In madness self-conflict is never resolved and pain is unremitting. What shall be Lear's fate? Shall he be mad to the end of his life? One half of the divided self must yield to the other; the divisions must be unified or must struggle to death. We do see Lear transform; his egoism yields. Entering the hovel for shelter Lear thinks:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'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. (3.4.28-36)

For it is the heart of *altruism* to see others as we see ourselves, and so Lear has found his own self to be as these others find themselves – houseless, unfed, wretched. Lear encounters Edgar who is *disguised* as a madman, holding up the mirror of misery to Lear. The *irony of meaning* meets the *irony of fact*. The compassion of Lear is not yet fully realized by him; it is confused with his dementia – he thinks that "poor Tom' (Edgar) must be like he, a man whose daughters have *betrayed* him. Nevertheless, the mortification of his *egoism* continues; he removes his clothes to be like "poor Tom": "Is man no more than this?" (3.4.92). Several aspects of structure and theme are intermixed in this action: it is a common symptom of senile dementia (*process of aging*); it is *corruption* of mind; it would not be read as a return to a natural state, as it might by Romantics, but as a loss of essential humanity – the "unaccomodated man," "poor, bare, forked animal" – and hence an *alienation* from mankind. Tom o'Bedlam's (Edgar's) riddles are chock full of superstition and the *demonic*, for he is hounded by the "foul fiend." This *demonic* presence which is also thematic to *Macbeth* and *Tempest* represents a subtext to the polar themes of the drama; it participates in the *Irony of Meaning* (Things-Not-as-They-Should-Be) and so

might be seen as *unnatural* phenomena. But to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, to a plague-infested London and a world-gone-mad in the streets, this *hidden* reality of evil (*demonic*) was to be terribly feared, if not genuinely believed. I cannot tell where Shakespeare comes down on its reality, but to exploit the matter for his audience is good theater. Gloucester enters and does not recognize his son; his son does not acknowledge him. Lear is beyond reason now and takes Tom o'Bedlam for a "philosopher." Gloucester says that Lear's daughters "seek his death." Has it gone this far or is this hyperbole?

3.5: Edmund completes his treachery against his father; Cornwall is persuaded that Gloucester is a traitor. How often letters are employed as "evidence," as if they cannot be forged or misunderstood. The scheme of treason was topical to Elizabethan England, and letters often played decisive roles in their discovery and in the conviction of traitors; Mary, Queen of Scots, was caught up by such an importune letter. A letter is a parcel of thought, *hidden* intentionally from some for the application of others. It is an instrument of *betrayal* and *deceit* in this play (as it was for Mary, Queen of Scots).

3.6: Lear is clearly out of his mind. Edgar, who is only pretending, states aside in his compassion: "My tears begin to take his part so much, / they mar my counterfeiting" (3.6.18-19). Lear is soothed to sleep and his Fool exits the play with this exchange:

> **LEAR**: We'll got to supper I'the morning.
>
> **FOOL**: And I'll go to bed at noon. (3.6.40-1)

The Fool's statement is made to himself and signifies at least the absurdity of the circumstance. Others have inferred additional meaning and some scholars doubt its authenticity (Halio, 284). The Fool's departure recalls the earlier witticism that it is no knave that runs from a great wheel careening down a hill (2.4.65). If Lear is to be murdered as Gloucester fears, a faithful follower may expect the same fate.

3.7: The scene begins with Regan and Goneril along with Cornwall and Edmund anticipating Gloucesters capture, for the French army has landed and treason is afoot. The cruel anger of Regan and Goneril underscores their *corruption*. Regan even plucks his beard once he is bound. Gloucester does not admit to treason, only to put Lear out of harm from Regan and Goneril, and alluding to ancient furies, that are the particular demons of guilt to parricides, declares:

> If wolves has at thy gate howled that stern time,
>
> Thou should'st have said, 'Good porter, turn the key:
>
> All cruels else subscribe. But I shall see
>
> The winged vengeance overtake such children (3.7.76-9)

In a singular scene of cruelty Cornwall puts out one of his eyes. Regan goads him to do the other, and it is done. Gloucester piteously cries out for his son Edmund and Regan reveals that it was he that betrayed him, and so Gloucester now understands that "Edgar was abused." So this is doubled tragedy: the parallel structure of Gloucester-Edmund-Edgar (compared to the main

matter of Lear-Regan/Goneril-Cornelia) culminates with the faithful honest man fallen and scorned. Thus far treachery wins out.

Act 4

4.1: Edgar opens the scene with ironical or profound acceptance to fortune, depending upon interpretation:

> The worst returns to laughter. Welcome, then,
> Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace!
> The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst
> Owes nothing to thy blasts. (4.1.6-9)

That it may be ironical acceptance is that it is ignorant of the worst – "The worst is not so long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (4.1.27-8). His father appears, bloody-eyed, blinded, and *alienated* from the kingdom and his own house. The set-up for the scene is made poignant by Gloucester's speech:

> 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! (4.118-23)

His affection for Edgar redeems the betrayed parent/child relationship; even his suffering is smaller by their reunion. Again in parallel to Lear, Gloucester will seek his own death in his abject misery and *alienation*. And in parallel, he remarks upon the turn of fortune, the equality of men thereby, and the need for *altruism*:

> Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens' plagues
> Have humbled to all strokes: that I am wretched
> Makes thee the happier: heavens, deal so still!
> Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
> That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
> Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly;
> So distribution should undo excess,
> And each man have enough (4.1.59-66)

4.2: Goneril proves *faithless* wife as well as faithless child; her husband Albany cannot abide the schemes of treachery that are about. Where *falsity*, *opportunism*, and *egoism* rule, there is a world *inverted*. As Oswald says, perplexed that Albany is not like-minded: "… told me I had turned the wrong-side out, / What most he should dislike seems pleasant to him; / What like, offensive" (4.2.9-11), thus spoken in an Irony of Meaning – what is, is not as it should be, but not what it should be in a perverse (*corrupt*) sense of the wrong thing ought to be the right thing. In such a world, a faithful honest man is coward and a *fool*, as Goneril calls her husband (4.2.29). The thrust of argument between the two pits one to the side of moral altruism and the other to

amoral egoism. Goneril says to Albany: “Thou bear’st a cheek for blows” (4.2.34). Albany replies: “See thyself, devil.” He sees her as *corruption*:

> You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
> Blows in your face. I fear your disposition:
> That nature, which contemns its origin,
> Cannot be border'd certain in itself;
> She that herself will sliver and disbranch
> From her material sap, perforce must wither
> And come to deadly use. (See *Riverside* edition: 4.2.30-36)

And to this naturalistic corruption, he adds moral corruption, her sick *egoism*:

> Wisdom and goodness to the vild seem vild:
> Filths savor but themselves. What have you done?
> 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! have you madded.
> Could my good brother suffer you to do it?
> A man, a prince, by him so benefited!
> If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
> Send quickly down to tame these vild offences,
> It will come,
> Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
> Like monsters of the deep. (See *Riverside* edition: 4.2.38-59)

The passages are consonant with the themes of the play, but are omitted by the Cambridge edition that I have used for authority. I did not know going into the text how much controversy surrounds it. These passages are unique to the first quarto and in the editor’s opinion were emended by Shakespeare in the folio edition. The argument over the two chief versions of the play – the quarto vs. folio – is meaningful; more than 300 lines are omitted from the folio and more than 100 lines added, including substantial change to Lear’s last speech. I will introduce quarto text where it aids thematic development; otherwise the two versions are respectively authentic versions that represent variance in production – lines cut to promote speed in drama, or lines added for new emphasis. The *Riverside* edition opted to merge text judiciously, keeping all the additions of the Folio and restoring most of the quarto. See note of discussion from the Royal Shakespeare Company concerning the problems of selecting a text.[v] A messenger interrupts to announce that Cornwall is dead, having succumbed to wounds in the fray before he finished blinding Gloucester.

4.3: Cordelia is landed and seeking Lear. The king is reported “mad as the vexed sea, singing aloud, / Crowned with rank fumitory and furrow weeds” (4.3.2-3). It is a *corrupt* crown for a king, made of weeds that useless or poisonous. She would seek to restore him and is advised to cause him to sleep. Cordelia acknowledges the invasion of Britain by her armed force but states: “No blown ambition doth our arms incite, / But love, dear love and our aged father’s right” (4.3.27-8). The thematic poles are now joined in open warfare.

4.4: Oswald and Regan exchange *deceits*: Oswald, *betraying* his own mistress (Goneril), and Regan, *betraying* her sister, to take Edmund as her husband. Both sisters, it seems, had sought some dalliance with Edmund recently.

4.5: Edgar is no longer disguised, although dressed as a peasant, but he is not yet recognized. Edgar *deceives* his father so that he will relent his suicide: "What I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (4.5.33-4). With philosophic *irony* – alluding perhaps to that profound acceptance of fortune previously confided – Edgar lets his father believe he fell and survived: "Thy life's a miracle" (4.5.55). Lear appears and does not recognize either man before him. He raves on *betrayal* and then on lust and perfidious women that he likens to *unnatural* conjunction of human and animal, divine and devilish, alluding again to the *demonic* elements at large in the world. Gloucester is repulsed to see his king thus: "O ruined piece of nature" (4.5.130). For madness is *corruption* of self-nature. Lear is now, absent his Fool, his own Fool. He riddles and jests.

KING LEAR	O, ho, are you there with me? No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light; yet you see how this world goes.
GLOUCESTER	I see it feelingly.
KING 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.
KING LEAR	And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand! Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back; Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener. Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear; Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. 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 the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes; And like a scurvy politician, seem To see the things thou dost not. (4.5.140-165)

The exchange is replete with *Irony of Fact/Meaning*: wise sight without eyes; blind sight with them; worldly ways turning the world upside down, making justice criminal and crime just. This is a presentiment of self-knowledge. Edgar calls it, "Reason in madness" (4.5.267). Will he yet

see in himself that "[dog] obeyed in office" and so recognize the *egoism* that has brought him to his fall? Edgar, by comparison, has come to such a realization:

> **GLOUCESTER** Now, good sir, what are you?
> **EDGAR** A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows;
> Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,
> Am pregnant to good pity. (4.5.211-14).

Lear runs away from the rescue by his daughter Cordelia, thinking it capture by her sisters. Then Oswald appears, intent on murdering Gloucester for the bounty on his life. Edgar resumes *disguise* to deceive him, this time as "peasant" or "slave," adopting the colloquial in his speech. They fight and Oswald is slain, giving up the letter intended for Edmond.

4.6: Lear is found sheltered by Cordelia and Kent beside her. He sleeps and they have changed his clothes to suitable attire for a king. The waking Lear gently rises to clear thought and recognition of reality. He finally sees his daughter Cordelia (4.6.66-7). Lear is meek: "You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (4.6.81-2). It is the first honest admission in *self-knowledge*, with humility indifferent to his ego. Cordelia and Lear are reconciled and their *alienation* ended. But much remains unresolved.

Act 5

5.1 & 5.2: In these plot-moving scenes, several intrigues collide. Edgar gives the letter to Albany. Goneril thinks to kill her sister. Edmund worries which sister to choose.

5.3: Edmund captures Lear and Cordelia. Lear is philosophic:

> Come, let's away to prison:
> We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
> <u>When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,</u>
> <u>And ask of thee forgiveness</u>: 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 (5.3.8-170)

Lear is resigned to fortune and to his self as never before. But this is a grim situation, captive to such evil as they are. Albany proposes to arrest Edmund even as Regan announces to make him her husband. By convention there shall be trial by combat; Edgar comes in answer to the call to combat his brother. Edgar slays Edmund: "The wheel is come full circle" (5.3.164). Vengeance moves the play to this satisfying resolution. Order is restored. Natural fealty triumphs, but not without the irony of brother killing brother, which fact in the Greek conception of nemesis should trigger another unfolding. In this context then, the tragic reunion of Gloucester and Edgar is now described by Edgar; their mutual *alienation* has been ended, but the imminent mortal combat of his two sons is unbearable to poor old Gloucester and he dies "'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief." The momentum of nemesis and treachery overwhelms us now. A

messenger announces the murder of Regan by Goneril and Goneril's suicide. Edmund admits his intention (with Goneril's) to murder Cordelia and Lear; to prevent it Edmund repents, but it is too late. Lear comes carrying Cordelia, dead, within his arms:

> 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! (5.3.231-3)

No play has greater horror in grief. Lear struggles against her death in desperate disbelief:

> And my poor fool is hang'd! 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! (5.3.279-84)

Lear's death at this moment comes shockingly, though fittingly. But it is a death that solicits despair: what good has been done in all of this? What truth or purpose has been served? As exchanged between Kent and Edgar earlier, we also question: "Is this the promised end? Or image of its horror?" (5.3.237-8). The play ends with questions not answered, and Edgar exhorts all to "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."

Summing Up: the Necessity for a Conjunctive Interpretation

In the spirit of speaking what I feel, I offer two interpretations of *King Lear* which while apparently contradictory are simultaneously authentic, and I own both of them.

The first is dismal. I can understand why audiences wanted Cordelia rescued and Lear to live. The play concluded with justice done, but it ended with the most villainous purposes accomplished, not thwarted as we had hoped. We are cheated of our victory. All was for nothing. Lear's transformation was fruitless and vain. What shall be won by suffering if there is no triumph in recovery? What worthwhile wisdom shall discovery bring if it cannot rescue us? The play possesses the weight of doom about it: the egoism that drove Lear, that same which impelled the villains in the play is a destructive malignant compulsive force like a plague that must run its hopeless course; no redemption purges it. Egoism is the evil that is human, insuppressibly human, and so we are doomed as we are human. The state of man, like the state of beasts, is helpless and craven. Lear comes out howling like the dogs to which he is repeatedly compared in the play, and wonders why base animals like dogs and rats might live and his daughter die. Why? Because, like animals, we must die. Remember then the climactic scene of Lear's *alienation* from society, crying out: "Is man no more than this?" (3.4.92); now we witness Lear in *alienation* from the universe; in the extremity of ego we are reduced to nothingness. This is one "feeling" to the play.

Alternatively we are uplifted by Lear's transformation, the gentle love of Cordelia, the triumph and wisdom of Edgar, the goodness of Albany, the faithfulness of Kent and the sacrifice of Gloucester. We see altruism transcend egoism, and egoism kill itself, even as it kills others.

We see Lear's death as a justice of an inescapable causation, of a huge motion that once started by Lear in his own rash willfulness, his will alone could not stop, could not hold back from overwhelming even himself; hence it is a naturalistic, though not moral, justice that he dies, killed by that cause which he had caused. *King Lear* is most like a Greek tragedy than any other of Shakespeare's play, where the fate of man is fixed by transcendent force of consequence, as in *Oedipus Rex* or the *Oresteia*; transgression will meet due punishment, whether or not it is an unintentional or a justified wrong; the unnatural must be crushed by nature; excess is undone by its excess. Our sympathy for Lear makes the outcome tragedy, as Aristotle observed of Oedipus. This catharsis that we feel is our measure of vicarious suffering, felt in our compassion for Lear. That compassion is the "moral" meaning of the play, and so implicitly redemptive in my feeling, if not declared in text.

The play stops at the dead center of paradox; it is resolution without conclusion. I am pitched to the peak of my emotions at the end and weep with Lear. Both interpretations are true to me. My despair results my compassion. My compassion requires my despair.

Appendix: Table - Analysis of King Lear

Dramatic Structures (character, relationships, plot)	**Dramatic & Rhetorical Devices** (props, actions, schemes, tropes)	**Thematic Elements** (ideas, related tropes)
Betrayal Alienation [Parent/Child] [Master/Servant] Lear's Development: Process of aging Process of self-knowledge	Deception Hiding Counterfeit Disguise (See Irony of Fact) Folly & Foolery (See Irony of Meaning)	Polar Themes (acting in paired opposites) 1. Honesty↔Falsity (see Irony of Fact) 2. Faithfulness↔Opportunism 3. Natural↔Corrupt* (see Irony of Meaning) 4. Altruism↔Egoism [Moral/↔Amoral] [Justice↔Indifference] 5. Human↔Bestial [Human↔Demonic]

Overarching Tension/Irony : Operating Across Structures, Devices & Elements

Irony of Fact: What Seems *versus* What is
Irony of Meaning: What is *versus* What Should Be

Note: frequent use of <u>inversion</u> makes an Irony of Fact/Meaning out of its object
(e.g., parents acting as children, vice versa); It is a method applied across all structures & elements

* The Natural/Corrupt polarity may be further associated with the whole host of Elizabethan cosmic dualisms – Natural/Unnatural, Order/Chaos, etc. – that are described by E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis.

These various aspects of the drama interact, reiterating and stimulating one another to make each more meaningful as each stands alone, while making them collectively a larger whole. For example, Kent's use of disguise operates on the polar theme of *Honesty/Falsity* and the *overarching tension/irony* of the play, while being used specifically to address the problem of *betrayal & alienation* in the play. In another example, Lear dressed-up as Tom o'Bedlam, in the depth of his *betrayal & alienation*, takes him *ironically* closer to casting off his self-*deception* and advancing his *self-knowledge*.

Shakespeare often uses these same devices and themes and the same overarching ironies of seeming in his plays. What distinguishes their presence in *King Lear* is that 1) they are particularly and effectively resonant with the problem of the play (*betrayal & alienation*), and the character development of Lear (*aging*, *self-knowledge*); and 2) the speech of the characters, the express usage of language is evidently conscious of that resonance. So *King Lear* contains a

philosophical, psychological, poetic and dramatic **architecture** that is especially harmonious among its parts; the whole is symphonic in its complexity and completeness.

Use of Polarity in Thematic Elements

Shakespeare so often employs irony in his dramatic presentation and oxymoron in his poetic expression that the matter of conflicting or opposing ideas seems commonplace. This does not in itself make for polarity in themes. *Romeo and Juliet*, although thematically fixed upon sexuality and violence, does not portray them as polar opposites, but rather as equivalents in passion. *Hamlet* which is fixed upon the problem of action, opposes it to the problem of thought, but the two are not set up as a polar theme in which there is dramatic struggle between them, so much as contrast and counterpoint, sustaining the drama: there was never really any doubt about whether to do or not to do; the readiness is all. What makes the usage of polarity in *King Lear* significant is that each extreme is validated; the pairing of the opposites makes or informs each opposite by conjunction. Altruism or Morality do not stand as themes independent to and apart from Egoism or Amorality. *King Lear* gives each equal presence and veracity upon the stage and for the mind. So much are these polar themes given realization that in the end there is ambiguity as to the resolution of their conflict; neither triumphs over the other. In a moralistic conception, in a conception of tragedy accustomed to a Christian mythic sense, such equality in the polarity of "good" and "evil" suggests an effective vindication of "evil." Thus, the play is read to be a nihilistic despair, or a literary failure. In my own view, the express use of polar themes, when employed tragically – where implicitly the sorrowful outcome is needful, if not morally just – means that their intentional equality defines a transcendent paradox and describes equity by cosmic balance. In a comedy, such equality in polar themes celebrates absurdity, and the overt paradox is a loud cruel sardonic kind of divine joke.

Part II - Review of Criticism

Over the past 400 years criticism of *King Lear* has divided upon the problem of its beginning and the problem of its ending. The *love test* at its beginning creates the premise of the play – the alienation of Cordelia, and Lear's disingenuous abdication. Yet critics and popular sentiments at first rejected it as "improbable," or took it as decorous pretext, and have only gradually understood it to contain the psychological and thematic predicate essential to all action, making the ending itself comprehensible. The ending of the play was for over 200 years so detested that an adaptation which completely reversed its tragic elements was popularly entertained and justified. Even after the Shakespearean original text and ending was reinstated, the ending made controversy of the play. Critics (and audience), affected viscerally over the apparent lack of moral vindication and the wanton suffering in the ending, divide radically in their interpretations: some still condemn the ending (and the play); some despair it for nihilism; while a few glean some piece of redemption, or at least serene dignity, out of the shredded lives. In this brief review I wish to identify the milestones of this critical history of *Lear* regarding the problematic beginning and ending, and suggest an approach to mediate that visceral response and the division of interpretations that we find.

Starting with the earliest critical response, the play's reception was troubled by disappointments of expectation and sensibility. The so-called "love test" obeys the proper telling of the original folk tale upon which it is based, but seems out of joint here. Why does Lear react so wildly except only to obey the rule of the fable? In itself it makes no sense; it is not only disproportionate, it is absurd. Nor does Cordelia's abstemious reluctance to express her affection make any sense; such expressions of fealty should seem a trifling convention of speech in the context of courtly manners. And of course the end of the play is completely contrary to the history: Lear and Cordelia were not killed, but triumphantly restored by all other accounts. Hence Samuel Johnson in 1765 found that the whole predicate of the play – Lear's alienation of Cordelia – to rest on "improbability," though he acknowledged that the portrayal was in "the histories of that time vulgarly received as true." But more importantly, for Johnson, the ending is flawed: "Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is more strange, to the faith of the chronicles" (Johnson 2). Johnson found the ending so "shocking" that after once witnessing the play he vowed to never read it again and would not have done so except that he ventured to publish his famous compendium of Shakespeare's works. He praised Nahum Tate's dramatic adaptation of Lear to substitute a happy ending, which indeed became the popular theatrical version of Shakespeare's play.

Johnson's view expressed well the popular sentiment about the play. In this "normal" view, the premise of the play – the *love test* – is seen to be a barbaric custom and the Shakespearean ending – Cordelia's and Lear's "shocking" deaths – is to be rejected, or if not rejected, it must cause the play to fail as a tragedy, because such an ending lacks requisite moral justice and the expected redemption of the protagonist. However, the "natural ideas of justice" are not an imperative of classical tragedy as expounded by Aristotle; rather, in the common usage of Johnson's time, it is the Natural Order of God to which this play does violence; we are

declaring a *Christian* aesthetic for tragedy that it is unjust for “the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause.” Moreover, to the extent that Lear himself is seen to have been transformed by a process of mortification, to be “penitent” at the end, and therefore seeking “redemption,” we have the apparent structure here of a Christian Morality play and are drawn to expect that *Lear* shall end happily in the manner of such plays (Welsford 107). The emotional set-up, the presumptive ideological set-up is that Lear will be freed and joyous reconciliation with his daughter will be fulfilled along with the larger triumph of good over evil, even in the midst of grief. But that conclusion is denied by Shakespeare intentionally, we must say, for he has changed the ending radically and to some purpose.

In the early nineteenth century *King Lear* began to be read again and haltingly was restored to its original text in performances at theatre (Halio 38). When Charles Lamb writes of the play in 1812 he had not yet witnessed dramatic presentation of the authentic text with its true ending, but even so introduced criticism that the play was “impossible to be represented on the stage” if only from a technical view of stagecraft; however, he also recognized that Tate’s “tampering with it shew” and he specifically disclaims the “happy ending” as a betrayal of the “living martyrdom that Lear had gone through” (Lamb 6). Coleridge had read the original text of the play and commented upon it in 1817. He is the first to address the premise of the play in terms of psychology, explicating the *love test* and Lear’s response to Cordelia as “…the anxiety, the distrust, the jealousy, which more or less accompany all selfish affections, and are amongst the surest contra-distinctions of mere fondness from true love, and which originate Lear's eager wish to enjoy his daughter's violent professions, whilst the inveterate habits of sovereignty convert the wish into claim and positive right, and an incompliance with it into crime and treason” (Coleridge). Coleridge focuses Lear’s character upon his selfishness and sees the duplicity of Lear’s abdication:

> There is something of disgust at the ruthless hypocrisy of her sisters, and some little faulty admixture of pride and sullenness in Cordelia's 'Nothing;' and her tone is well contrived, indeed, to lessen the glaring absurdity of Lear's conduct, but answers the yet more important purpose of forcing away the attention from the nursery-tale, the moment it has served its end, that of supplying the canvass for the picture. This is also materially furthered by Kent's opposition, which displays Lear's moral incapability of resigning the sovereign power in the very act of disposing of it. (Coleridge)

William Hazlitt in 1817 wrote in unwitting agreement to Coleridge, how the significance, the motive force of the play is to be derived from correct interpretation of the *love test* in terms of the psychology of Lear:

> The character of Lear itself is very finely conceived for the purpose. It is the only ground on which such a story could be built with the greatest truth and effect. It is his rash haste, his violent impetuosity, his blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes, that aggravates his impatience of them, that enforces our pity for him. The part which Cordelia bears in the scene is extremely beautiful: the

> story is almost told in the first words she utters. We see at once the precipice on which the poor old king stands from his own extravagant and credulous importunity, the indiscreet simplicity of her love (which, to be sure, has a little of her father's obstinacy in it) and the hollowness of her sisters' pretensions. (Hazlitt 14)

But of the disquieting ending of the play neither Hazlitt nor Coleridge offers any but casual comment. Hazlitt approves of Lamb's diffident vindication of the Shakespearean ending and calls the scene "sad, painfully sad." Coleridge also could only acknowledge "the last sad, yet sweet, consolation of the aged sufferer's death." These are perhaps sensitive readings of Lear's death as a release from the world, rather than reconciliation to it, but these summary words fly over the moral and tragic ambiguity of the ending too swiftly.

It seems first a German critic, before any in England, who reclaimed the integrity of Shakespeare's ending of the play and attempted to interpret it without recoiling before its apparent moral horror. August Wilhelm von Schlegel in 1811 wrote that:

> Of Cordelia's heavenly beauty of soul, painted in so few words, I will not venture to speak; she can only be named in the same breath with Antigone. Her death has been thought too cruel; and in England the piece is in acting so far altered that she remains victorious and happy. I must own, I cannot conceive what ideas of art and dramatic connection those persons have who suppose that we can at pleasure tack a double conclusion to a tragedy; a melancholy one for hard- hearted spectators, and a happy one for souls of a softer mould. After surviving so many sufferings, Lear can only die; and what more truly tragic end for him than to die from grief for the death of Cordelia? And if he is also to be saved and to pass the remainder of his days in happiness, the whole loses its signification. According to Shakespeare's plan the guilty, it is true, are all punished, for wickedness destroys itself; but the virtues that would bring help and succor are everywhere too late, or overmatched by the cunning activity of malice. The persons of this drama have only such a faint belief in Providence as heathens may be supposed to have; and the poet here wishes to show us that this belief requires a wider range than the dark pilgrimage on earth to be established in full extent. (Schlegel)

By the end of the nineteenth century the Shakespearean text and Lear's ending had been restored to theatrical performances in England and America, and critical interpretation of the play now squarely addressed the beginning and ending of the play, recognizing and not retreating from their problematic ambiguities. In 1885 the criticism of Richard Moulton enjoined the psychological theme of the love test begun by Coleridge, calling Lear's behavior "imperiousness" and positing it as a problem of accustomed rule: "Lear is dominated by the passion of imperiousness, an imperiousness born of his absolute power as king and father; he has never learned from discipline restraint of his passion, but has been accustomed to fling himself upon obstacles and see them give way before him. Now the tragical situation is prepared for him meeting with obstacles which will not give way" (Moulton 25). To the ending, Moulton then argues an equity of consequence to Lear's hubris, one that is a "nemesis upon Lear himself – the

double retribution of receiving nothing but evil from those he has unrighteously rewarded, and nothing but good from her whom, he bitterly feels, he has cruelly wronged" (Moulton 23). While presenting a new argument for the pre-Christian, Greek-like aspects of this tragedy – note especially his application of the concept of *nemesis* –, this novel criticism did not satisfy the critical anxiety for the ending, especially against the consideration of themes more nearly Christian and moral than not – the characters of Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester, Albany, and Kent, and the consummate motives of their fealty, honesty, love and compassion.

So, against this seemingly amoral view of the play, A.C. Bradley in his essays in 1904 endorses a "feeling which haunts us in *King Lear*, as though we are witnessing something universal – a conflict not so much of particular persons as of the powers of good and evil in the world" (Bradley 32). Bradley reverts to Lamb's criticism that the play cannot be enacted and is essentially flawed, and he remains "in bewilderment or dismay, and even perhaps in tones of protest" over the death of Cordelia (Bradley 47). He strains to see in Lear, leaning over the lifeless body of Cordelia, hoping for her breath, a vindication of goodness by the poignancy of hope itself, and offers resignation that, yes, tragedy must sometimes show evil triumphant, but:

> "Let us renounce the world, hate it, and lose it gladly. The only real thing in it is the soul with its courage, patience, devotion. And nothing outward can touch it" (Bradley 50).

This is of course the reassertion of the Christian conception of a just tragedy, boldly stated, but even so he fretfully concludes upon the "pessimism" of Shakespeare and fears that:

> ...this strain of thought, to which the world appears as a kingdom of evil and therefore worthless, is in the tragedy, and may well be the record of many hours of exasperated feeling and troubled brooding. Pursued further and allowed to dominate, it would destroy the tragedy; for it is necessary to tragedy that we should feel that suffering and death do matter greatly, and that happiness and life are not to be renounced as worthless. (Bradley 51).

In the twentieth century, as fitting to the horror of its two World Wars – the first of which destroyed Europe's empires forever and butchered the promising youth of most of Europe in gangs of futile attacks and counter-attacks upon an aptly named no-man's land; and the second of which burned and obliterated by bombardment and massacre what illusions that remained and gave us Man as Evil in such magnitude and audacity as we had never seen before and hope never to see again – the criticism of *King Lear* now embraced its depthless sorrow and bloody hysteria, found companionship in its despair, and was forced by eyes wide-open to see new conceptions of tragedy itself. For G. Wilson Knight in 1930 the play's problems were resolved by witness to the "grotesque" universe of the play; *Lear* is not rationally tragic; it is a horror of absurdity and folly which he calls "a new sublime incongruity." Knight reframes our conception to tragedy: "The peculiar dualism at the root of this play which wrenches and splits the mind by a sight of incongruities displays in turn realities absurd, hideous, pitiful. This incongruity is Lear's madness; it is also the demonic laughter that echoes in the *Lear* universe" (Knight 64). In this context the fascination with the role of the Fool in Lear becomes important, and becomes topical

to many critics (see Welsford). For the Fool is symbolic of these paradoxes, reemphasized in the 20th century corpus, and speaks truth when the world is false and mad, when irony and oxymoron are trusted more than moral pronouncement.

Shortly after the end of World War II, Robert Heilman initiated the candid reconsideration of the quality of justice in *Lear's* tragedy, the necessity for moral conclusion. "To us, in our world," he wrote in 1948, "*Lear* should not be too difficult or seem too bitter…. For we have seen many Gonerils – and not always at melodramatic distances – and become aware of the Goneril element in humanity…. We should have no trouble in seeing that Shakespeare has caught a world in *extremis*, when the quality of man's reasoning about reality is the main problem; in seeing that he has caught metaphysical evil in a particular historical formulation" (Heilman 138). Shakespeare, he concludes, was morally neutral in this expression of the world, neither pessimist or sentimentalist: "He spares no character the suffering that, when evil is loose in the world, must come both to tragic protagonist and to the bystander who, because no one is isolated, is enmeshed in the general human situation." Where Heilman then declares fatalistic realism; then Muir would have us reject our Christian presumptions for Shakespeare and accept the play as "pagan" (Muir 121); but then Harry Levin sees a "grim sort of poetic justice" in Lear's death (Levin 162); and then L. C. Knights still sees a "purgatorial experience culminating in reconciliation" with a "positive affirmation in spite of everything" (Knights 185); and J. Stampfer offers a kind of psychoanalytic catharsis to *Lear* that "each audience, by the ritual of the drama, shares and releases the most private and constricting fear to which mankind is subject, that penance is impossible" (Stampfer 217): all have begun where Samuel Johnson had refused to begin, that the ending is necessary and meaningful, and rather than reject the play in the name of Christian aesthetics of tragedy, our aesthetics of tragedy must be modulated. The vision of *King Lear* is consonant to our world, even to those who insist upon a Christian resolution of redemption, penance and moral justice. We must despair the world as we have witnessed it to be; what then we do is die or survive, as we must and we are able.

Nicholas Brooke coldly summed up the 20th century perspective in his essay on "The Ending of King Lear" in 1964: "I cannot, any more than anyone else, just stare at the end of the play and nod assent; to do that, and no more, would to be imagine one's own death." (Brooke 220) The play demands our visceral response, that gasping for our own life. Brooke shall offer us his personal "notion" for the meaning of the play which some may call gloomy, others paradoxical, pleasing some and dissatisfying others. Just so, Bradley shall have given his response, authentic to his Christian faith. Mack, Gardner, Bloom, and all of the above shall offer theirs by their own mind's mirror. What response each of us has, as Brooke would teach us, is that which is dark and dearest within ourselves, representing that elicited affirmation or denial or hope or fear or pity or loathing or mixed complexity of these, declared as we are confirmed to believe them true. The meaning of the play lies expressly in the elicitation of the response. It is the express method of the play, by its design and architecture, to conclude so. The purpose, as Edgar has admonished us, is to make us: "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."

My own response you may read on pages 17ff. I had thought, too arrogantly, that my own response was so just, complete and profound that it could offer some transcendent resolution to the problematic ending of the play. I now believe that this is not possible and is indeed implicitly wrong, because the resolution must by its nature reside in personal response.

King Lear is that rarest of artistic and intellectual masterpieces, evoking presentiment of questions, not answers, bringing us to that state of consciousness in which we must ask ourselves what we believe is the truth that we must live by.

While from the first, *King Lear* was credited a masterpiece, its ending seemed so antithetical to Christian conventions and the expectations of the audience that it was dismissed from view for the better part of 250 years. The beginning of the play – the *love test* that is the premise of the play as a whole – seemed an enigma at first. With Coleridge its significance is revealed in the psychology of Lear, his “selfishness” as he calls it or “egoism” as I have framed it. It is a psychology that preoccupies the principal villains in the play and is counterpoised by opposing inclinations in others to effect dramatic (and thematic) structure of character and plot, although the “good” Cordelia may be said to share the familial “pride” as well. After Coleridge the psychology of Lear is recognized for the central motivation of the play. The topical then turns upon its manifestation in madness, development, parallelism and so on. The problem of the ending, however, was not so easily solved and is perhaps as insoluble as it is ambiguous and ambivalent. From the beginning the principal problem was its apparent shock to Christian aesthetics of tragedy. A play that in all other ways seems to be a cosmic struggle of good against evil, engaging indeed the sky and wind in elemental conflict, must obey the moral justice of the Natural Order to the Christian world, that of the creator God. And a play in which Christian mythic cycle of self-progress has been invoked – the narrative linearity of error, suffering, remorse, revelation, and repentance – must climax in mercy. But there seems neither mercy nor justice at the end. Not until the 20th century was this presumption of aesthetics effectively challenged, and that because, in my opinion, Western culture was radically shaken and had shifted beneath our feet: the general subversion of modernism, from even before the time of Coleridge when *King Lear* began to emerge from disapprobation, was indomitable; but the horrific quakes of two successive World Wars, so undermined the cultural foundations of Europe that when building anew the old order was not and could not be restored. An altered view of the world pervaded a new generation of criticism. While the Christian aesthetic persists, the absence of moral justice in *Lear* is given a genuine sympathy and is offered for authentic truth as a changed vision of “natural order” within a changed conception of what is “natural”. In this perspective, contemporary scholarship shall accept the ambivalence and ambiguity of *Lear's* ending with a refined critical taste for paradox and complexity made normal by the 20th century experience. To insist with prejudice upon one response to the ending of *Lear* is to deny the effect and tension, if not the arguable truth, of a differing response. Thus the scope of scholarship now widens to an explication of the art of the play, beyond its meaning: how does *Lear* pose and triumph the tragic paradox? How are the varieties of meaning evoked and brought to bear against each other? How do they not annihilate each other, like matter and anti-matter in collision, so that the whole does not collapse into solipsistic absurdity, but remains tragic?

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Notes

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[i] For the psychology of a father surrendering his daughter to a husband, consider the implicit symbolism of the contemporary wedding ceremony, or the movie “Father of the Bride” with Spencer Tracy and Elizabeth Taylor. In a recent psychological study (Science Daily, 27 Sep. 1999) it was shown that daughters who were emotionally close to their fathers matured sexually at later ages than those whose relationship to their fathers was distant and cold; whatever else this may mean, it suggests the emotional bond between father and daughter is profound, as you might think by common sense.

[ii] A long excerpt from: Gilman, Sander L., Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter. Hysteria Beyond Freud. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pages 127-9. <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft0p3003d3/>

“There is no doubt that Shakespeare was familiar with Samuel Harsnett's antipapist pamphlet *A Declaration of Egregious Popishe [sic] Impostures . . . Under the Pretence of Casting Out Devils* (1603). Harsnett, a churchman with a checkered past by the time he wrote the *Declaration* early in life, had served on various commissions to inspect those who claimed to exorcise devils. He had heard vivid accounts of possessed women. From the time he was a student at Cambridge, he pondered the boundaries between fraudulent witchcraft and natural possession, especially in cases in which female hysteria was claimed to have manifested itself as a natural disease. His *Declaration* spoke loudly to his generation, especially to Shakespeare, who took the names of the spirits mentioned by Edgar in *King Lear* from it. Harsnett also recounts in the *Declaration* the case of a man afflicted with *hysterica passio*, a term he uses interchangeably with "the Mother," and he writes as if the case were an anomaly. But other Elizabethans had also commented on "the Mother," under different circumstances and in contexts other than political or medical ones, and had written about it both as natural illness and natural metaphor for female sexuality. A decade or so later the poet Drayton invoked "the Mother" as a simile for "a raging river" in his well-known *Poly-Olbion* (1612-1622)—no doubt a poetic trope for unbridled female sexuality—as well as considered it a genuine female malady:

> As when we haplie see a sicklie woman fall
> Into a fit of that which wee the Mother call,
> When from the grieved wombe shee feeles the paine arise,
> Breakes into grievous sighes, with intermixed cries,
> Bereaved of her sense; and strugling still with those
> That gainst her rising paine their utmost strength oppose,
> Starts, tosses, tumbles, strikes, turnes, touses, spurnes and spraules,
> Casting with furious lims her holders to the walles;
> But that the horrid pangs torments the grieved so,
> One well might muse from whence this suddaine strength should grow.[[128]]

“Thus by the turn of the seventeenth century the confluence of several streams of thought vis-à-vis hysteria had, so to speak, coagulated. M. E. Addyman considers Shakespeare's assimilation of the doctrine of hysteria to be sufficiently important to have warranted a book-length study.[129] "It seemed to me," she claims, "that, while *hysterica passio* formed a potent symbol in *Lear* and offered a detailed vocabulary for certain effects, its role was limited; but of Leontes [in *The Winter's Tale*] one could say that he was a hysteric, and the elucidating of that comment would reveal much of interest about the nature of the play."[130] For Addyman, hysteria and its natural progression to insanity constitute the essence of Lear's disintegration. After Lear's mode of being and basis for authority have been irrevocably shaken, he inquires: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (I. iv. 250). When he no longer knows himself, he exclaims to the fool, "O fool, I shall go mad!" (II. iv. 289). After expressing his anguish over his rejection by his daughters and the sight of his servant in Regan's stocks, Lear cries out:

> O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!
> Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow,
> Thy element's below!
> (II. iv. 55-57)

“Addyman's observation, which has eluded many Shakespeareans, is that Lear conceptualizes the horror of the disenfranchisement he is soon to experience in the very terms of—indeed in the very language of the newly medicalized condition. "Some new world," she writes, "some terrible knowledge which will not accommodate existing patterns of speech and habit, is about to be brought into being, and it is experienced in its first inner stirrings as 'this mother,' as '*hysterica passio* .'"[131] Why, we wonder, was hysteria, among all the various medical conditions then, perceived as capable of such drastic transformations, especially if figures as diverse as Shakespeare and Burton responded so forcefully to it?

“The different uses of hysteria made by Shakespeare in *Lear* and *The Winter's Tale* do not diminish his creative response—on the contrary, they heighten it. A form of knowledge for the great tragic protagonist (Lear) becomes the basis for character and destiny in the later romantic one (Leontes). Hysteria signified to Shakespeare not simply a medical malady—for him it became more than a newly discovered disease recently emancipated from its demonic bondage. The transition from demonic profile to medical malady was indeed in the thick process of transition during the Elizabethan period. As Addyman observes, "Lear's *hysterica passio* is a form of knowledge: it is the mode and limitation of his awakening to the world which exists beyond his will"; for Leontes it represents more than anything "his maladjustment" itself, the essence of his dis-ease.[132] It would be literal-minded, perhaps even obtuse, to inquire how Shakespeare conceived of a *male* hysteric in an era when the doctors had observed few.[133] Narrative, especially great imaginative literature such as Shakespeare's plays, or (conversely) popular narrative, such as pamphlets and tracts, has always provided science and medicine with some of its best ideas; narrative brilliantly leaps to hypotheses doctors would not, perhaps could not, intellectually and imaginatively dare to make.[134] The doctors saw the "mother" as feminine, but in the popular imagination it was something (however mysteriously) that could afflict men. It is unknown how Elizabethan medical authorities responded to Shakespeare's use of the term *hysterica passio* , and it may be that his usage in the plays was ignored.”

[iii] I did not expect to find that concept here. I think it mostly a late 18th century (Locke cum Rousseau) or even early 19th century one (Wordsworth's Preludes, etc.). It may be only a kind of premonition, but Shakespeare is such a profound psychologist that I would not be surprised that he infers the idea of self-development which we now take for granted.

[iv] King Lear was probably written between 1603 and 1606. The Bubonic Plague struck London again in 1603, killing 33,000, and recurred chronically during the summer months and always feared even it did not recur. In 1603 Walter Raleigh was imprisoned upon suspicion of treason and later that year Queen Elizabeth died.

[v] The following excerpt is taken from the website of the Royal Shakespeare Company. <http://www.rsc.org.uk/lear/teachers/edition.html>

The 1623 First Folio's authority is largely unquestionable. Its two editors, John Heminges and Henry Condell, were actors in Shakespeare's company and therefore in a very good position to know the plays as they were performed on stage. There is a crucial distinction between knowing this and knowing the plays as Shakespeare first wrote them in the case of *King Lear*, for no other Shakespeare play that exists in multiple formats bears such strong evidence of revision from Quarto to Folio, apparently informed by attempts to perform it on stage. Shakespeare's plays survive only in print, edited and prepared by someone else, so what we are looking for behind each one is the 'perfect' manuscript. This thinking is wrong-headed though; Shakespeare was a playwright, not an author in the modern sense, and dramatic texts were often shaped by rehearsals and performances, determining not only what was feasible on stage, but also what was unpopular and best to cut. The 1608 Quarto, called *The True Chronicle History of King Lear* lacks about 100 lines that are in the Folio text (which calls itself *The Tragedy of King Lear*), but notably contains about 300 that aren't, including the 'mock trial' scene in the hovel on the heath during the storm. 'Reported' texts typically struggle to reproduce a play as performed, but never add significantly to it, suggesting strongly that the Quarto of *Lear* is not one of these. There is evidence that it was performed in 1606, so it seems safe to infer that the Quarto reflects what Shakespeare's company wanted those earlier audiences to see and hear. Somewhere around 1610, Shakespeare adapted the text for a revival, making additions and cuts (as previously discussed), and altering many words and phrases within speeches. Thus, there are many 'substantive' differences (i.e. differences in individual words) between Quarto and Folio. This can be illustrated by comparing Lear's opening line from each:

Q - 'Meanwhile we will express our darker purposes.'
F - 'Meanwhile we shall express our darker purpose.'

Painstaking studies show that the Quarto text bears strong linguistic parallels with the plays that chronologically precede it (*All's Well, Timon, Othello*), while the language of the Folio text is more akin to Shakespeare's late 'Romance' plays like *The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline and The Tempest*, thus strengthening the claim for the date of revision being around 1610. There is no evidence for performances of this revival, but we can say with near certainty that they must have

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taken place. Heminges and Condell would have been in the company, so would recognise it as being the 'final' theatrical state of the play, after Shakespeare had fine-tuned it, hence their inclusion of this version in the Folio. This line of thinking about the texts of *King Lear* is quite recent. Editors have long assumed that the two represent imperfect versions of a perfect Shakespearean original, which can be recovered by conflating (i.e. combining) them. The tradition of conflation was begun in 1709 by the editor Nicholas Rowe, and was basically followed until 1986 when the editors of the Oxford Shakespeare rightly insisted upon our acknowledgement of Quarto and Folio *Lear* as two distinct texts.