

'KING LEAR': A RETROSPECT, 1939–79

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Throughout the period under review there has been a wide measure of agreement that *King Lear* is the greatest of all the plays, and, perhaps as a consequence, an equally wide measure of disagreement about what it says. In the course of the many scrutinies it has been subjected to, almost every significant word in it has been examined with minute care, as though the drama were an extended metaphysical poem; yet, paradoxically enough, there is no general consensus among editors as to what Shakespeare actually wrote; and editions differ greatly from one another in the texts they offer. G. K. Hunter, for example, in his New Penguin edition first published in 1972, lists well over a hundred readings in which his text does not concur with those of Peter Alexander (1951), Kenneth Muir (1952), and Dover Wilson and G. I. Duthie (1960).¹ The prime cause of the variations is, of course, that there are two substantive texts not one: the Quarto of 1608, containing some 300 lines not found in the Folio, and the Folio itself, containing 100 lines not found in the Quarto. The editor must, therefore, or has hitherto felt that he must, make use of both while knowing full well, to complicate his task still further, that neither of them was set up from a manuscript in Shakespeare's hand. Nevertheless, one great advance has been made. In a classic study, published in 1940,² W. W. Greg established conclusively that the Quarto of 1608, in a copy which, like all extant copies, was made up of both corrected and uncorrected sheets, was used for setting the Folio text. He also

showed that the copy of the Quarto employed for this purpose had been collated with a text from the playhouse, in all probability the prompt-copy, and much altered in the process. His findings on this score have won general acceptance, though both G. I. Duthie, in the New Cambridge edition of the play, and G. Blakemore Evans, in the Riverside edition of Shakespeare (1974), agree with A. S. Cairncross³ that the Folio also had some recourse to the second Quarto of 1619, a view that has been vigorously challenged and repudiated by J. K. Walton, who asserts categorically that it is 'of no value'.⁴

As well as defining the relationship between the two substantive texts, Greg's investigation also brought into sharp focus the major problem that every editor has to face, for in the course of it he discovered clear evidence 'that the folio has in some instances inadvertently reproduced errors of the quarto in place of what we must assume to have been the readings of the playhouse manuscript'. It therefore follows that 'where the folio differs from the quarto its readings... must be derived from the authoritative playhouse manuscript, whereas where the two agree we can never be certain

¹ *King Lear*, ed. G. K. Hunter (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 331–5.

² *The Variants in the First Quarto of 'King Lear'* (1940).

³ 'The Quartos and the First Folio Text of *King Lear*', *Review of English Studies*, n.s. vi (1955), 252–8.

⁴ *The Quarto Copy for the First Folio of Shakespeare* (Dublin, 1971), pp. 282–7.

that the folio has not carelessly reproduced an error of the quarto' (p. 187). Since then Charlton Hinman¹ has given editors yet another reason for treating the Folio text with some caution by demonstrating that it was not set by one compositor, B, as Alice Walker had suggested,² but by two, B and E, and that E, probably an apprentice and the least skilled member of Jaggard's team, was responsible for more than half of it.

In these circumstances, the nature and origin of the copy used for the 1608 Quarto has become an issue of the first importance, and has proved an extremely recalcitrant one. In 1940 Greg thought the copy had probably been obtained 'from actual performance by some method of shorthand' (p. 138). By 1955, however, he had been persuaded by G. I. Duthie³ that shorthand was not the answer.⁴ Less convinced by Duthie's theory that the copy-text was dictated to a scribe by the cast relying on their memories,⁵ he found himself attracted by the freshness and ingenuity of Alice Walker's hypothesis, advanced in her *Textual Problems* (pp. 37–67), that it was derived from, as he puts it, 'a surreptitious transcript of the foul papers by two boy actors, "Goneril" dictating to "Regan", who in their haste contaminated the written text by recollections of what they were accustomed to speak and hear on the stage' (p. 382). All the same, he still had his doubts, especially about the identification of the two boys as the culprits. This last doubt was shared by Duthie, who, in his final words on a subject to which he had devoted so much of his life, accepted Miss Walker's general theory but modified it to read: 'transcription from foul papers, the persons involved having had some memorial knowledge of the play, seems the most convincing solution'.⁶ J. K. Walton, however, argues that Duthie was wrong to abandon his original theory, and that memorial reconstruction still remains the likeliest answer to the question of the origin of the copy

employed by the printer of the 1608 Quarto.⁷ In doing so Walton does not mention the indirect support Miss Walker's theory has received from E. A. J. Honigmann, who, pointing to the occasional greater metrical regularity of the Quarto, makes an interesting case for the idea that some of the variants between the two texts can best be explained as representing first thoughts (the Quarto) and second thoughts (the Folio) on the part of Shakespeare himself.⁸ More recently still, Michael J. Warren, resorting to literary rather than bibliographical criteria, has boldly attacked the whole assumption, hitherto the basis of editorial endeavour, that there is or ever was such a thing as the ideal text of the tragedy. He holds 'that Q and F *King Lear* are sufficiently dissimilar that they should not be conflated, but should be treated as two versions of a single play, both having authority'.⁹

Greg concluded *The Variants in the First Quarto of 'King Lear'* on an optimistic and hortatory note: 'I believe that now the whole of the information needed is at the disposal of editors, and it appears to be high time that they set about the job of preparing a text of the play

¹ 'The Prentice Hand in the Tragedies of the Shakespeare First Folio: Compositor E', *Studies in Bibliography*, ix (1957); and *The Printing and Proof-Reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1963), I, 212.

² *Textual Problems of the First Folio* (Cambridge, 1953), pp. 62–3.

³ *Elizabethan Shorthand and the First Quarto of 'King Lear'* (Oxford, 1949).

⁴ *The Shakespeare First Folio* (Oxford, 1955), p. 380.

⁵ *King Lear*, ed. G. I. Duthie (Oxford, 1949), pp. 19–116.

⁶ *King Lear*, ed. G. I. Duthie and J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 132–5.

⁷ *The Quarto Copy*, pp. 269–81.

⁸ *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text* (1965), pp. 121–8.

⁹ 'Quarto and Folio *King Lear* and the Interpretation of Albany and Edgar', in *Shakespeare: Pattern of Excelling Nature*, ed. David Bevington and Jay Halio (Newark, N. J., and London, 1978), p. 97.

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that shall be based upon a properly reasoned estimate of the evidence' (p. 190). In 1955, when he published *The Shakespeare First Folio*, the optimism had disappeared. Summing up what had been done in the interim, which had, in fact, seen the publication of Duthie's edition of 1949, the most scholarly we have, and of Kenneth Muir's New Arden edition of 1952, the most commonly used by literary critics, he wrote: 'It is to be feared that a consideration of the various theories [about the origin of the copy for the Quarto] so far advanced can only lead to the conclusion. . . that *King Lear* still offers a problem for investigation' (p. 383). Nothing has been discovered since then to alter that verdict. For the editor the play remains a nightmare – and her nine-fold.

The uncertainties about the text have in no way inhibited the activity of aesthetic criticism. The last forty years have produced a formidable – one is sorely tempted to say, daunting – outpouring of studies and interpretations of the most diverse kind. The very nature of the world we live in has much to do with the interest the play excites. Shot through with hints and fears of Doomsday, *King Lear* has taken on a peculiar immediacy and urgency. It speaks to our condition. What it says varies from critic to critic for two main reasons. First, as Helen Gardner acutely observes, no one can write about *King Lear* today without, at the same time, writing about himself and 'interpreting its design in the terms of his own conception of the mystery of things';¹ and, secondly, the clear-cut conflict in it between good and evil holds out an almost irresistible invitation to ideological readings, especially in a world where Shakespeare has, to quote Harry Levin, become 'a sort of lay religion'.² Like the story of the Fall of the Angels, *King Lear* 'has been adopted by both parties', and has undergone, on occasions, some strange metamorphoses in the process. Paul N. Siegel, for example, improving the ending in a manner that did not

occur to Nahum Tate, assures us that Lear and Cordelia 'become reunited in eternal bliss';³ while Jan Kott sweeps all attempts to find some positive meaning in the tragedy into the dustbins of *Endgame* thus:

In Shakespeare's play there is neither Christian heaven, nor the heaven predicted and believed in by humanists. *King Lear* makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies; of the heaven promised on earth, and the heaven promised after death; in fact – of both Christian and secular theodicies; of cosmogony, and of the rational view of history; of the gods and natural goodness, of man made in the 'image and likeness'. In *King Lear*, both the medieval and the renaissance orders of established values disintegrate. All that remains at the end of this gigantic pantomime is the earth – empty and bleeding.⁴

Which of the two are we to accept? 'Both? one? or neither?' Confronted by Edmund's dilemma, the sensible man will, surely, opt for the last of the three possibilities, and look for guidance elsewhere.

Between these two extremes of sentimental wishful thinking and reductive nihilistic rant there is no shortage of such guidance, sometimes brilliantly illuminating, sometimes tententiously misleading, and sometimes painfully and painstakingly moralizing and repetitious. I shall, therefore, attempt no more than to distinguish some of the main trends and major issues.

L. C. Knights, writing some twenty years ago, observed that 'the appreciation of Shakespeare, the kind of thing men have got from Shakespeare, has varied enormously at different periods'. He then went on to say:

from time to time major shifts of attention occur, and not the least significant and fruitful of these is the one that has taken place in our time, and that scholars and critics of very different kinds have helped to bring

¹ *King Lear* (1967), p. 4.

² *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times* (Oxford, 1976), p. 6.

³ *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York, 1957), p. 186.

⁴ *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964), p. 118.

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about. Conceptions of the nature and function of poetic drama have been radically revised; the essential structure of the plays has been sought in the poetry rather than in the more easily extractable elements of 'plot' and 'character'.¹

If such is indeed the case, then the new trend should be most obvious over the period in question (c. 1930–59) in what was written about *King Lear*, for, as Wolfgang Clemen assures us, 'An attempt to interpret a Shakespearean play solely on the basis of its imagery – a risky undertaking – would have the greatest chance of success if *King Lear* were the play in question.'² In fact, three years before Clemen's book came out but too late for him to make use of it, such an attempt had been made. R. B. Heilman's *This Great Stage*,³ significantly subtitled 'Image and Structure in *King Lear*', is based on the assertion that 'In its fullness the structure [of the play] can be set forth only by means of the patterns of imagery' (p. 32). The use of 'only' there was, not surprisingly, very strongly objected to by, among others, W. R. Keast, who condemned the work out of hand as 'in almost all respects a bad book'.⁴ Yet, once the initial fuss had died down, Heilman's main findings were absorbed into the critical bloodstream with great rapidity, and have persisted there ever since. They could not be rejected because he had pointed to a feature of the play which is demonstrably there but had not been properly noticed before: the presence in it of elaborate verbal patterns made up of references to sight, smell, clothes, sex, animals, and justice, and, behind them all, the striking paradoxes of madness in reason and reason in madness. It is significant that the one serious attack on the work in more recent years, Paul J. Alpers's '*King Lear* and the Theory of the "Sight Pattern"',⁵ does not deny that the sight pattern is there; instead, it argues that Heilman and those who have followed him have mistaken its import. It is also worth noting that Heilman did his work so thoroughly that little

has been added to it. William Empson examines the use of the word 'fool' in the play, but ingeniously counterpoints the approach through 'pattern' with an approach through 'character' in order to bring out the different results they can give;⁶ and Rosalie Colie puts some of Heilman's discoveries into a larger historical context in the chapter on *King Lear* in her *Paradoxia Epidemica*,⁷ where she relates the paradoxes in the tragedy to the Renaissance tradition of paradox in general, and shows how they are closely interwoven with one another, much as his patterns are.

Yet, exciting and important as Heilman's book was and remains, it did little to alter existing judgements on the play's larger significances, though it did add an extra dimension to one's sense of Shakespeare's artistry in conveying them. His final conclusions about what *King Lear* says do not differ greatly from Bradley's. In revealing what a close study of the imagery could accomplish he had also, unintentionally, revealed what it could not. At this point I turn to Knights's own essay on the play. Its main contention is that *King Lear* is 'timeless and universal'.⁸ It makes good this claim by concentrating, as D. A. Traversi had done,⁹ on the conflict within the mind of the hero as the core of the tragedy, the focus from which everything else radiates. It is true that Knights uses the poetry to illustrate the points he makes; but the strength of the essay lies in its psychological penetration and imaginative grasp. In fact, the approach is,

¹ *Some Shakespearean Themes* (1959), pp. 13–14.

² *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (1951), p. 133.

³ Baton Rouge, 1948.

⁴ 'Imagery and Meaning in the Interpretation of *King Lear*', *Modern Philology*, 47 (1949), 45.

⁵ *In Defense of Reading*, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York, 1962).

⁶ *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), pp. 125–57.

⁷ Princeton, 1966.

⁸ *Some Shakespearean Themes*, p. 84.

⁹ '*King Lear*', *Scrutiny*, XIX (1952–3).

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in no small measure, traditional. By 1959, when *Some Shakespearean Themes* appeared, the idea that the 'poetry' alone could provide the master-key to understanding was losing its hold.

In the same essay Knights says that *King Lear* 'marks a moment of great importance in the changing consciousness of the civilization to which it belongs', and then proceeds to a short consideration of the way in which the connotations of the word 'Nature' were undergoing a radical shift at the time when the play was written. Here he is taking up a topic which had interested him for a long time and which had already affected the criticism of *King Lear*. He touches on it in 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?' (1933), where he links it to the idea of order; and the economic and social crisis of the early seventeenth century is very much to the fore in his *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (1937). Somewhere at the back of it all lie the influence of R. H. Tawney, the preoccupation of the thirties and forties in England with social change, and the developing study, especially in the United States, of the history of ideas. The impact of the last on the interpretation of *King Lear* is evident in Theodore Spencer's treatment of the play, where much emphasis falls on microcosm and macrocosm: the connexions between family, state, and the gods.¹ Combining this kind of interest with a wide knowledge of medieval and sixteenth-century drama, S. L. Bethell distinguishes two meanings of 'Nature' in the tragedy: 'first, nature as opposed to supernature, or the realm of grace; and secondly, nature as opposed to civilisation' (p. 56). The second nature is, he suggests, incarnate in Edmund, who represents the 'new thought' of Machiavelli, while supernature appears as Cordelia, who is 'associated with theological terminology and Christian symbol' (p. 59).² A similar kind of thinking, at the political level, is present in Edwin Muir's *The Politics of 'King*

Lear', which envisages the action as a dramatization of the destruction of the Middle Ages by a gang of Renaissance adventurers.³ The final step towards giving *King Lear* a significant place in the history of ideas and of social change was taken by John Danby in his *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of 'King Lear'*.⁴ In it he contends that the good characters in the play see Nature, much as Hooker saw it, as God-ordained, benignant, and ordered; while the bad characters see it as Machiavelli had done, and as Hobbes was soon to do. The action thus becomes a struggle between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and, more than that, between two forms of society: 'Edmund's is the society of the New Man and the New Age. . . Lear's is the feudal state in decomposition' (p. 138). Above and beyond both stands Cordelia, representing the ideal: 'Nature in its communal aspect'.

Making a good deal of play with traditions of Christian communism, this was an attractive thesis at the time when it appeared, particularly in an England where there was a strong feeling that 'distribution should undo excess,/And each man have enough', and it won many adherents. Since then it has come under fire from Robert Ornstein, who accuses Danby of oversimplifying and oversubtilizing Shakespeare's intention because 'the attempt to define Goneril, Regan, and Edmund ideologically merely diverts attention from the true philosophical drama of the play which is focused in Lear's mind'.⁵ Nevertheless, the main thesis has continued to exert a strong appeal. It has been adopted by Nicholas Brooke and Maynard Mack, among others, while

¹ *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York, 1942).

² *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (1944).

³ Glasgow, 1947.

⁴ 1949.

⁵ *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison and Milwaukee, 1960; paperback edn 1965), p. 264.

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Rosalie Colie has carried its social implications a stage further by seeking to relate some aspects of the play to the crisis of the aristocracy described by Lawrence Stone.¹ Its capacity to endure would seem to indicate that it was something more than a *King Lear* for the forties.

As well as bringing out the clash between the two ideas of Nature in the drama, Danby tries, much more questionably, to turn Shakespeare himself into a medieval poet, whose work can best be interpreted by medieval methods of exegesis. He writes of Cordelia: 'she is a figure comparable with that of Griselde or Beatrice: literally a woman; allegorically the root of individual and social sanity; tropologically Charity "that suffereth long and is kind"; anagogically the redemptive principle itself' (p. 125). Here his argument links up with and becomes part of the most important development of the forties: a strong trend towards making *King Lear* an explicitly Christian tragedy. Two tendencies, which might, on first sight, appear antagonistic, came together to assist in the process. On the one hand, there was, among some of Bradley's followers, an impulse to free some of his more hesitant insights from the cautions and reservations with which he had so carefully hedged them in; on the other, there was the growing reaction against his heavy reliance on character study, and the attempt to replace it by an approach through theme, imagery, and symbol, such as that which Wilson Knight had already employed, with fresh and illuminating results, in his *The Wheel of Fire*, where, incidentally, he says that Cordelia 'represents the principle of love' (p. 201).

In *Shakespearean Tragedy* Bradley tentatively suggests that *King Lear* might not unfittingly be called *The Redemption of King Lear*. He does this, startlingly and paradoxically enough, within the overall framework of his conviction that Shakespearean tragedy is secular, that any theological interpretation of the world by the

author is excluded from it, and that the play, 'the most terrible picture that Shakespeare painted of the world', does not contain 'a revelation of righteous omnipotence or heavenly harmony, or even a promise of the reconciliation of mystery and justice'. Nevertheless, his alternative title is, he thinks, justified because the King's sufferings have the effect of 'reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of [his] nature', and "the gods", who inflict these sufferings on him, do so in order to enable him to attain 'the very end and aim of life'. The Christian implications of that final remark are, despite Bradley's calculated retention of 'the gods', inescapable. The statement is inconsistent with everything he says at the end of his first chapter on the play; but the temptation it held out to others, especially when coupled with the word 'redemption', was too strong to be resisted.

Combining Bradley's alternative title with another of his more adventurous suggestions, to the effect that the tragedy, in its concern with the ultimate power in the universe, affects the imagination as the *Divine Comedy* does, though the two works are entirely different in kind, R. W. Chambers came to see *King Lear* as 'a vast poem on the victory of true love', moving from the *Purgatorio* to the *Paradiso*, where 'Lear, consoled, ends by teaching patience to Gloucester and to Cordelia'.² He was followed, in his optimistic reading, by S. L. Bethell, who views the world of the play as one without revelation but seeking for some sort of moral and religious order, which is symbolized by Cordelia, who is constantly associated with Christian doctrine;³ by G. L. Bickersteth, for whom Cordelia is the symbol

¹ 'Reason and Need: *King Lear* and the "Crisis" of the Aristocracy', in *Some Facets of 'King Lear': Essays in Prismatic Criticism*, ed. Rosalie L. Colie and F. T. Flahiff (Toronto and Buffalo, 1974).

² *King Lear* (Glasgow, 1940), pp. 48–9.

³ *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*, pp. 54, 60.

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of divine love in a pagan setting;¹ and, of course, by John Danby. All of them agree that Lear becomes a better man for his sufferings, and that the tragedy is, to quote J. C. Maxwell, 'a Christian play about a pagan world'.² The wide currency this view gained is evident from the prominence given to it in Kenneth Muir's introduction to his New Arden edition (1952).

Even in the forties, however, at least two powerful voices were raised in opposition. F. P. Wilson stated emphatically: 'No compensatory heaven is offered. Man has only himself and his own power and endurance to fall back on. These are very great, but when they fail only madness or death remains, and death is, if not nescience, escape into the unknown.'³ George Orwell, characteristically going his own independent way, not only denied that the play is Christian but also disposed briskly of the idea that Lear is regenerated. The old King dies, he tells us, 'still cursing, still understanding nothing', having failed to recognize that 'If you live for others, you must live *for others*, and not as a roundabout way of getting an advantage for yourself', this being the true meaning of 'renunciation', which is, as Orwell sees it, what the play is really about.⁴ In the early fifties more voices joined these two. Convinced that the tragic experience is not compatible 'with any form of religious belief that assumes the existence of a personal and kindly God' (p. 18), Clifford Leech contends that the comedy in *King Lear* helps us to accept the play's picture of life 'because it confirms our most private judgment, our deepest awareness of human folly' (p. 82);⁵ and William Empson, also much preoccupied with folly, inclines to Orwell's view that the King does not become wise, and retorts to those who think he becomes patient: 'if Lear really seemed regenerated to the point of accepting his calamities (including the death of Cordelia) the play would become sickly'.⁶

A more sustained and damaging attack came from D. G. James, gathering weight from

having behind it one of the most wide-ranging considerations of the play as a contribution to man's knowledge of himself in his world that the entire period has to offer. *The Dream of Learning*⁷ is based on the idea that 'poetry . . . issues from a peculiar labour of knowing' (p. 78), different from but no less important than the labour that goes into scientific knowing, an idea that James attempts to establish by bringing together *Hamlet*, *The Advancement of Learning*, and *King Lear*. So far as the last is concerned, James contends that the drive of the play is an effort to penetrate to the limits of human experience. Consequently, while there are 'signs that Christian belief was moving in Shakespeare's mind in the course of its composition' (p. 119), 'what seems certain is that it was [his] fully conscious decision not to give the story any fraction of a Christian context. The play's action is terrible in all conscience; but there is no crumb of Christian comfort in it' (pp. 92–3). All the same, Lear emerges from his madness a changed man; and the tragedy makes its own non-doctrinal affirmation, because the good characters continue to act out of wholly disinterested motives right to the end. This conclusion is not dissimilar to that reached by Arthur Sewall, following a different route, in his *Character and Society in Shakespeare*.⁸ Affirming that 'the Christian-allegorical interpretations recently placed upon certain of Shakespeare's works (especially *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*) are almost certainly in error' (p. 60), and rejecting outright Danby's identifi-

¹ *The Golden World of 'King Lear'* (1946).

² 'The Technique of Invocation in *King Lear*', *Modern Language Review*, 45 (1950).

³ *Elizabethan and Jacobean* (Oxford, 1945), p. 121.

⁴ 'Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool', *Shooting an Elephant* (1945).

⁵ *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Other Studies in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (1950).

⁶ *The Structure of Complex Words*, p. 154.

⁷ Oxford, 1951.

⁸ Oxford, 1951.

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cation of Cordelia with Charity, Sewell finds that the distinctive feature of *King Lear* is that 'the characters are imagined not only as members of each other but also as members of a nature which is active both within themselves and throughout the circumambient universe. Man is nowhere so certainly exhibited as a member of all organic creation and of the elemental powers' (p. 117).

It is against this background, to which, by the time Barbara Everett wrote, Paul N. Siegel had added his thoroughgoing Christian version of the drama,¹ that one must set her astringent article 'The New *King Lear*'.² In it, making no mention of such allies as Orwell, James, and Sewell, she attacks what she calls the orthodox approach to the play, focusing her attention mainly on Muir's introduction to his edition, which she finds fault with for its excessive, as she sees it, emphasis on the Christian content of the drama at the expense of everything else. This is not strictly true, for one of the most valuable features of that introduction is its extensive treatment of the play's sources. This said, however, there is no denying that the essay is acute and very much to the point. It accuses the Christian allegorizers of attaching more importance to the 'poetry' than to the plot; of overlooking Bradley's honest doubts about his own transcendental reading of the ending; and, most importantly, of reducing the specific concerns of the play to a rather platitudinous moralizing, a charge that Keast had levelled at Heilman some ten years before. What matters is, she contends, less what Lear learns than that it is Lear, royal Lear with his demand for absolutes, who learns it, and learns it in a peculiarly direct and physical manner.

The article does not stand alone. The year in which it came out, 1960, also saw the appearance of other writings which move in the same general direction as it does. Robert Ornstein, too, rejected moralizing, saying

rather neatly: 'One can of course read *Lear* as a warning against pride, wrath, or relatives. But I suspect that like all great tragedy *Lear* actually celebrates the vulnerability of man, the sublime folly of his "needs" and aspirations, the irrationality of his demands upon the vast inscrutable universe which surrounds him' (p. 273).³ Two powerful and well reasoned essays in *Shakespeare Survey 13* took issue with Bradley's reading of the play's ending. J. Stampfer, noting that Lear's illusion that Cordelia lives is not confined to his last speech but recurs several times after he enters carrying her body, decides, in his 'The Catharsis of *King Lear*', that the tension in the King right up to the moment of his death is 'between an absolute knowledge that Cordelia is dead, and an absolute inability to accept it' (p. 2). J. K. Walton takes another road to a similar destination. The main experience of Lear in the latter half of the play is, he argues, a continuous enlargement of consciousness. So for him to believe, to the very end, that his daughter is still alive reverses 'the direction of the whole movement which has been taking place' (p. 17). Bradley is, therefore, wrong about 'Lear's Last Speech', as the essay is entitled. To these witnesses one must also add Maynard Mack, who, in his richly suggestive article 'The Jacobean Shakespeare',⁴ writes of Lear at the end of the play:

the man before us . . . who sweeps Kent aside, rakes all who have helped him with grapeshot . . . exults in the revenge he has exacted for Cordelia's death, and dies self-deceived in the thought she still lives – this man is one of the most profoundly human figures ever created in a play; but he is not, certainly, the Platonic ideal laid up in heaven, or in critical schemes, of regenerate man. (p. 38)

¹ *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise*.

² *Critical Quarterly*, 2 (1960).

³ *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy*.

⁴ *Jacobean Theatre*, ed. J. R. Brown and B. Harris (1960).

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Looking back from the vantage-point of today, one can see, I think, that a crucial shift was taking place round about 1960, not only in the controversy as to whether *King Lear* is, or is not a Christian tragedy, but also in critical assumptions and methods. But the shift took time. Two works appearing in that year reassert the Christian reading in all its fullness. G. I. Duthie, in his introduction to the New Cambridge edition, says the play is 'about education . . . conversion, spiritual regeneration, the attainment of salvation' (p. xx); sees Cordelia and Kent as Christ-like figures; and finds a just and merciful, though, he feels constrained to add, inscrutable, God behind the entire action. Irving Ribner is no less assured. Combining his extensive knowledge of medieval and sixteenth-century drama with an almost indiscriminate resort to symbolism – 'All the characters perform symbolic functions' – in the chapter on the play in his *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy*,¹ he has no hesitation about saying that *King Lear* 'affirms justice in the world, which it sees as a harmonious system ruled by a benevolent God' (p. 117).

Few critics and scholars since then have gone quite so far as that, though many continue, as well they might, to see the Lear of the latter part of the play as a better man than the Lear of the first two acts. Chief among the few are Virgil K. Whitaker² and Roy W. Battenhouse.³ Assuming that *King Lear* rests on 'the Christian concept that God permits suffering to try and refine the natures of men' (p. 210), Whitaker, unwittingly one trusts, reveals some of the grislier implications of that notion by telling us, for example, that Lear 'has been stretched long enough upon the rack of this tough world, not so much because he can endure no more as because he has become patient and resigned, perfected in the "ripeness" that is all. He is a higher kind of man for the stretching' (p. 227). Even the blinding of Gloucester is seen simply as an appropriate punishment for the lustful

man (p. 237). The fact that it is more immediately and more pressingly the ironical consequence of Gloucester's charity and heroism in helping the old King his master is conveniently overlooked. Battenhouse goes to work after another fashion. Calling typology to his aid, and taking it for granted that both Shakespeare and his audience were as well versed in the teachings of St Augustine as he is himself, he finds the play informed by 'a background sense of parable, which . . . turns about the possibilities for human progress under providence' (p. 301). There is immense learning behind the book, but one cannot but conclude that it has been misapplied.

Oddly enough Battenhouse makes no more than a passing reference to William Elton's '*King Lear* and the Gods' (1966),⁴ which had come out three years before his own work, and in which the whole question of whether the play is an optimistically Christian drama receives the most thorough and scholarly examination it has ever been subjected to. Looking at the tragedy in the light of the religious beliefs, disbeliefs, and disputes of the time when it was written, Elton distinguishes four main attitudes towards the ultimate governance of the world and the operation of providence in it that are to be found in both Sidney's *Arcadia* and Shakespeare's play. They are: *prisca theologia*, the position of the virtuous heathens who were on the way, as it were, to Christian thinking; atheism; superstition; and *Deus absconditus*, the notion of an inscrutable providence. Having identified these positions, Elton equates the characters of the play with them. Cordelia and Edgar exemplify the first; Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, the second; Gloucester, the third; and Lear himself, the fourth. It all looks highly

¹ 1960.² *The Mirror up to Nature* (San Marino, 1965).³ *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington and London, 1969).⁴ San Marino.

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schematic, yet it does throw an enormous amount of fresh light on the question it attempts to answer. Elton's principal conclusions are: that it is to underestimate 'the complexity both of the play and of Lear's character' to say that he 'repents and attains humility and patience, thus becoming fit for heaven' (p. 283); that 'the double plot is an instrument of complexity, the assurance of a multifaceted ambivalence which, contrary to the salvation hypothesis, probes and tests, without finally resolving, its argument of mysterious human suffering' (*ibid.*); and that the play as a whole is best described as 'a syncretically pagan tragedy' (p. 338). Since those words were written, Robert G. Hunter has tackled the same problem by putting *King Lear* alongside the tragedies which have an undeniably Christian background – *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* – a procedure which leads him to the view that in *King Lear* 'Shakespeare dramatizes the final possibility: there is no God'.¹

That verdict too will no doubt be contested, but in its seeming finality it sounds a suitable note on which to leave this particular topic. Before doing so, however, I must record two reflections which the story of this long-drawn-out controversy brings with it. On the one hand, the determination with which believers and unbelievers alike seek to annex (if that is not too strong a word) the tragedy to their cause is a tremendous tribute to its power and significance; on the other, the peripheral nature, as it seems to me, of much of the learning brought to bear on the issue suggests that there is a real danger that criticism of *King Lear* may degenerate into an arid kind of scholasticism.

Fortunately, that danger has been recognized by some students of the play for some time. The new direction which critical thinking begins to take around 1960, less concerned with ideological considerations and dwelling more on the

poignantly human experience that *King Lear* embodies, becomes clear not only in Knights's essay but also in John Holloway's treatment of the tragedy in his *The Story of the Night* (1961).² In it he expresses his dissatisfaction with the view that the ending is an affirmation of the value of love, because the word 'love' is too vague to cope with 'the range, power and variety of the issues of life on which this incomparable work has touched'; what matters most is that Cordelia is not content to love, she seeks to do – to recover her father his right. This anticipates, in some ways, Paul J. Alpers's dismissal of the whole tendency to make Cordelia a symbolic figure, of which he says: 'Cordelia is Cordelia. Surely there is no need to identify her with the abstraction Love in order to say that she is extraordinarily loving.'³ Moreover, he will have no truck with the kind of moralizing which, he asserts, falsifies the essential experience. He writes:

If we treat Lear's recognition of Cordelia as a moral awareness that gives him a new personal identity, we must claim that his suffering is a good. It seems to me that we must say that Lear's suffering is shocking and heartbreaking and also (not 'and yet') it enables him to say 'Thou art a soul in bliss' and then to recognize his daughter. (*Ibid.*)

This is the kind of response that leads on naturally to Nicholas Brooke's wonderfully economical and penetrating analysis of the drama in his *Shakespeare: King Lear*.⁴ Working his way through the play as it unfolds, he finds the pattern of the action to be one in which hope after hope is raised only to be dashed, a process which reaches its culmination in Albany's speech about rewards and punishments, which is abruptly broken off and made

¹ *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments* (Athens, Georgia, 1976).

² London.

³ 'King Lear and the Theory of the "Sight Pattern"', p. 152.

⁴ 1963.