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King Lear

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King Lear

The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare

VOLUME 17

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDITED BY JOHN DOVER WILSON



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THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

EDITED FOR THE SYNDICS OF THE
CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BY

JOHN DOVER WILSON

KING LEAR

EDITED BY

GEORGE IAN DUTHIE

AND

JOHN DOVER WILSON

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KING LEAR



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TO
DAVID NICHOL SMITH
FROM THE TWO
EDITORS

PREFATORY NOTE

The editing of this play, like that of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1955, has been shared by Professor Duthie and myself. And, as before, he drafted the whole and handed it over to me with permission to make what additions or changes I thought fit. The Introduction (except for a paragraph on page xxiv about Cordelia) and the Note on the Copy are virtually as he gave them to me; and the text also is his, except for some slight adaptation of the stage-directions and emendations here and there, made with his consent. The Glossary too, apart from a few additions, is mainly his. Since, however, the Notes he drafted were predominantly textual in character, it has fallen to me to supply most of the exegesis, such textual notes as I am responsible for being labelled 'J.D.W.'.

His earlier edition of the play, published in 1949, was at once recognized as a landmark in the study of Shakespearian textual criticism. Scholars may well turn then with especial interest to his present Note on the Copy, which embodies some of his second thoughts in the light of subsequent work on the text. Yet in a play like *King Lear* commentary presents problems almost, if not quite, as difficult as those involved in textual decision. And I for my part have been compelled to not a few second thoughts by other collaborators in the edition as a whole, namely Mr C. B. Young and Mr J. C. Maxwell, who read my notes in draft and to whom I owe a good deal more than can be conveniently recorded; while a third friend, Professor Peter Alexander, has always been ready with a word of warning or encouragement. Needless to say, moreover, I have kept the valuable editions of Professor Kenneth Muir

and the late Professor Kittredge constantly before me. Finally—a point well known to scholars—the general reader of a modern text of *King Lear* should be made aware of the great debt all editors of this play owe to Sir Walter Greg's various essays upon it and in particular to that little bibliographical masterpiece *The Variants in the First Quarto of King Lear* (1940), which is the foundation of the present text and will remain the foundation of all future ones.

How many years of his life Professor Duthie has given to the text of *King Lear* I do not know. I have myself only been able to spend sixteen months on the commentary. For life is short and the editing of Shakespeare an endless adventure.

J. D. W.

CHRISTMAS 1958

INTRODUCTION

I. *Sources and Date*

The story of King Lear and his daughters is a very old one, and it had been told by many writers before it supplied Shakespeare with the main plot of his mightiest tragedy. Shakespeare apparently knew four renderings of the tale. He knew it as it is chronicled in the pages of Holinshed. He knew it as it is told in the second book of *The Faerie Queene*. He knew it related—as coming from the mouth of the youngest daughter, after her death—by John Higgins in the *Mirror for Magistrates*. And he knew it already presented in dramatic form, by a playwright whose identity we do not know, as *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*.

The reader who wishes to go into the question of the relationship between Shakespeare's play and its sources should consult first the beautiful and too little known lecture on the subject by R. W. Chambers,¹ and for details an article published in *The Library*² by Sir Walter Greg in 1940. Greg lists some two score parallels³ between Shakespeare's version and the *Leir* play. It would seem, as he says, that, as Shakespeare wrote, 'ideas, phrases, cadences from the old play still floated in his memory below the level of conscious thought, and that now and again one or another helped to fashion the words that flowed from his pen'. He shows also that there are

¹ *King Lear*: the first W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture, by R. W. Chambers (Glasgow, 1940).

² 4th series, xx (1939-40), 377 ff.

³ There was room for only a few of these in our Notes.

places in *Lear* where Shakespeare seems to recall now Holinshed, now Spenser, now Higgins. We find, too, recollections of words and phrases from other books. Shakespeare knew Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, and, as Professor Muir has shown,¹ echoes it frequently in this play. There are echoes also of Florio's translation of Montaigne.² And the Gloucester sub-plot has its source in the story of the Paphlagonian king in Sidney's *Arcadia*. Plenty of Shakespearian reading lies behind this play. But assuredly he did not write it with books at his elbow. And what he remembered from books he used for his own new purposes, transmuting what his memory furnished. He has his own dramatic design to work out. If he recalls and uses words and phrases and situations from one or other of the sources, he is never bound to follow the plot-development of any of them. In Holinshed, Spenser, and Higgins Lear is, after his tribulations, restored to his crown through the military intervention of Cordelia and her husband. He dies in the course of nature, and is succeeded by Cordelia, who rules for a time. She then becomes a victim of rebellion by her nephews, is defeated and imprisoned, and commits suicide. In the *Leir* play we have the restoration of the king to his throne as the ending, with no unhappy fate for Cordelia. Shakespeare differs here (and elsewhere too) from all four source-documents, and is infinitely more powerful. The plot, the tone, and the significances of the drama he produces are his own business.

When did Shakespeare compose *King Lear*? Harsnett's book was entered in the *Stationers' Register* on 16 March 1603; and the Shakespearian *Lear* itself was registered on 26 November 1607, the entry indicat-

¹ In the revised 'Arden' edition of the play (1952), pp. 253 ff.

² *Ibid.* pp. 249 ff.

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ing that it had been performed at court on 26 December 1606. Thus we have clearly established *termini*. Can a more precise date be fixed upon?

Sir Edmund Chambers¹ declares that 'these late eclipses' referred to by Gloucester in 1. 2 'must be the nearly total eclipse of the sun on 2 October 1605 and the partial eclipse of the moon on 27 September 1605'; and he says also that 'there is a fairly palpable imitation of 1. 4. 9-42 in Edward Sharpham's *The Fleir*, 1, *ad fin.*', a work which 'was probably produced after 30 January 1606, registered on May 13, and printed in 1607'. The composition of *Lear*, then, would seem to belong to the winter of 1605-6: and Chambers comments further that 'the earlier part of 1606 seems also to fit best for *Macbeth*, and...the time-table left available by plagues makes it unlikely that two Shakespearean plays appeared almost concurrently at this date and none at all in 1605, which was clearer from sickness'; thus the latter months of 1605 would seem to be indicated for *Lear*. And this fits in very well with the appearance of the principal source, the *Leir* play, which was registered on 8 May 1605, and published in the same year. We can readily imagine Shakespeare studying this book (along with other versions of the story) during the summer and autumn of 1605. The picture seems to be clear enough, and it may indeed be accurate; yet there are difficulties in the way of accepting it—difficulties excellently presented by Sir Walter Greg in the 1940 article already drawn upon.

The earliest record of a *Lear* drama is of two performances of a 'kinge leare' at the Rose in April 1594, in the course of a brief and unsuccessful season there by the Queen's and Sussex' companies jointly. As Greg says, 'It was not a new play, and since there is no trace of it in Sussex' men's repertory during their longer season of

¹ *William Shakespeare* (1930), 1, 468.

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thirty performances the previous Christmas, it presumably belonged to the Queen's'. It was no doubt this play, or a version of it, that was entered in the *Stationers' Register* on 14 May 1594, as 'The moste famous Chronicle historye of Leire kinge of England and his Three Daughters'; but this entry would appear not to have been followed by publication, for on 8 May 1605, we have, entered to Simon Stafford and immediately transferred to John Wright, 'the Tragecall historie of Kinge Leir and his Three Daughters'. 'These entries,' says Greg, 'are sufficient evidence that no edition had followed the entrance of 1594. Had there been one it would presumably have been known: an honest holder of the copy would not have entered it anew, he would have obtained an assignment; while a pirate would have stood to gain nothing by advertising his theft.' The Stafford-Wright entry was followed in the same year by the publication of the *Leir* text which we have already referred to as Shakespeare's main source.

Now there are, about the 1605 *Leir* publication, two odd things which, as Greg shows, suggest that Shakespeare's play was in existence before 8 May 1605.

(1) In the entry, the *Leir* play was originally called a 'Tragedie'; this was subsequently altered to 'Tragecall historie'. Now *Leir* is not a tragedy—and the title-page gives it as a 'true chronicle history'. Reference to the tragic in the *Register* may well be due to the fact that Shakespeare's tragic handling of the story had been recently acted.

(2) The entry refers to *Leir* as having been 'latelie Acted', and the *Leir* title-page carries the legend 'As it hath bene diuers and sundry times lately acted'. Now it is quite possible that the play performed and registered in 1594 was not the same play as that entered and published in 1605. Yet it is equally possible that the two were the same, or closely related; and not only, as Greg

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says, would it be foolish not to apply the principle of Occam's razor, but the style of the play published in 1605 definitely suggests a much earlier date. Greg is surely being very reasonable when he says, 'I find it very difficult to believe that this respectable but old-fashioned play, dating back in all probability to about 1590, had been "divers and sundry times lately acted" in 1605.' But if Shakespeare's new play had been sundry times lately acted by the spring of 1605, it is easy enough to believe that 'it was the popularity of Shakespeare's play that suggested the publication of the old *King Lear*', and that there was a fraudulent intention to pass off the *Lear* volume as giving the text of Shakespeare's recent successful masterpiece.

It seems eminently possible then that Shakespeare wrote *Lear* late in 1604 or early in 1605. How, in that case, did he get his intimate knowledge of the *Lear* play? Are his debts to it due merely to recollection of performances in the first half of the 1590's? This cannot be ruled out as quite impossible, but it does not seem likely. Shakespeare's acquaintance with the old play seems rather too close to make such an explanation plausible. Having given his impressive list of parallels, Greg comments: 'When a general similarity of structure and incident has already betrayed Shakespeare's acquaintance with the earlier piece: then the parallels, I conceive, point to his having read it with some care.' Presumably he read it in manuscript. The manuscript registered in 1594 may have been a transcript, or even a report, of the *Lear* prompt-book: that prompt-book itself may eventually have come into the possession of the Chamberlain's Men: it may have lain unused in their library until Shakespeare read it and decided to transfigure it: and subsequently, in some way, Stafford may have got hold of it. This hypothetical chain of events—advanced as possible by Greg (though he is not very enthusiastic

about it)—has nothing in it inherently unlikely. As for the reference to eclipses which suggests that *Lear* belongs to the later part of 1605: there is always the possibility of the insertion of a topical allusion some time after the composition of the play; but in any case I have never been happy about this kind of evidence for dating. Astrology is a significant dramatic element in *Lear*. Why should it be supposed that if Shakespeare makes a character refer to ‘these late eclipses’ he must needs have in mind eclipses that had actually occurred in the recent experience of himself and his audiences?

I pass to a consideration of Shakespeare’s play in and by itself—the play which Maeterlinck called ‘the mightiest, the vastest, the most stirring, the most intense dramatic poem that has ever been written’.

Indebted to Sir Walter Greg in what has gone before, I am equally indebted, in what follows, to various other recent critics. It happens here—as perhaps elsewhere also—that the editor of a play in a serial edition finds that he has little to say about it that has not been said before, but that he wishes to tell his readers about some of the views—the most important ones, in his opinion—taken by others. He may wish to endorse them, or to oppose them. And if a debt is inadvertently unacknowledged, why then, ‘pray you, forgive and forget’.

II. *The King*

In Shakespeare’s play the king is an impressive, dominating figure. He is aged, and he speaks of himself as about to ‘crawl toward death’ (1. 1. 40). Yet he is in fact robust; for at 1. 4. 8 we find him coming back from hunting, a strenuous pursuit, and calling with hearty appetite for dinner. There is no fatigue here. In the centre of the play he is grievously afflicted by exposure to the fury of the tempest; yet he survives it—and, after

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his ordeal, he has the strength, near the very end, to kill Cordelia's hangman. His physical stamina is indeed extraordinary, and any producer who thought of presenting him as (in Lamb's phrase) 'an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick' would be (in Cordelia's phrase) 'far wide'. And Lear's aspect is indeed royal. The disguised Kent is assuredly using no flattery when at 1. 4. 31 he speaks of Lear as having 'authority' in his countenance—that is, in his bearing. The Lear we see in 1. 1 is a monarch of great age, of powerful physique, of compelling personality. But he is a foolish man. Consider what he does.

Determined to retain the title, status, and prerogatives of a king, he nevertheless wishes to relinquish the actual task of ruling. He has decided to divide his kingdom amongst his three daughters who, with their husbands, will govern their respective regions, under his titular authority. In the first scene of the play he ostensibly holds an auction—the best portion of the kingdom will go to that daughter who by her words indicates that she loves her father best of the three; and so on. But he has already made his division. Before the play has begun, he has decided to give Goneril and Regan exactly equal portions of the realm, and to give Cordelia a portion richer than these.

If he has made his decision already, why should he ask the daughters to speak of their love for him before he formally presents them with their portions? It might be suggested that he wants to corroborate in his own mind, or publicly to display as sound, his previous judgement as to their degrees of affection for him. But this will hardly do. For when the first daughter has spoken, Lear gives her her portion before hearing the second; and when the second has spoken, he gives her her portion before hearing the third. His real reason for making his daughters speak of their love is just that he likes to hear

himself praised on ceremonial occasions. He knew that Goneril would flatter him, that Regan would flatter him; and he enjoys their flattery. He was confident that Cordelia—his particular favourite—would excel them in adulation. His own words give him away. ‘Now, our joy,’ he says,

what can you say to draw

A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

The matter is already decided. Lear leans back to enjoy the culmination of the performance he has staged. But the words do not come, and he immediately casts her off. And to his fault of vanity is joined the fault of rashness. When his pride receives an affront he reacts intemperately. He lacks self-control. Passion usurps the place of reason. And this is not merely the result of old age—he ‘hath ever but slenderly known himself’, and ‘the best and soundest of his time hath been but rash’.

None of the pre-Shakespearian versions gives any reasonable excuse for Lear’s rejection of Cordelia. But with the love-contest the matter is different. In the old *Leir* play the love-contest is not originally the king’s idea. Leir’s queen has died and the funeral has just taken place. His three daughters are unmarried. He now wants to marry them to ‘princely mates’ for their own good; for, deprived of their mother’s care, they are like ‘a ship without a stern’, since a father can manage sons but does not know how to guide daughters. In addition, he wants to resign his crown, for he is old and tired and hopes to devote himself to the contemplative life. He wishes therefore to divide his realm amongst the three daughters as dowry. He will thus kill two birds with one stone.

One of his lords, Skalliger, advises him to modify his plan. He recommends him

To make them each a jointure more or less
 As is their worth, to them that love profess.

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Leir rejects this:

No more, nor less, but even all alike.

But he subsequently decides to conduct the contest. When he does, he speaks as if the idea is his own and has just occurred to him—

I am resolv'd, and even now my mind
 Doth meditate a sudden stratagem,
 To try which of my daughters loves me best.

The old playwright is inconsistent. But the fact that the plan is not Leir's in the first place does suggest a mitigation of his blameworthiness. And yet Leir does not need this mitigation; for in deciding to conduct the contest he has a motive which is at once reasonable and well-intentioned.

The two elder daughters have suitors whom they are prepared to accept. But the youngest, Cordella, though 'solicited by divers peers', will accept none of them. She will not marry anyone 'unless love allows', and as yet none has appeared whom she can love. This naturally causes Leir anxiety—his youngest child has no one to look after her properly. It is this commendable anxiety which causes him to institute the love-contest. He calculates thus: when his daughters declare how much they love him, they will 'contend each to exceed the other in their love' (and, if we regard this as rather cynical, the atmosphere of the passage permits us to visualize a twinkle in the old king's eye). 'Then,' he continues,

at the vantage will I take Cordella.
 Even as she doth protest she loves me best,
 I'll say 'Then, daughter, grant me one request,
 To show thou lov'st me as thy sisters do,
 Accept a husband whom myself will woo.'
 This said, she cannot well deny my suit,
 Although, poor soul, her senses will be mute.

Then will I triumph in my policy,
 And match her with a king of Brittany.

No doubt this is hardly honourable (quite apart from the fact that Leir does not know his Cordella): but it is rational; and the trick is a loving stratagem. Shakespeare rejects it altogether—surely because he wants to relate Lear's questioning of his daughters simply and solely to a serious character-defect. In his opening scene Shakespeare will give Lear no excuse whatever for what he does. Shakespeare wants, at the outset, to establish firmly in our minds the notion of *hamartia*. In a brilliant book on *Hamlet* recently published¹ Professor Alexander makes light of that notion in connection with *Hamlet*: it is certainly relevant to *Lear*.

The *Leir* playwright is, I have said, inconsistent. Having given the king a rational and good-hearted motive for arranging the love-contest, he makes him react to Cordella's honesty in an intemperate way which disconcerts us because Leir has so far been so reasonable. The writer does not seem able to give a consistent characterization of the king at the start. Shakespeare is quite clear, to the king's disadvantage.

The absurdity of Lear's conduct in Shakespeare's first scene is such as to induce some critics to say that the scene is 'improbable'. Thus Coleridge declared that '*Lear* is the only serious performance of Shakespeare the interest and situations of which are derived from the assumption of a gross improbability'.² Professor Charlton says, in his book *Shakespearian Tragedy*, published in 1948 (in which what I have just been writing about Leir and Lear at the beginning of the story is more felicitously put), that 'Shakespeare's version has more

¹ *Hamlet, Father and Son* (1955).

² *Coleridge's Shakespearian Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor (1930), I, 59.

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improbabilities in it than has any of the older versions'.¹ Yet I doubt whether the 'improbabilities' of 1. 1 trouble any audience in the theatre; for the might of Shakespeare's poetry conveys to our imaginations 'an elemental human world', and we do not think altogether in terms of commonplace probability. This is going to be a huge, momentous, universal tragedy—essentially different from the old *Leir* play in which, as Professor Charlton says, 'the anonymous dramatist set the whole scene in an atmosphere of everyday reasonable probability'. Consider the two elder sisters, for instance. In the old play they are, as Charlton says again, 'commonplace in their littlenesses. They regard Cordella as a "proud pert Peat", mainly because she copies the cut of all the new frocks which they put on so that they may compete with her greater natural prettiness'. How different is this from Shakespeare's presentation of two moral monsters! What Goneril and Regan have in their hearts is quintessential evil. Thus Shakespeare withdraws from them the kind of real-life actuality which they have in the old play. He makes them more improbable. But by the power of his imagination, and of the poetry which expresses it, he makes them seem frighteningly real to us in a deeper sense.

Professor Tucker Brooke declares² that in Shakespeare's *Lear* 'the theme is bourgeois, in spite of the rank of the protagonists; the vices portrayed are mean and the virtues homely'. I cannot think that this is a proper estimate. Professor Tucker Brooke's words are indeed very applicable to the old play. But Shakespeare's transformation of the old play lifts the story out of the everyday bourgeois world and into the sphere of the elemental.

¹ Charlton, *op. cit.* p. 198.

² In *A Literary History of England*, ed. A. C. Baugh (1948), p. 536.

III. *Cordelia*

At the beginning of Shakespeare's play, Lear is foolish. At the end, he is a man who has learned wisdom. And it is an appalling intensity of suffering that has taught him this wisdom. This is a play about education. It is not essentially different to say that it is also a play about conversion, spiritual regeneration, the attainment of salvation. At the beginning Lear is spiritually bankrupt; at the end he is (to use a phrase of Marlowe's) 'i' the way to heaven'. 'The Lear that dies is not a Lear defiant, but a Lear redeemed. His education is complete, his regeneration accomplished.'¹

His initial folly and lack of spiritual health result in his rejection of Cordelia. The wisdom and spiritual health which he ultimately achieves result in his kneeling before Cordelia. How does Shakespeare want us to think of Cordelia?

She is conceived as a Christ-like figure. This is indicated by words applied to her by other characters and by words she herself speaks.

It is a feature of Shakespeare's art that he sometimes makes a character express itself in words and phrases the surface meaning of which, important in itself, is quite clear—but the words and phrases chosen to express this surface meaning have certain well-defined and widely-accepted associations, so that, as the character speaks, it becomes surrounded in the audience's imaginations with a certain atmosphere. Cordelia's grief over her father's sufferings is thus described in 4. 3. 30-1:

There she shook
 The holy water from her heavenly eyes
 That clamour moistened.

¹ J. Dover Wilson, *The Essential Shakespeare* (1937), p. 126.

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On the surface the meaning is simply that her beautiful eyes shed tears which were caused by her truly filial feeling. And it would be absurd to brush the surface meaning aside as unimportant—it is the primary meaning. But the words ‘holy water’, conjoined with the word ‘heavenly’, could not but suggest to Shakespeare’s contemporary audiences a Christ-like atmosphere about Cordelia. ‘The reference is certainly to the holy water of ecclesiastical usage’, says Mr Bethell;¹ and he points out that holy water, ‘being prepared with the addition of salt, furnishes an especially appropriate conceit’. In the next scene Cordelia says

O, dear father,
 It is thy business that I go about,

echoing words of the child Christ quoted in the second chapter of St Luke. In 4.7 she says to her father who, as yet, cannot hear her,

and wast thou fain, poor father,
 To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn,
 In short and musty straw?

No doubt Shakespeare has in memory the line in Higgins in which Cordila, contrasting her earlier life of prosperity with her subsequent experience in prison, uses the words

From dainty beds of down, to be of straw full fain.

But surely he also has in mind the story of the Prodigal Son who, according to one version, ‘wolde faine have filled his bellie with y^e huskes, that the swine ate’.² The Prodigal returned to his father and declared that he was

¹ *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (1944), p. 59.

² Quoted from *The Newe Testament* (Geneva, 1560). So also *The Bible... Imprinted at London by the Deputies of Christopher Barker... 1594*—‘And he woulde faine have filled his bellie with the huskes, that the swine ate....’

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no longer worthy to be called his son. In essentially the same way Lear kneels before Cordelia—the parent and child roles are reversed. The Prodigal's father symbolizes the Divine. Once more Shakespeare invests Cordelia with an aura of Christian purity. In the same scene, a moment or two later, Lear comes to consciousness and speaks to Cordelia—

Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
 Upon a wheel of fire...

suggesting the Christian notions of Heaven and Purgatory. And this Christ-like nature of Cordelia is suggested not only in the later stages of the play, but at the start as well—by the same method of the use of evocative words. Mr Bethell (to whom, as to Professor Heilman,¹ I am greatly indebted) quotes words spoken by the King of France in 1. 1. France cannot think that Cordelia has been guilty of any heinous offence,

which to believe of her
 Must be a faith that reason without miracle
 Should never plant in me.

The surface meaning is plain enough, and of course France is not consciously speaking in Christian terms. But Shakespeare's contemporary audiences could not but mark the suggestive significance of the juxtaposition of words like 'believe', 'faith', 'miracle'. What Lear rejects at the start is the truth and wisdom that Christianity cherishes: by the end, through suffering, he has come to see the value of that truth and wisdom. The play is, of course, set in pre-Christian times; there is no overt reference to Christianity, and there is indeed only one reference (5. 3. 17) to 'God' in the singular (and this may be a piece of Shakespearian carelessness). The point

¹ See his book *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in 'King Lear'* (1948).

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is that this is 'a Christian play about a pagan world'.¹ Setting the scene in an age-old pagan time, Shakespeare traces the progress of a foolish man towards the attainment of wisdom—and the wisdom Shakespeare has in mind is the kind of wisdom he himself values most highly. That is the wisdom of Christianity. In anachronistically echoing words of Holy Writ, and words of particular significance in Christianity, Shakespeare knows what he is doing. He is virtually saying—this is the kind of wisdom that all men, at all times, should strive to attain. He means this play to be of universal significance; it is not a period piece.

Cordelia symbolizes a set of values; but at the same time she is a human being, a person in the play. There are critics who feel disposed to blame her somewhat in the first scene. Surely, they think, she is a little too blunt—surely her affection for her father might have led her to pardon his error, and to humour him a little. On her stark 'Nothing, my lord' Coleridge comments²—'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".' In our own day, the late George Gordon has reproved Cordelia in kindly fashion.³ He speaks of the barbarous idea, entertained by some of the characters, that 'Age is unnecessary': and he says, 'Even Cordelia, if I may dare to say it, sinned a little from youth—simply from not properly understanding the feelings—or, if you like, the weakness—of Age.... She has "l'esprit géométrique", and will not play the old man's game. "So young, my Lord, and true", needs some interpreting. True she was, but—oh!—so young!' This is a humane attitude, courteously and gently expressed.

¹ J. C. Maxwell, *M.L.R.* XLV (1950), 142.

² I quote from Furness, note *ad loc.*; cf. Raysor, I, 60-1.

³ See his *Shakespearian Comedy* (1944), p. 122.

Yet does it not, and still more what Coleridge hints of pride and sullenness', misunderstand completely the situation in which she stands, misinterpret the very tones of her voice? When Kent protests a little later,

Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least;
 Nor are those empty hearted whose low sounds
 Reverb no hollowness,

he is clearly comparing the subdued, almost whispered, tones of Cordelia's reply to Lear with the brazen speeches of her sisters. For no one can suppose that she liked answering her father in this way or did not realize that she was putting him to shame. The agony was that she had to: he left her no choice. She was of course disgusted by Goneril and Regan's hypocrisy but not surprised: she knew them well. What afflicted her was that the father to whom she was devoted asked her to sell her soul, to purchase a kingdom by coining the love she bore him into words of flattery so as to outbid her sisters.

I will not praise that purpose not to sell²

declared her creator finding himself in a predicament somewhat similar though, we may guess, far less distressing. For she was a young girl, the youngest of three daughters in an age when all unmarried daughters were little more than bond-slaves of their fathers; her father, who had never known his will thwarted, sat in majesty upon his throne; and she had to make her declaration before the whole court. And so when she heard the outrageous question

What can you say to draw
 A third more opulent than your sisters?

even though she knew it was coming, what other possible reply could she give than a low voiced 'Nothing'? She could not heave her heart into her mouth.

² Sonnet 21, l. 14.

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But the warmth of the love she was unable to express
 might have been felt had Lear the open heart to detect it.

Good my lord,
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I
 Return those duties back as are right fit,
 Obey you, love you, and most honour you.

The balance between ‘begot—bred—loved’ and ‘obey—love—honour’ is no mere rhetorical trick. I cannot think that any intelligent authority on prosody, commenting on the last of these lines, a very beautiful line, could fail to note the deep emotion it evinces. The effect of its component parts is cumulative. ‘Obey you’ is succeeded by a slight pause: ‘love you’ is succeeded by a slight pause: ‘and most honour you’ is in its second and third syllables long drawn out, intensely, and so honestly! Her dwelling on ‘most’, disturbing the strict parallelism of verbs noted a moment ago, is significant. If Lear cannot hear the difference between this and the spurious showmanship of Goneril and Regan, it is he, and not Cordelia, who is at fault. And the whole design of the play bears this out. On both the naturalistic and the symbolic level Cordelia stands vindicated at the start as at the end.

Truth speaks with ‘a still small voice’,

whose low sounds
 Reverb no hollowness.

And at the end of the play Lear tells us:

her voice was ever soft,
 Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.

The verbal echo is significant. After education by suffering, Lear can see that what he rejected was the last thing in the world that he should have rejected. In Cordelia there is nowhere any fault.

IV. *Kent*

In 1.1 Cordelia knows that Lear is rejecting the true and accepting the false. She also knows, or at least clearly suspects, that what he is doing will in all probability turn out to his disadvantage as regards his own worldly prosperity and physical welfare. To her sisters she says, 'I know you what you are'. If she stood within her father's favour she 'would prefer him to a better place'. 'Love well our father,' she tells them;

To your professéd bosoms I commit him.

The implication in 'professéd' is clear.

Now the Earl of Kent shows the same two-sided awareness of Lear's folly. He knows that Lear's youngest daughter does not love him least. He knows that the words of Goneril and Regan are hollow. He knows, that is, that Lear, with his lack of sound judgement, is rejecting the true and accepting the false. At the same time he knows that Lear is being foolish on the level of practical prudence. He begs him to 'reserve (his) state'. Lear is running his head into a noose. Lear threatens Kent with death. Kent retorts that he does not fear to lose his life, 'thy safety being motive'. He knows that Lear's 'safety' is threatened by his actions in this first scene, and he wants Lear to be safe.

Kent's perspicacity, as regards both morality and prudence, is similar to Cordelia's; and that we should think of the two characters as standing for the same values is underlined by the fact that a certain pair of antithetical key-words is applied to them both in this tremendous opening scene. Cordelia certainly speaks with 'plainness', and Lear takes this as 'pride'. Kent declares that, when majesty stoops to folly, 'to plainness honour's bound', and Lear thinks that Kent shows

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'strained pride'. Both are 'plain'; Lear thinks of both as exhibiting 'pride'. Moreover, when Lear says

Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her,

the attentive reader or spectator realizes that Cordelia has never actually used the word 'plainness', whereas Kent has! Shakespeare associates Cordelia and Kent so closely in his mind that he can write as if he were confusing them. I have spoken of Cordelia as a Christ-like figure. Inasmuch as Kent, wrongly cast out by Lear, is irresistibly impelled by his love to humble himself, adopting a lowly disguise, in order to protect and help the man who had rejected him, we may think of him too as having a Christ-like quality.

Like Cordelia, Kent may perhaps be accused by some of a fault in not having humoured the weakness of age in his master. Admittedly, he speaks very directly to Lear. Should he not have pruned his terms a little, in deference to the human frailty of a beloved sovereign? I cannot believe that Shakespeare means us to think in this way. Not only are the things that Kent says true and wise: it is also quite clear that everything he says in this first scene is prompted by devotion to Lear's physical, as well as moral and spiritual, welfare. And by the end of the play Lear has learned that Kent was quite right in what he said.

Just as Lear's reconciliation at the end with the Cordelia whom he had rejected at the start is imaginatively emphasized by the repetition of the word 'low' with reference to her voice (1. 1. 147; 5. 3. 273), so we find emphasized by other verbal echoes that, through his suffering, Lear learns the wisdom that Kent had at the beginning. At 1. 1. 145 Kent cries out—

What wouldst thou do, old man?

Lear is king, and Kent has always honoured him as such (1. 1. 139). But, readily and properly admitting Lear's