

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

13

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CONTENTS

[Notes are placed at the end of each contribution. All line references are to the 'Globe' edition, and, unless for special reasons, quotations are from this text]

<i>List of Plates</i>	viii
The Catharsis of <i>King Lear</i> by J. STAMPFER	I
Lear's Last Speech by J. K. WALTON	II
Albany by LEO KIRSCHBAUM.	20
Madness in <i>King Lear</i> by KENNETH MUIR	30
The Influence of <i>Gorboduc</i> on <i>King Lear</i> by BARBARA HELIODORA CARNEIRO DE MENDONÇA	41
Some Aspects of the Style of <i>King Lear</i> by WINIFRED M. T. NOWOTTNY	49
Keats and <i>King Lear</i> by D. G. JAMES	58
<i>King Lear</i> on the Stage: A Producer's Reflections by ARNOLD SZYFMAN	69
Costume in <i>King Lear</i> by W. MOELWYN MERCHANT	72
The Marriage-Contracts in <i>Measure for Measure</i> by ERNEST SCHANZER	81
Tom Skelton—A Seventeenth-century Jester by E. W. IVES	90
Illustrations of Social Life III: Street Cries by F. P. WILSON	106
An Elizabethan Stage Drawing? by R. A. FOAKES and R. T. RICKERT	111
Was there a Music-room in Shakespeare's Globe? by RICHARD HOSLEY	113
<i>International Notes</i>	124
<i>Shakespeare Productions in the United Kingdom: 1958</i>	134
Three Adaptations by JOHN RUSSELL BROWN	137
The Year's Contributions to Shakespearian Study	
1. Critical Studies reviewed by BERNARD HARRIS	146
2. Shakespeare's Life, Times and Stage reviewed by R. A. FOAKES	154
3. Textual Studies reviewed by JAMES G. MCMANAWAY	162
<i>Books Received</i>	170
<i>Index</i>	172

LIST OF PLATES

PLS. I-IV ARE BETWEEN PP. 80 AND 81

- I-II. Costumes for productions of *King Lear*
- III. The Town Crier, etc.
(British Museum)
- IV. A. 'I haue Screens if you Desier'
(Huntington Library)
- B. 'What kichin-stuffe'
(Huntington Library)
- C. The bookvendor: 'I haue Ripe Strawburyes'
(British Museum)
- D. The Common Cryer
(Bodleian Library)

PLS. V-VIII ARE BETWEEN PP. 144 AND 145

- V. A. Tom Skelton
(Muncaster Collection: photo: *Country Life*)
- B. Tom Skelton
(The Shakespeare Institute)
- VI. *All's Well That Ends Well*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1959. Directed by Tyrone Guthrie, designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch
- A. The Widow, Diana and Helena
- B. The Countess and Rinaldo
- C. Parolles unmasked
(Photos: Angus McBean)
- VII. *All's Well That Ends Well* (cont.)
- A. The King and Helena
- B. Bertram and Helena
- A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1959. Directed by Peter Hall, designed by Lila de Nobili
- C. Titania and her attendants
- D. Oberon and Puck
(Photos: Angus McBean)
- VIII. A. Frontispiece from *The Tempest*, by Mr Dryden (1735)
(Photo: John Cope)
- B. *The Tempest: or The Enchanted Island*, The Old Vic, 1959. Directed by Douglas Seale, costumes and scenery by Finlay James, choreography by Peter Wright. Masque of Neptune and Amphitrite
(Photo: Central Press Photos Ltd.)

THE CATHARSIS OF KING LEAR

BY

J. STAMPFER

The overriding critical problem in *King Lear* is that of its ending. The deaths of Lear and Cordelia confront us like a raw, fresh wound where our every instinct calls for healing and reconciliation. This problem, moreover, is as much one of philosophic order as of dramatic effect. In what sort of universe, we ask ourselves, can wasteful death follow suffering and torture? Nor is this concern an extrapolation from our own culture. It is, rather, implicit in Lear's own image, when he calls for tongues and eyes to howl 'That heaven's vault should crack' (v, iii, 259), and in his despairing question:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? (v, iii, 306-7)

The problem becomes more overwhelming when we consider that, unlike the problems Shakespeare may have inherited with the plot of *Hamlet*, this tragic ending was imposed by Shakespeare on a story which, in its source, allowed Cordelia's forces to win the war. Moreover, the massive intrusion into *King Lear* of Christian elements of providence, depravity, and spiritual regeneration make it impossible to shunt aside the ending as a coincidence of its pre-Christian setting. The antiquity of setting may have had the irrelevant effect of releasing certain inhibitions in the playwright's mind; but the playgoers in Shakespeare's audience did not put on pagan minds to see the play. Rather, the constant references to retributive justice, perhaps greater here than in any other of Shakespeare's tragedies, make it an issue in a way that it is not in such 'pagan' plays as *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. Indeed, part of the poignance of *King Lear* lies in the fact that its issues, and the varieties of evil that it faces, are so central to Christianity, while it is denied any of the mitigation offered by a well-defined heaven and hell, and a formal doctrine of supernatural salvation.

The impression of unreconciled savagery and violence in the ending has been mitigated, in our generation, by a critical reading that would interpret Lear's last emotion as one of joy, even ecstasy, rather than one of unbearable agony. Bradley advances this reading, though hedged with a considerable qualification, in the following passage:

And, finally, though he is killed by an agony of pain, the agony in which he actually dies is not one of pain but of ecstasy. Suddenly, with a cry represented in the oldest text by a four-times repeated 'O', he exclaims:

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!

These are the last words of Lear. He is sure, at last, that she *lives*: and what had he said when he was still in doubt?

She lives! if it be so,
It is a chance which doth redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt!

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

To us, perhaps, the knowledge that he is deceived may bring a culmination of pain: but, if it brings *only* that, I believe we are false to Shakespeare, and it seems almost beyond question that any actor is false to the text who does not attempt to express, in Lear's last accents and gestures and look, an unbearable *joy*.¹

Some recent critics² have gone much further than Bradley in an attempt to build from Lear's momentary emotion at death a 'chance which doth redeem all sorrows', and make the play's ending a transfigured vision of attained salvation.

Before disputing the weight this penultimate moment in Lear's life can bear in counterbalancing all that precedes it, one must first consider whether the reading itself is defensible; for, in a sense, everything in the play hangs in the balance with Lear's death. If it is one of transfiguring joy, then one might, for all the enormous difficulties involved, affirm that a species of order is re-established. If not, however, then the impression is irresistible that in *King Lear* Shakespeare was confronting chaos itself, unmitigated, brutal, and utterly unresolved. The problems of justice and order, however interpreted, finally rest in the mystery of Lear's last moment, and not in the ambiguity of whether Edgar will or will not take over, by default, the throne of England. Like the news of Edmund's death, the problem of the succession is 'but a trifle' (v, iii, 295) alongside the supreme issue of whether any 'comfort' was applied by Shakespeare to the 'great decay' of Lear, as was evidently applied by him to the deaths of Hamlet and to a lesser extent Othello.

Bradley and those who follow him in this matter rest their case on the observation that Lear died persuaded that Cordelia still lived. He leaves unremarked, however, the fact that this illusion is not a new and sudden turn, but recurs three or four times in the last scene. It is, indeed, the main concern of Lear's first three speeches on re-entering the stage, before he goes temporarily out of his mind:

She's gone for ever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives. (v, iii, 259-63)

The tension here, and it is the underlying tension in Lear until his death, lies between an absolute knowledge that Cordelia is dead, and an absolute inability to accept it. Lear 'knows when one is dead, and when one lives'. His very faculties of reason and knowledge would be in question if he could not distinguish life from death. 'She's gone for ever... She's dead as earth', he repeats over and over. If he is to grasp reality in the face of madness, it is the reality of Cordelia's death that he must grasp. But this is the one reality that sears him whenever he attempts to grasp it, and so he tries, by the test of the looking glass, to prove that she lives, despite his emphatically underlined knowledge to the contrary.

Three brief speeches by Kent, Edgar and Albany intervene between this and Lear's next speech. One would guess that Lear is very active on stage at this point, possibly getting a looking glass, holding it up to Cordelia's lips, registering either momentary hope or immediate despair, then, when this test fails, snatching a feather and trying a second test. He would seem to be oblivious to all reality but Cordelia's body and his attempts to prove that she is alive. His second speech shows what is at stake in the effort:

THE CATHARSIS OF KING LEAR

This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt. (ll. 265-7)

This effort, too, fails, and Kent's painful attempt, on his knees, to wrest Lear's attention away from Cordelia only makes Lear momentarily turn on his companions with the savage outcry of 'murderers' and 'traitors' before trying again to prove her alive, this time by putting his ear to her lips in the thought that she might be speaking:

A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all:
I might have sav'd her; now she's gone for ever!
Cordelia! Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low; an excellent thing in woman.
I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee. (ll. 269-74)

His outcry, 'Ha!', like his cry 'This feather stirs', registers an illusion that Cordelia has spoken to him. This is a wilder self-deception than the thought that she has breathed, and remains with him beyond the end of the speech. His 'I kill'd the slave' is said almost lovingly and protectively to Cordelia's body, as if she heard him. Thus he struggles simultaneously for sanity and for the belief that Cordelia lives. Under the strain of these two irreconcilable psychic needs, his mind simply slips and relaxes into temporary madness:

He knows not what he says; and vain is it
That we present us to him. (ll. 293-4)

But agonized sanity breaks through Lear's madness once more, as the words of Kent, Albany and Edgar could not. Albany sees it rising, ominously convulsing Lear's features, and exclaims, 'O, see, see!' (l. 304) as Lear cries out:

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! (ll. 305-8)

The repeated cries of 'Never!' are the steady hammering of truth on a mind unable to endure it. Lear's life-blood rushes to his head. He chokes, and asks someone to undo the button of his collar (l. 309). Then, against the unendurable pressure of reality, the counterbalancing illusion that Cordelia lives rushes forth once more. Once again, it is at her lips, breathing or speaking, that he seeks life and dies:

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there! (*dies*) (ll. 310-11)

Who is to say, given this cycle of despair, insanity, and the illusion of hope, if it really matters at what point of the cycle Lear expires, or even if his last words establish it decisively? On the contrary, on purely aesthetic grounds, we have an indication from another point in Act v

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

that all of Lear's emotions have been gathering to an unendurable head at the moment of death. Gloucester, the counterpart to Lear in the subplot, was, like him, driven out by his false offspring, tormented in the storm, and finally preserved by a faithful, though rejected child. And Gloucester's death, which is described in considerable detail by Edgar, contains just such a welter of conflicting feelings as does Lear's, and might well be the model for understanding Lear's death:

Never,—O fault!—reveal'd myself unto him,
Until some half-hour past, when I was arm'd.
Not sure, though hoping, of this good success,
I ask'd his blessing, and from first to last
Told him our pilgrimage; but his flaw'd heart,
Alack, too weak the conflict to support!
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly.

(v, iii, 192-9)

Gloucester's heart burst from its inability to contain two conflicting emotions, his psyche torn apart by a thunderclap of simultaneous joy and grief. And such, by aesthetic parallel, we may presume was the death of Lear, whose 'flaw'd heart', too, as is evident throughout the last scene, was

Alack, too weak the conflict to support!

But the similarity only serves to accentuate the basic difference between the two deaths. Gloucester died between extremes of joy and grief, at the knowledge that his son was miraculously preserved, Lear between extremes of illusion and truth, ecstasy and the blackest despair, at the knowledge that his daughter was needlessly butchered. Gloucester's heart 'burst smilingly' at his reunion with Edgar; Lear's, we are driven to conclude, burst in the purest agony at his eternal separation from Cordelia.

There is, then, no mitigation in Lear's death, hence no mitigation in the ending of the play. On the contrary, either the play has no aesthetic unity, or everything in it, including Lear's spiritual regeneration, is instrumental to the explosive poignance of Lear's death. Nor can there be any blenching from the implications of Lear's last sane question:

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!

It is only by giving Lear's death a fleeting, ecstatic joy that Bradley can read some sort of reconciliation into the ending, some renewed synthesis of cosmic goodness to follow an anti-thesis of pure evil. Without it, this is simply, as Lear recognized, a universe where dogs, horses, and rats live, and Cordelias are butchered. There may be mitigations in man himself, but none in the world which surrounds him. Indeed, unless Lear's death is a thoroughly anomalous postscript to his pilgrimage of life, the most organic view of the plot would make almost a test case of Lear, depicting, through his life and death, a universe in which even those who have fully repented, done penance, and risen to the tender regard of sainthood³ can be hunted down, driven insane, and killed by the most agonizing extremes of passion.

THE CATHARSIS OF KING LEAR

The plot of *King Lear* is generally not read in this fashion. On the contrary, its denouement is generally interpreted as another 'turn of the screw', an added, and unnecessary, twist of horror to round out a play already sated with horrors. If it is defended, it is generally on grounds like those of Lamb,⁴ who contended that it was a 'fair dismissal' from life after all Lear had suffered, or those of Bradley, that Lear's death is a transfiguration of joy to counterbalance all that has preceded it. Neither reading is satisfactory, Lamb's because it makes the ending, at best, an epilogue rather than a denouement to the main body of the action, Bradley's because the textual evidence points to the opposite interpretation of Lear's death. If Lear's spiritual regeneration, however, with the fearful penance he endures, is taken as the play's 'middle', and his death, despite that regeneration, as its denouement, then the catharsis of *King Lear*, Shakespeare's profoundest tragedy, has as yet escaped definition. This catharsis, grounded in the most universal elements of the human condition, can be formulated only when one has drawn together some of the relevant philosophical issues of the play.

Thus, the ending is decisive in resolving the plethora of attitudes presented in the play concerning the relationship between God and man. Set side by side, out of context, and unrelated to the denouement, these attitudes, and their religious frames of reference, can be made to appear an absolute chaos. Certainly almost every possible point of view on the gods and cosmic justice is expressed, from a malevolent, wanton polytheism (iv, i, 38-9) to an astrological determinism (iv, iii, 34-5), from an amoral, personified Nature-goddess (I, ii, 1) to 'high-judging Jove' (II, iv, 231). But the very multitude, concern, and contradictory character of these references do not cancel each other out, but rather show how precarious is the concept of cosmic justice. Surely if the play's ending is an ending, and cosmic justice has hung in the balance with such matters as Goneril's cruelty (iv, ii, 46-50), Gloucester's blinding (III, vii, 99-100), and Edmund's death (v, iii, 174), it collapses with Lear's ultimate question: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?' Despite the pagan setting, the problem of theodicy, the justification of God's way with man, is invoked by so many characters, and with such concern, that it emerges as a key issue in the play. As such, either the denouement vindicates it, or its integrity is universally destroyed. In point of fact, this is implied in the deaths of Lear and Cordelia.

The force of evil, perhaps the most dynamic element in the Christian tragedies, is extended to wide dimensions in *King Lear*, where two distinct modes of evil emerge, evil as animalism, in Goneril and Regan, and evil as doctrinaire atheism, in Edmund. These modes are not to be confused. Goneril, in particular, is, from the point of view of conscience, an animal or beast of prey. She and Regan never discuss doctrine, as does Edmund, or offer motives, as does Iago. Their actions have the immediacy of animals, to whom consideration never interposes between appetite and deed. It is in this spirit that Lear compares Goneril, in a single scene (I, iv), to a sea-monster, a detested kite, a serpent and a wolf, and Albany, in another (iv, ii), to a tiger, a bear, a monster of the deep, and a fiend, as though, through them, animalism were bursting through civil society.

Edmund, on the other hand, is a doctrinaire atheist, with regard not only to God, but also to the traditional, organic universe, a heterodoxy equally horrifying to the Elizabethans. This doctrinaire atheism involves an issue as basic in *King Lear* as that of a retributive justice, and that is the bond between man, society and nature. Here, there is no plethora of attitudes, but two

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

positions, essentially, that of Cordelia, and that of Edmund. Cordelia's position is perhaps best expressed by Albany, after he learns of Goneril's treatment of Lear:

That nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be bordered certain in itself.
She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap, perforce must wither
And come to desperate use. (IV, ii, 32-6)

According to Albany, an invisible bond of sympathy binds human beings like twigs to the branches of a tree. This bond is no vague universal principle, but closely rooted in one's immediate family and society. This is natural law in its most elemental possible sense, not a moral code, but almost a biochemical reaction. Hierarchical propriety is a necessity for life, like sunlight and water, its violation an act of suicide or perversion. It is Cordelia, in response to this law, who says firmly, 'I love your majesty? According to my bond; no more nor less' (I, i, 94-5). This bond, the central concept of the play, is the bond of nature, made up at once of propriety and charity.

In contrast to this concept of Nature is Edmund's soliloquy affirming his doctrinaire atheism (I, ii, 1-15), where natural law is summed up in two phrases, 'the plague of custom', and 'the curiosity of nations'. The bond of human relations, as understood by Cordelia and Albany, is a tissue of extraneous, artificial constraints. Edmund recognizes a hierarchy, but rather than growing out of society, this hierarchy goes wholly against its grain. This is the hierarchy of animal vitality, by which 'the lusty stealth of nature', even in the act of adultery, creates a more worthy issue than the 'dull, stale, tired bed' of marriage. And in response to Gloucester's superstitious references to the larger concept of the organic universe, Edmund repudiates any relationship between the 'orbs from whom we do exist' and his own destiny (I, ii, 139-45).

Strangely enough, however, while the denouement seems to destroy any basis for providential justice, it would seem to vindicate Cordelia with regard to the bond of human nature. Thus, the deaths of Cornwall, Goneril, and Regan are, as Albany prophesied, the swift and monstrous preying of humanity upon itself. Cornwall is killed by his own servant; Regan is poisoned by her sister; and Goneril finally commits suicide. Even more is Cordelia vindicated in Edmund, who is mortally wounded by his brother, and then goes through a complete, and to this reader, sincere repentance before his death. Critics have expressed bewilderment at Edmund's delay in attempting to save Lear and Cordelia. They do not, however, remark the significance of the point at which Edmund acts. For it is not until Goneril confesses the poisoning of Regan and commits suicide, thus persuading Edmund that he was loved, that he bestirs himself to save Lear and Cordelia if it is not too late. Intellectual assent is not sufficient. Only to those wholly caught up in the bond of love is charity possible:

Edm. Yet Edmund was below'd:
The one the other poison'd for my sake,
And after slew herself.
Alb. Even so. Cover their faces.
Edm. I pant for life. Some good I mean to do,
Despite of mine own nature. (v, iii, 239-44)

THE CATHARSIS OF KING LEAR

Herein, however, lies a sardonic paradox; for Edmund deceived himself. He was the object of lust, but was not encompassed by love. Goneril slew Regan for his sake, but it was out of lust and ambition; she was incapable of that love which brings to self-transcendence, such as Cordelia's love of Lear, or his own act of 'good', in spite of his 'own nature'. And far from killing herself for Edmund's sake, she committed suicide, utterly alone, at the implicit threat of arrest for treason. Edmund, ever the doctrinaire logician, took false evidence of the bond of love at face value, and died as isolated as he lived. The two forms of evil in *King Lear* were ultimately opaque to one another.

But an even more sardonic paradox is implicit in Edmund's death. For Edmund, by abandoning his atheistic faith and acknowledging the power of love, accepts Cordelia's instinctual affirmation of natural law. But the denouement itself, with the gratuitous, harrowing deaths of Cordelia and Lear, controverts any justice in the universe. Chance kills, in despite of the maidenly stars. It would seem, then, by the denouement, that the universe belongs to Edmund, but mankind belongs to Cordelia. In a palsied cosmos, orphan man must either live by the moral law, which is the bond of love, or swiftly destroy himself. To this paradox, too, Shakespeare offers no mitigation in *King Lear*. The human condition is as inescapable as it is unendurable.

To so paradoxical an ending, what catharsis is possible? This question can be answered only by re-examining the structure of the plot. There can be observed, in *Hamlet*, a radical break from the mode of redemption in such earlier plays as *Romeo and Juliet*. In *Romeo and Juliet*, redemption comes when the tragic hero affirms the traditional frame of values of society, love, an appropriate marriage, peace, and the like, though society has, in practice, ceased to follow them. The result is to enhance the *sancta* of society by the sacrifice of life itself. In *Hamlet*, redemption only comes, finally, when the tragic hero spurns and transcends the *sancta* of society, and appeals to a religious mysticism into which human wisdom can have no entry, and in which, at most, 'the readiness is all'. The final result, however, is none the less the redemption of society and the reconciliation of the tragic hero to it; for Hamlet's last act is to cast a decisive vote for the next king of Denmark. Even *Othello*, domestic tragedy though it is, ends with the reconciliation of the tragic hero and society; and Othello's last act is an affirmation of loyalty to Venice and the execution of judgement upon himself. *King Lear* is Shakespeare's first tragedy in which the tragic hero dies unreconciled and indifferent to society.

The opening movement of *King Lear* is, then, not merely a physical exile from, but an abandonment of the formal *sancta* and institutions of society, which is pictured as even more bankrupt than in *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, only one man's deliberate crime corrupts the Danish state, 'mining all within'; in *King Lear*, animalism, atheism, brutal ambition, superstition, self-indulgence, and lethargy all contribute to society's decay. In this opening movement of abandonment, Lear is stripped of all that majesty and reverence clothing him in the opening scene, of kingdom, family, retainers, shelter, and finally reason and clothing themselves, until he comes, at the nadir of his fortunes, to 'the thing itself... a poor bare forked animal' (III, iv, 111-12). Romeo found his touchstone of truth against the rich texture of the Capulet feast, Lear in an abandoned and naked madman. Romeo and Juliet formed, from the first, an inviolate circle of innocence that was the fulfilment of their previous lives; Lear found no innocence until all his previous life had been stripped away from him.

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

In contrast to this movement of abandonment, and the basis of the second, counter-movement, stands not, as in *Hamlet*, religious mysticism, but an elemental bond that we can, in this play, indifferently call charity or natural law, one that binds man to man, child to parent, husband to wife, and servant to master almost by a biological impulsion. From first to last, charity is discovered, not as the crown of power and earthly blessing, but in their despite. This theme is enunciated by France in taking Cordelia for his wife:

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor,
Most choice forsaken, and most lov'd despis'd!
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon,
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away.
Gods, gods! 'tis strange that from their cold'st neglect
My love should kindle to inflam'd respect. (I, i, 253-8)

The same affirmation is made by Kent, in entering the impoverished Lear's service:

Lear. If thou be'st as poor for a subject as he's for a king, thou art poor
enough. What wouldst thou?
Kent. Service.
Lear. Who wouldst thou serve?
Kent. You.
Lear. Dost thou know me, fellow?
Kent. No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain
call master.
Lear. What's that?
Kent. Authority. (I, iv, 22-32)

Indeed, organized society dulls people to an awareness of charity, so that it is only in Lear's abandonment that he becomes bound to all men:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to what these wretches feel,
That thou may'st shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just. (III, iv, 28-36)

Shakespeare could, of course, have used this more elemental level of charity or natural law as he used the force of love in *Romeo and Juliet*, to redeem and renew society. Had he chosen to do so, it would have become politically effective in Cordelia's invading army, overwhelmed the corrupt elements then in power, and restored the throne to Lear, as is suggested in Shakespeare's conventionally pious source. But society, in Shakespeare, is now no longer capable of self-renewal. And so the counter-movement of the play, the re-clothing of Lear, by charity

THE CATHARSIS OF KING LEAR

and natural law, with majesty, sanity, family and shelter, after the most terrible of penances, does not close the play. At its close, the completion only of its dramatic 'middle', Lear is utterly purged of soul, while the hierarchy of society is reduced, as at the end of *Hamlet*, to an equation of 'court news' with 'gilded butterflies' (v, iii, 13-14). At this point, if the universe of the play contained a transcendent providence, it should act as in the closing movement of *Hamlet*, mysteriously to redeem a society unable to redeem itself.

Shakespeare's pessimism, however, has deepened since *Hamlet*, and the deaths to no purpose of Lear and Cordelia controvert any providential redemption in the play's decisive, closing movement, so that another resolution entirely is called for. Narrowing our problem somewhat, the catharsis of any play lies in the relationship of the denouement to the expectations set up in the play's 'middle'. In *King Lear*, this middle movement has to do primarily with Lear's spiritual regeneration after his 'stripping' in the opening movement of the play. These two movements can be subsumed in a single great cycle, from hauteur and spiritual blindness through purgative suffering to humility and spiritual vision, a cycle that reaches its culmination in Lear's address of consolation to Cordelia before they are taken off to prison (v, iii, 9-17). The catharsis of *King Lear* would seem to lie, then, in the challenge of Lear's subsequent death to the penance and spiritual transcendence that culminates the play's second movement. This challenge can be described as follows:—

All men, in all societies, make, as it were, a covenant with society in their earliest infancy. By this covenant, the dawning human consciousness accepts society's deepest ordinances, beliefs, and moral standards in exchange for a promise of whatever rewards and blessings society offers. The notion of intelligible reward and punishment, whether formulated as a theological doctrine and called retributive justice or as a psychological doctrine and called the reality principle, is as basic to human nature as the passions themselves. But given the contingency of human life, that covenant is constantly broken by corruption within and without. A man's life and that of his family are at all times hostages of his limited wisdom, his tainted morality, the waywardness of chance, and the decay of institutions. Indeed, social ritual, whether religious in character, like confession or periodic fasting, or secular, like the ceremonial convening of a legislature, is an attempt to strengthen the bond of a covenant inevitably weakened by the attrition of evil and the brute passage of time. These are all, in a sense, acts of penance, that is, acts whose deepest intent is to purge us of guilt and the fear of being abandoned, to refresh our bond with one another and with our private and collective destiny.

Lear, at the beginning of the play, embodies all that man looks forward to in a world in which, ultimately, nothing is secure. He has vocation, age, wealth, monarchy, family, personal followers and long experience. Like Oedipus and Othello, he would have seemed to have attained, before the play begins, what men strive for with indifferent success all their lives. In this sense, Lear engages our sympathies as an archetype of mankind. And just as Othello discovers areas of experience which he never cultivated and which destroy him, Lear discovers that even in those areas he most cultivated he has nothing. Thus, like Oedipus and more than Othello, Lear activates the latent anxiety at the core of the human condition, the fear not only of unexpected catastrophe but that even what seems like success may be a delusion, masking corruption, crime and almost consummated failure.

This opening movement, however, leads not to dissolution, exposure and self-recognition,

SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

as in *Oedipus* and *Othello*, but to purgation. And Lear's purgation, by the end of the play's middle movement, like his gifts and his vulnerability at its start, is so complete as to be archetypal. By the time he enters prison, he has paid every price and been stripped of everything a man can lose, even his sanity, in payment for folly and pride. He stands beyond the veil of fire, momentarily serene and alive. As such he activates an even profounder fear than the fear of failure, and that is the fear that whatever penance a man may pay may not be enough once the machinery of destruction has been let loose, because the partner of his covenant may be neither grace nor the balance of law, but malignity, intransigence or chaos.

The final, penultimate tragedy of Lear, then, is not the tragedy of *hubris*, but the tragedy of penance. When Lear, the archetype not of a proud, but of a penitential man, brutally dies, then the uttermost that can happen to man has happened. One can rationalize a passing pedestrian struck down by a random automobile; there is no blenching from this death. Each audience harbours this anxiety in moments of guilt and in acts of penance. And with Lear's death, each audience, by the ritual of the drama, shares and releases the most private and constricting fear to which mankind is subject, the fear that penance is impossible, that the covenant, once broken, can never be re-established, because its partner has no charity, resilience, or harmony—the fear, in other words, that we inhabit an imbecile universe. It is by this vision of reality that Lear lays down his life for his folly. Within its bounds lies the catharsis of Shakespeare's profoundest tragedy.

NOTES

1. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1924), p. 291.
2. Harold S. Wilson, *On the Design of Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto, 1957), p. 204; Geoffrey Bush, *Shakespeare and the Natural Condition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. 128.
3. L. L. Schücking, in his *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays* (New York, 1922), p. 186, cites most, though not all the evidence that can be offered to document a spiritual regeneration in Lear, only to deny it any validity in the play because, by the comparative method, he finds no similar concern elsewhere in Shakespeare for *charitas*, or social justice. Aside from a number of relevant passages that leap to mind from other plays, the most striking parallel is in *King Lear*, itself, where Gloucester, Lear's counterpart in the subplot, makes a speech similar to Lear's prayer, though not as profound, on the poor and the wretched (iv, i, 67-74). Whatever may or may not be true in other plays, charity is apparently a prime consideration in *King Lear*; and, if so, Lear's regeneration in charity is, by Schücking's own evidence, part of the play's aesthetic movement.
4. New Variorum edition of *King Lear* (Philadelphia, 1880), p. 421.