The influence of Christian moral doctrine upon the interpretation of *King Lear* has given us the story of a penitent’s progress through a school of suffering to the great spiritual discovery of love. One characteristic formulation is: “…the declining action which is the dogging of the hero to death is complemented by a rising action which is the hero’s regeneration. . . . Its primary story is not the descent of the King into Hell but the ascent of the King as he climbs the mountain of Purgatory and is fulfilled.”¹ This view has been presented with varying degrees of subtlety, with varying degrees of allowance for the obdurate residue of pain and loss, with varying degrees of analytical sophistication. And indeed it has much to substantiate it. The highly symmetrical morality play grouping, suggesting Everyman traveling toward Death between false friends and true friends; the plenitude of references to the great topics of Christian reflection—*nosce teipsum*, man and nature, providence, wisdom and folly, deceptive appearances; the powerful polarization of good and evil; the story of the Abasement of the Proud King:² all lend themselves to assimilation in the direction of Christian myth, particularly if one is permitted to invoke what Enid Welsford has called “the wilder paradoxes” of the Christian religion.³ Yet the optimistic Christian reading fails to take adequate account of Lear’s state of mind at the close of the play. It imposes upon what is exhibited the idea that Lear, having passed through the refining fires of affliction and attained humility, patience and self-knowledge, is thereby redeemed: “*King Lear* is, like the *Paradiso*, a vast poem on the victory of true love.”⁴ Opponents of this view will be quick to point out that what we witness is considerably more in the nature of a defeat than a victory, that love proves to be the ultimate and most bitter mockery of the human condition, and that the unholy *pietà* of the final scene, as Lear enters with Cordelia in his arms, is an appalling parody not less than satanic in its import.
It is my purpose here to argue that love has only obliquely to do with the case, though filial reconciliation has seldom been more movingly portrayed; that it is the inadequacy, if anything, of love to redeem that is the burden of the play, though love is given, in Cordelia, France, the Fool, Kent, Gloucester, Edgar, in the obscure impulse which moves Cornwall’s servants to turn against their master and succor a blind old man, and in Lear himself, a rich variety of forms more compelling, persuasive, and ethically appealing than in any other of the great tragedies; that what is enacted is a titanic agon rather than a purgatorial progress; and that the death of Cordelia, at which the sensibility of the eighteenth century shuddered, and which the sensibility of the twentieth century shudderingly embraces, is dramatically intelligible. By dramatically intelligible I mean intelligible not in terms either of a providentialist or a nihilist philosophy, but in terms of that tragic movement of the spirit which the play dramatizes, a necessary part of the self-discovery of which the play is a mimesis.

The sins of Lear, for which, it is so often held, he is punished, have been indefatigably catalogued. Wicked pride, self-will, self-love, vanity, choler, egoism, senile puerility, a crass materialism which views love as a commodity to be bartered and traded, tyranny, sloth, and want of courage, which lays down burdens and offers as rationalization the excuse of old age—all have found their place, severally and together, in the indictment of Lear. And as the indictment grows heavier, the punishment becomes more and more deserved, at the very least justifiable upon Regan’s pedagogic grounds:

O! Sir, to willful men,
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters.

(II.iv.304-306)
The play makes Regan the spokesman of this cold self-righteousness, rendering further comment unnecessary. But under any guise, the moral sense which can be stifled by the logic of Job’s comforters is probably impervious to tragic experience. Bildadism is so prevalent in the criticism of King Lear, I suggest, because the play is a Shakespearean version of the Book of Job, raising the problem of undeserved suffering with a similar insistence, power, and intensity. The Elizabethans saw Job as the pattern of all patience which Lear invokes on the heath; but in the rebellion which is a constitutive part of that ancient contest with God the imagination reared upon the Scriptures could hardly have failed to find the paradigm of what Harbage has so perceptively isolated for comment: “Lear’s molten indignation, his huge invective, his capacity for feeling pain.”

Like Job, Lear takes his initial prosperity as a sign of heavenly favor; like Job in affliction, he calls the heavens themselves to heavenly account. Like Job, though he die for it, yet will he affirm his own conviction of what injustice is. Like Job, his natural egotism reaches beyond itself to embrace a universe of suffering creatures and returns to the bedrock reality of the suffering creature. Like Job, he refuses to compromise with pain and with evil; refuses to surrender to the plot of optimistic quietism whereby pain and evil are denied, are made into goods, disciplinary or deserved or redemptive; are made nonexistent. Lear, raging in the storm, is no hero of renunciation but of an enormous expostulation; “raging, ravening and uprooting into the desolation of reality.” What is dramatized in the action of Lear is the opposite of resignation. It is the way in which an erring man’s passionate protest against injustice and humiliation affirms human dignity despite the most relentless pressure of cruelty, cynicism, and degradation that can be brought to bear on it.

So much ink has been spilt upon the allegation that Lear’s proposed division of the kingdom was in itself in some way wrong or morally reprehensible that it is worth pausing for a moment to consider its implications. One eminent scholar has defended it thus:
... to withdraw in one’s age from the cares of state has the appearance of wisdom, to dispose of one’s goods by gift instead of testament the appearance of generosity. ... The things Lear wants—fidelity and love—are good things. That he should find them in his servant and his child seems to him an aspect of universal order.  

But I believe we can pursue the point even further. Given that Lear wished both to withdraw in his old age from the cares of state and to leave his kingdom in good order, three alternative courses of action were open to him: primogeniture, complete equality of division between his heirs, and that disposition of affairs which would reflect an ideal justice—“honours, rewards and benefits bestowed according to virtue and merit.” Cordelia was Lear’s favorite daughter not without good reason, as the outcome of events certainly confirms, and if he wished to make sure of her having her share, her deservedly largest share, this can be seen as not only truly just but also sensible. But the justice and reasonableness of the decision require public demonstration, public confirmation. Hence the so-called love-test, conceived as purely formal, a ceremonial which shall reflect and make manifest the self-evident justice of his distribution.

Coleridge long ago noted Shakespeare’s antedating of the particulars of the proposed division of the kingdom in the form of the court gossip of the prefatory scene. Coleridge’s conclusion, dictated by his bias toward psychological realism (“the trial of love is but a trick; and ... the grossness of the old king’s rage is in part the natural result of a silly trick suddenly and most unexpectedly baffled and disappointed”) proved reductive; it fathered a host of later vulgarizations of the tragic predicament which make of Lear at the very beginning of the play a senile, obtuse, or crass materialist, who must be chastised into learning what every Sunday-school child knows by heart.

The technique of juxtaposition in evidence here has been used by Shakespeare before, most notably in Richard II, a play anticipatory of King Lear in many ways and particularly in its exploration of self-
There, too, in Act I formal ritualistic ceremonies are juxtaposed with glimpses behind the scenes which disclose the realities of state politics. There are two languages: the language of chivalric challenge and counterchallenge, and the language of political facts and political accommodations. In the conversation between Kent and Gloucester, which reveals, be it noted, no particular dismay on their part regarding the proposed division, it is the Dukes of Albany or Cornwall whom the King favors or does not favor. Here the two languages—the matter-of-fact language of state gossip and the language of ceremony with its elaborate and symmetrical theatricality—serve notice that the division scene is deliberately staged, a public ceremonial dramatizing and sanctioning a decision which a moment’s simple arithmetic shows has in fact already been made. Recent criticism has rightly stressed the ritualistic nature of the scene, and has enabled us thereby to perceive, rather than Coleridge’s signs of senility (there are indeed far more signs of “senility” in the recovery scenes than here), the degree to which Lear’s first speech is in fact cogent, decisive, and masterful. Lear is impressively in command of the court and his faculties.

We are invited, I suggest, to perceive what Lear’s symbolic ceremony was meant by him to represent: the act of a wise, responsible, and careful king, prudent in looking ahead and capable of disciplining himself in his own lifetime to the conferring of power upon younger strengths. It is to be a ritual enactment of wise and just rule (the very opposite of caprice or chance), which distributes rewards and powers where “nature doth with merit challenge.” Moreover, Lear’s “quantification of love,” boldly ritualized, has warrant in the semantics of the concept itself. Anglo-Saxon “lofian” (and one sense of “love” as late as 1596, according to the Oxford English Dictionary) meant to estimate, evaluate, appraise (compare the colloquial “dear” of today). That Regan metaphorically coins herself to metal in her reply while Cordelia in her rejection invokes a “bond” (hardly to be cleared of fiscal associations) is Shakespeare’s way of meshing into the language of the play a universal aspect of human evaluations.
But, and this is the crucial point, between Regan’s “I am of that self-same mettle as my sister” and Cordelia’s “according to my bond” occurs the play’s definitive event. The replies of Goneril and Regan are according to expectation—ours and Lear’s. Cordelia’s is not. Cordelia refuses to play her ceremonial part. She rejects form in favor of substance and thereby irremediably alters the terms of reference of the entire scene. Lear was on dangerous ground in his identification of the theatre of the world with the theatre in his mind. Like Hamlet in the staging of his Mousetrap, he believes that he can stage-manage nature, master reality, make his will, his “sovereignty, knowledge and reason,” transparent in appearances. But, in the autocracy his composite role of king, father, lawgiver, judge, and magistrate has nourished, he has taken insufficient account of the wayward obduracy of needs and desires—his own and others’. The problem of sibling rivalry, for instance, is evidently not a planet which has swum into his ken (nor into Gloucester’s), though Shakespeare’s awareness of that dimension of his fable is fully exhibited in Cordelia’s replies and in the parting dialogue between the sisters. And yet, it is important to perceive, though he exhibits something less than the wisdom of Solomon in his grand ceremony, he might have got away with it. Three formal declarations of love and loyalty, whatever the details of their expression, would perfectly have served his purposes. But three such formal declarations are precisely what he does not receive. And the nonmaterialization of the third is what shatters his staged demonstration, brutally translates his language of ritual into the language of personal feeling, and causes the wounded rage which leads him to commit his fatal error.

“But goes thy heart with this?” is a crucial moment. It shows Lear to be less naïve, less “puerile” and unsophisticated, than many of his critics (notably Wilson Knight) have made him out. He is perfectly aware of a possible discrepancy between speech and intention. But Cordelia’s reply, the cold rationality with which (in mirror-image fashion) she halves love and denies him its mysterious fullness which is beyond mathematics, leaves him no recourse, in his bewildered incredu-
lity, mortification and disappointment, but the punitive passion which presently breaks out in the writ of disinheritance. There is between these two protagonists, both proud, both self-righteously rationalizing their own spontaneous emotions—he, the insult of his repudiated gift, she, her inability to “heave her heart into her mouth”—both at fault, an irreducible clash of will, understanding, and purpose. It is a clash whose terrifying inevitability is grounded in the most familiar and universal of circumstances: the parental-filial “knot intrinsicate,” which of all other relations is the most familiar to human beings. His conception of his dignity and her idea of hers are in fatal opposition. His demand for the tenderness she denies him and hers for truth are irreconcilable in the situation created. But if he, in his artist’s hubris has created the situation, she, in her moralist’s zeal fails to save it. If he imputes to her a gross self-interest in his warning, “Nothing will come of nothing,” it is also possible to hear among the many echoes of the word “nothing” an echo from Corinthians 13, to Cordelia’s disadvantage: what after all could he have done, with the form of his authority thus repudiated? He is publicly shamed and humiliated by his best-loved daughter, beneficiary of his just affection, argument of his praise and balm of his age. What would Cordelia have had him do? Is not her truth—her “nothing”—too much less than the truth? Is it not also, in its way, a false appearance, well-intentioned (unlike Edmund’s “nothing” later) but nevertheless misleading? Is her appeal to reason totally free of Coleridge’s “little faulty admixture of pride and sullenness,” aroused by her sister’s fulsome usurpation (as she sees it) of the truth she cherishes as her own prerogative?

Yet when Lear disinherits Cordelia—“so young and so untender”—invoking the universal laws of nature themselves to abrogate the other natural law of paternal care and propinquity of blood, he is manifestly, violently, unjust, as Kent’s interference powerfully conveys. This ferocious plucking out of the eye that has offended is a colossal hubris. Without hesitation he takes upon himself both the knowledge and the execution of a justice of iron symmetry—nothing for nothing—blind
to human vulnerability, to the falsity of the position he has placed her in, and to the source of his own passionate violence. As the shrewdest of his daughters notes, he has ever but slenderly known himself, let alone the needs and desires of others. There is no more compelling rendering in literature of what Tyndale, in a strikingly apposite passage, called natural blindness:

The root of all evil and the greatest damnation and most terrible wrath and vengeance of God that we are in, is natural blindness. We are all out of the right way. One judgeth this best, another that to be best. Now is worldly wit nothing else but craft and subtlety to obtain that which we judge falsely to be best. As I err in my wit, so err I in my will. When I judge that to be evil which indeed is good, then hate I that which is good. And when I suppose that good which is evil,indeed then love I evil. And if I be persuaded and borne in hand that my most friend is mine enemy, then hate I my best friend; and if I be brought in belief that my most enemy is my friend, then love I my most enemy."

The chiastic symmetry of Tyndale’s syntax delineates with deadly accuracy the mutual blindness from which this tragedy takes its rise.

Our clear perception of the import of this opening sequence is impeded by the attempt to find Lear solely to blame for the assault which is presently to be made upon him. The more culpable Lear is made to appear the more Christlike Cordelia becomes, while the exculpation of Lear involves the incrimination of Cordelia. It is precisely this transvaluation of contraries, this dialectic of guilt, that the predicament dramatizes. As Gloucester observed, “The wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, but nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects.” The reasoning of it thus and thus, which takes up so much critical energy, prevents us from properly perceiving the sequent effects, and distracts our attention from the precision of the dramaturgy. Only, I believe, when we perceive the true nature of the predicament, when we fully take in—it is the fool’s single and obsessive theme—that it is not
the original proposed division of the kingdom, nor even the love-test as such, that constitutes Lear’s fatal error, but, specifically and precisely, the redistribution which actually takes place, the disinheritance of Cordelia and the giving of entire power into the hands of the wicked sisters, are we enabled to follow the tragic progress which takes shape upon the basis of the folktale.

Lear’s fatal error is the occasion for the villainy which waits in ambush to express its evil nature. The error, itself the issue of an impossible choice, creates impossible choices for all about him: choices between virtue and expediency, obedience and conscience, integrity and self-betrayal. Kent’s loyal and reckless courage, Burgundy’s venality, France’s magnanimity, Goneril’s calculated opportunism instance the possibilities. But it is to be noted that these possibilities for good and ill precede the initial situation. They represent the perennial stuff of human nature, of human motivations. The King’s error exposes, and exposes him to, the plighted cunning of the sisters; but it does not cause it, any more than the good sport that there was at Edmund’s illegitimate making causes his doctrine of ruthless self-interest. It is a moment’s folly, a breach through which evil rushes, disintegrating his monolithic identity. He becomes, if not a hero with a thousand faces, at least a fractured glass, the shivered fragments of which are reflected separately in each of the figures that surround him, as the division scene is reflected in phantasmagoric parodies.

That both Cordelia on the one hand and Goneril and Regan on the other embody, represent, or reflect aspects of their father has often been observed; Cordelia his pride, Goneril and Regan the retributive calculus which in him appears to be the rational order of justice, in them is the correlative of predatory and self-seeking gain. The fool reflects his folly, Kent his integrity; Gloucester, co-protagonist, his entire tragic role. Yet they are his antitheses as well: the fool wiser than he in his practical wisdom; Kent unchanging, too old at forty-eight for the great excursions into wisdom of the King at eighty; Gloucester submissive, where he is indomitable.
It is not my purpose here to enumerate in detail the multiplicity of effects arising from the contrast in resemblance of the subplot’s mirror-image. It constitutes Shakespeare’s most sustained and complex system of mirrors; and because it is both complex and systematic, it is the matrix of unlimited interrelated relationships and cross-relationships. The basic equation is that Lear is to Gloucester as Cordelia is to Edgar and Goneril and Regan to Edmund. But Edmund, too, is a mirror-image of Lear, and so is Edgar. Edmund is, at his first appearance in the play, much concerned with distribution and division, in the mode of getting rather than giving, and with argument, derived by way of a perverse skepticism, from the same calculus of merit and desert. Nature is his goddess as she is Lear’s, but it is to natural law that he gives his allegiance not natural law. Again, Edgar, outcast and refugee, despised and rejected of men, mirrors Lear in his aspect of naked man and victim. The subplot is that feature of the play’s invention which accounts for the sheer magnitude of Lear, for it brings under the aspect of unity a truly awesome multiplicity of parts. The play, on its account, possesses the systematic symmetry of Julius Caesar or Richard II, the improvising spontaneity of Hamlet, which arises from the generation within the scheme of fresh relationships and fresh awarenesses in the process of action, and the dense texture of verbal recurrences of Macbeth.

When we next see Lear after the division scene, much has occurred. Edmund’s plot has been conceived and initiated, and the orderly disposition of events in the world called into radical question by Gloucester’s nervous premonitions. Lear now speaks prose, and the discrepancy between the high style of his announcement of intention to the court—“while we unburdened crawl toward death”—and the colloquialism of “Let me not stay a jot for dinner” generates irony. A lifetime’s high living and hearty appetite, so far from preceding a comfortable and enjoyable retirement, is, as the audience anticipates, upon the verge of disastrous deprivation. The first intimation is the insolence of the lackey Oswald; but to Lear’s imperious habit the world seems merely asleep, insufficiently alert to his presence. It is not until Lear
calls for his fool that we are made aware of a subterranean ferment of consciousness.

The fool, gnomic truthteller, yet another reflection of Lear who has been a fool, serves as a sounding board for the events in Lear’s mind. It is significant that the latter demands his presence at the moment when a reluctant admission of the way things are is elicited by his knight’s sympathetic anxiety: “Thou but remembr’rest me of mine own conception. I have perceived a most faint neglect of late, which I have rather blamed as mine own jealous curiosity than as a very pretense and purpose of unkindness” (I.iv.70-74). The fool throughout their dialogue mirrors Lear’s mind, articulates his foreboding anxiety, and allows him a hidden self-examination, a dialogue between self and soul in which, however, he can still take refuge in the props of his long-established role: “Take heed, sirrah; the whip” (I.iv.116). The echoes—“Nothing can be made out of nothing”; “thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav’st thy golden one away”; “thou hast pared thy wit o’ both sides, and left nothing i’ th’ middle”; “now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am a Fool, thou art nothing”—keep the past simmering in the present and ominously anticipate the arrival of Goneril with her attack upon the knights. Lear’s “Are you our daughter?” is another form of the question he asked Oswald: “Who am I sir?” to which he received the reply: “My Lady’s father.” Therefore when he bursts out with

Does any here know me? This is not Lear:
Does Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied—Ha! Waking? ’tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?

(I.iv.234-238)

the effect is of a disorientation already far advanced.

Lear has given his golden crown away, and with it, he discovers, as every normal expectation is reversed, his identity. He is appalled as
only a man who recognizes a terrible truth can be. Yet he thrusts away the knowledge, taking up the fool’s “Lear’s shadow” in a self-protective sense. This must be a nightmare illusion, else he should be false persuaded he had daughters. With heavy sarcasm he inquires her name. She counters with a plain unvarnished tale indeed: of his “pranks,” his debauched and riotous knights, and with the nonnegotiable demand that he disquantify his train and be attended by such men as may besort his age, which know themselves and him. He lashes out in reply:

Detested kite! thou liest.
My train are men of choice and rarest parts,
That all particulars of duty know,
And in the most exact regard support
The worships of their name. O most small fault,
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!
Which, like an engine, wrench’d my frame of nature
From the fix’d place, drew from my heart all love,
And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in,
And thy dear judgment out! Go, go, my people.

(I.iv.271-281)

What is of supreme importance to notice is that Lear’s self-accusation, though he is no further than the very outset of his odyssey, is complete, his recognition of his error as full as it will ever be, though so many discoveries are still before him.

This is the fact that is overlooked in nearly all moralistic and “redemptive” readings of Lear, where it is a prime element in the case that Lear’s sufferings are justified by the repentance they finally produce. The fact of the matter is that Lear has needed no more than two days to know the woe that too late repents. His recognition is expressed with an unexampled completeness and candor within the first eight hundred lines of the play. Therefore he is from now on under attack from two
sources. The remorse for what he has done to Cordelia, the gnawing sorrow of the love he has repudiated, is one source. The other is the marble-hearted fiend itself, now, with dreadful irony, emerging in its true location. All the evil that he had indignantly imputed to Cordelia now manifests itself in the daughter who has been the recipient of what should properly have been Cordelia’s.

The curse which in violent transport he calls down upon Goneril’s head is significantly different from the disinheritance of Cordelia. The magisterial surface of that first speech is now eroded. That was a sentence from the seat of power. This is a petition from one who is without power to a power that is both infinitely remote and infinitely closer to the seat of pain. What is now articulated is overtly in the language of suffering, and the degree and the kind of his suffering is indicated by the reference to all that is desirable and valuable—a babe to honor her, a mother’s pains and benefits, which his curse would obliterate. Apollo gives way to the presiding goddess of creatures whose existence is defined by their capacity to feel pain. It is a measure of his own pain, which is almost too much for him. Lest he break down in the indignity of tears at her feet he summons up a fierce pride:

Old fond eyes,
Beweep this cause again, I’ll pluck ye out
And cast you, with the waters that you loose,
To temper clay. . . . Thou shalt find
That I’ll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off for ever.

(Liv.310-315)

In King Lear, Coleridge observed, old age is itself a character. It is certainly a crucial circumstance in the complex predicament. Old age implies, ideally, expectations of honor and respect deservedly accorded to long experience consummated in rich wisdom. But in old age, as Regan puts it, nature stands on the very verge of her confine. It
is a precarious ledge upon the downward slope toward bodily decrepitude and mental vacuity: weakness, dotage, and dependence. An old man is either a figure of veneration or an object of contempt, a nuisance to his family and friends, a babe again to be used with checks and flatteries. Lear’s personal, specific plight is that he stands upon just such a precarious verge, is acutely vulnerable on this score; and this is an aspect of his situation which, presented with an insistent iteration in Act I, is intensified throughout the contest of Act II.

Thus the royal pomp and command of the court scene is disrupted with a breathtaking effect of dramatic shock by Kent’s blunt and reckless “What wouldn’t thou do, old man?”; and then refracted and diminished in the domestic tattle between Goneril and Regan which immediately follows it:

GONERIL. . . . he always lov’d our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

REGAN. ’Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.

GONERIL. The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look from his age, to receive not alone the imperfections of long engraffed condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

(I.1.290-299)

Goneril’s account of elderly tantrums,

Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away! Now, by my life,
Old fools are babes again, and must be us’d
With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus’d.

(I.iii.17-21)
is indeed countered by Kent’s statement of the authority in Lear’s
countenance which he would fain call master. But this in turn is fol-
lowed by the fool’s parody of parental abdication and the fool’s
clairvoyance:

I have used it, Nuncle, e’er since thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers;
for when thou gav’st them the rod and put’st down thine own breeches,
    Then they for sudden joy did weep,
    And I for sorrow sung,
That such a king should play bo-peep
    And go the fools among.
(I.iv.179-185)

In the subplot the theme is repeated in Edmund’s vein, “I have heard
him oft maintain it to be fit that, sons at perfect age, and fathers
declin’d, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage
his revenue” (I.i.71-74), and demonstrated in the staging of his impos-
ture. What we are meant to perceive is the nature of Lear’s tragic dis-
tinction—the tremendous force, power, and energy of the character (to
which Gloucester is the frailer foil) precisely as it is in disproportion to
the natural infirmity of his age.

The fourth scene brings to a close a tragic exposition that for imme-
diacy, profundity, and address it is impossible to overpraise. If the fool
is meaning to distract Lear’s attention from his troubles, he chooses a
curious way of doing so, since every word of his crazy common sense
harps relentlessly upon the latter’s daughters and his folly. Lear is ab-
stracted, intermittently attending, uttering in snatches that which is
beating in his mind: “I did her wrong.” “I will forget my nature. To take
’t again perforce!” “Monster ingratitude!” The strange duet counter-
points the two voices: the voice of worldly wisdom, which knows that
a snail has a house to put’s head in, and the voice of the soul struggling
with its knowledge of guilt and passion, struggling to keep above the
water in which it is drowning. “O! let me not be mad, not mad, sweet

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"heaven" registers Lear’s desperation before the force of the inner torment that is threatening to destroy him.

The analogical structuring of the scenes in Act II frames and directs our perception of the dilemma Lear now faces, while their extraordinarily dramatic expressiveness resides, as in the last scene of Act I, in the erratic incompleteness of Lear’s speech, the shifts and lacunae through which we must infer the inner mind. The spontaneous utterances, half-expressed, half-stated, arise as from immense depths, as if forced to the surface by relentless pressure.

Lear’s confrontation with his daughters is presented in II.iv; it is cunningly prefaced, both by the subplot scenes of Edmund’s practice upon his father, and by the set-to between Kent and the lackey Oswald. In the former Edmund’s evil appears good to Gloucester and is rewarded as “virtue and obedience” by Cornwall, so that a parallel is established with the first act; in the latter faithful Kent, outspoken servant of his master’s true interests, outfaces the superserviceable finical halcyon rogue who does his mistress doubtful service, and is recompensed with the stocks for his pains. What we have then in Act II is the inversion of values which places virtue and true service in the stocks and rewards villainy and venality with honors. Edgar’s flight and disguise as Poor Tom suggests the totality of the regime of deception by the extremity of the counter deception taken to escape it. It also, in its deliberate stripping of identity—“Edgar I nothing am”—adumbrates Lear’s later flight. Such is the preparation for the arrival of Lear at Gloucester’s house, where Kent in the stocks provides new confirmation of the abatement of kindness which he has already perceived.

Lear’s attempts to be patient, forbearing, considerate, clashing with those imperious habits of command which express themselves in his scornful dismissal of Cornwall’s excuses as “mere fetches” and in the incredulity of “They durst not do’t;/ They could not, would not do’t; ’tis worse than murther./ To do upon respect such violent outrage” (II.iv.22-24) are, as Coleridge noted, extremely pathetic. But they sug-
gest less the mere pathos of a newly chastened spirit than the tension of a man in the grip of a terrible anxiety. “Thou shalt have as many dolors for thy daughters as thou cans’t tell in a year” the fool acidly informs him. And Lear’s “O! how this mother swells up toward my heart: Hysterica passio! down, thou climbing sorrow!” (II.iv.56-57) renders the choking fear physically apprehensible. It is surely the panic terror of the doubt, of the suspicion that the fool speaks truly, the desperate will to believe well of his one remaining daughter, that struggles with indignation at the treatment of his servant—a calculated affront to himself as he rightly perceives.

This preliminary trial of strength reaches a preliminary climax in the peremptory command which the effrontery of the Duke’s “fiery quality” strikes upon the flint of his pride:

Give me my servant forth.
Go tell the Duke and’s wife I’d speak with them,
Now, presently: bid them come forth and hear me,
Or at their chamber-door I’ll beat the drum
Till it cry sleep to death.

(II.iv.115-119)

But “Oh me, my rising heart” serves as a reminder of the inner turmoil—the pressure of grief, pain, and anxiety which he must subdue, must control, if it is not to break out and render him incapable of maintaining himself at all. He turns to Regan upon her entrance as to the source of all comfort, almost as a child turns to its mother with a tale of injury sustained; and ironically, much in the manner of a hortatory parent, she produces her injunction and her demand:
O, sir! you are old;
Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of her confine: you should be rul’d, and led
By some discretion that discerns your state
Better than you yourself. Therefore I pray you
That to our sister, you do make return;
Say you have wrong’d her.

(II.iv.147-153)

This is the first intimation we have of that which constitutes Lear’s impossible choice. Return to her? Ask her forgiveness?

Do you but mark how this becomes the house:
“Dear daughter, I confess that I am old.
Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg
That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.”

(II.iv.154-157)

The scathing bitter sarcasm of his mock contrition exposes the ignominy of her expectation that he behave like a scolded child; “to be slave and sumpter/To this detested groom” measures the infamy of the demand that he go down upon his knees to beg a pittance and a pension to keep base life afoot. But this pride of Lear’s, this stubborn claim to dignity and independence, is to be further tested. At present he still has the hope that Regan’s tender-hefted nature will not give her o’er to harshness; that her eyes will comfort and not burn:

’Tis not in thee
To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train,
To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes,
And, in conclusion to oppose the bolt
Against my coming in.

(II.iv.175-179)
The further curses that he hurls at Goneril’s head ward off the fool’s wise knowledge of her identity with her sister in marble-heartedness. That she is different is an illusion presently to be shattered, but his perception of what is at issue is no illusion.

As Goneril enters he prays for the assistance not of Regan but of the heavens themselves; and not as distant symbols of cosmic law but as beings whose sway has become inexplicably questionable:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \text{ Heavens,} \\
\text{If you do love old men, if your sweet sway} \\
\text{Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,} \\
\text{Make it your cause; send down and take my part!}
\end{align*}
\]

(II.iv.191-194)

That he sees himself as thus universally representative, the dignity due to his age a fundamental human claim, is the mark of a largeness of spirit unshared by many of his critics who find his “concern with dignity and authority when out of office” no more than “a testy obsession.”18 His appeal calls forth the brutality of “All’s not offense that indiscretion finds/ And dotage terms so” (II.iv.198-199) and “I pray you, father, being weak, seem so” (II.iv.203). The infamous pair harp incessantly upon his age, Regan taking courage from her bolder sister; and their nagging rivets attention upon the material fact of Lear’s eighty years, unnecessary in their scheme of things but utterly central for the discarded father. Lear is doubly threatened: from without by the ruthless obdurate self-seekers, and from within by the tumult of grief and passion which rises to engulf him, threatens to reduce him to helpless sobbing at their feet, to actual physical breakdown. Goneril’s entrance revives the casus belli of the fifty followers and adds a further twist to the knife at Lear’s heart. The contest enters its third round, and the breaking point, signaled by the flight into the storm and the cry “O fool! I shall go mad,” concludes it.

The calculated resemblance of this bargaining scene to the first

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court scene has of course invariably been noted. In the opening scene, it is said, Lear put a kingdom up for auction; now he is being paid in his own coin. As he was then, so he is now: as blind as he ever was to the difference between price and value; as ready as he ever was to measure spirit by matter. And the conclusion often drawn is that his analysis of the economics of conspicuous consumption that follows, in which he acknowledges his great need for a long-suffering patience, represents the humiliation which he deserves and which was necessary to bring him to his senses. That so far from bringing him to his senses it in fact causes him to go out of his mind is a matter for which this view of events offers no explanation save indeed the disciplinary affliction which is regularly invoked by the Bildadian tribe. The powerful point of the ghastly resemblance between the two scenes is precisely that it is a resemblance and not an identity. The two episodes are mirror-images of division, and as the scene progresses the emerging perception of apparent resemblance, which conceals an utter contradiction, represents the structure of Lear’s dawning recognition.

The face that Lear sees in the mirror is indeed his own. When he had power he demanded professions of love and denied Cordelia her dowry when she was too proud to comply. Now that they are in power they demand professions of contrition, demand that he beg for his pittance and when, like his daughter, he is too proud to comply, deny him his servants, emblem, and means of independent subsistence. “I gave you all” he stutters, to be brought up short with the ice of “And in good time you gave it.”

As his responses to these assaults change from outrage and incredulity through the recollected anguish of the daughters’ lovelessness—a pain as intolerable as an embossed carbuncle in his flesh—through the poignant attempt to abjure magistracy:
But I'll not chide thee;
Let shame come when it will, I do not call it;
I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot,
Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove.
Mend when thou canst; be better at thy leisure. . . .

(II.iv.227-231)

we are enabled to perceive what Lear perceives and more than he perceives. The face that he sees in the mirror is his own, but he watches in mounting horror as his own features are transformed to monstrous caricature before his eyes. For it is a demonic parody that the distorting mirror produces. What was well-intentioned error on his part in the first scene is cunning malice on their part in this. He took words for deeds, forms for substance, appearances for realities, and interest for disinterest. But for all that he acted in good faith and upon the assumption of good faith in others; intended a just distribution of wealth and power and gave without reservation, save the reservation of a hundred knights for his own needs. The daughters’ actions are founded upon a lie (just as their first protestations of love were a lie) since the accusations against Lear’s retainers mask the lust to take and to get; and their ruthless greed for deprivation and acquisition has no purpose (since they are already in possession of their portions of the kingdom) save the untrammeled enjoyment of total power. What is exhibited now is not an imperfect human love and an imperfect human justice but a diabolical negation of love and justice. The human “all” is now the devil’s “nothing,” the void, the “O” without a figure which punctuates the play’s rhetoric, the fool’s emblem of the consequences of Lear’s folly.

But if this is what the mirror structure reveals to the audience, who are in possession of more knowledge than the protagonist, it can only partially and opaquely be perceived by Lear. For Lear’s agon is with his inner anguish as well as with his outer adversaries. Lear has listened to the worldly wisdom the fool has dinned into his ears. He is tasting the bitter reality of the abdication of power. He who so confi-
dently rewarded good (as he believed) with goods, and punished evil with privations, has glimpsed terrible flaws in the power of his reason, sovereignty, and justice to represent truth and order reality. Good and evil have terrifyingly changed places, as in the fool’s logic: “Why, this fellow has banish’d two on’s daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will” (I.iv.107-109). And that third daughter, cast out without his blessing, is tormentingly present to his memory. The redoubled anguish and horror threaten to overwhelm him: the pangs of disprized love, so much more cruelly desolating at eighty than at eighteen, reflect back dizzyingly upon the love he denied Cordelia; while the sense of an insufferable wrong done him reflects the dread of a terrible wrong done by him. With this tumult of emotion within he must contend while the daughters beat him down with their cross bids. Caught like a creature at bay he capitulates, in savage irony, turning to the daughter he has annihilated with curses, with

Those wicked creatures yet do look well-favored
When others are more wicked; not being the worst
Stands in some rank of praise. I’ll go with thee.
Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,
And thou art twice her love.

(II.iv.258-262)

It is, however, a capitulation from which their relentless vindictiveness as much as his own stubborn pride saves him. The logic of measure for measure, which was the pride of his rationality, is shivered into fragments, for now he knows that “twice her love” is twice times nothing. With Regan’s “What need one?” he turns upon them with a mighty repudiation of the calculus of material needs when survival is the question:
O! reason not the need; Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s. Thou art a lady:
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear’st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But for true need. . . .

(II.iv.266-272)

There’s beggary, Lear is saying, in the need that can be reckoned. Man’s need lies elsewhere. It is a major insight, which the break in the speech indicates he is not yet ready to assimilate. For if he repudiates their style of rationing, he also repudiates his own. And where shall he find a substitute for the quantum—the principle of measure for measure which has been the staff of his mind?

Lear’s unfinished sentence allows us to glimpse the chasm in his mind, from which he draws back with his appeal to the heavens for patience. We bridge his incoherence with a flash of insight, become aware of Lear’s awareness. What is articulated in this greatly moving speech is the transformation of Lear into a tragic hero of grander dimension than any who have preceded him. He is as full of grief as age, wretched in both, but he will not surrender to what he now repudiates. The patience that is his true need is no pious long-suffering. The patience that he needs to resist and remain master of the rising insanity—and there is no more literal a cry in Shakespeare than “O fool! I shall go mad”—is the patience precisely not to “bear it tamely.” For, it is important to remember, that he could do, as he has already done in his brief rehearsal of capitulation. He could indeed confess his helplessness humbly and abjectly (as Danby actually believes he does), 19 choose comfort, and live upon his daughters’ cold charity, saying aye and no at their bidding for his bed and board. “Fool me not so much” is his prayer, and the phrase powerfully suggests that he has seen not only the indignity but the plausibility of
this course of compromise, accommodation, acceptance as a relative good (since deserved) of what in his soul he knows is an absolute evil.

Thus his temptation is quiet, the temptation of Yeats’s old man. But he can purchase quiet only at a price he cannot pay. To justify the doings of these unnatural hags, even as instrumental, is a violation of justice greater than his own, a trading of justice itself for a monstrous lie. Yet, standing his ground, he is helpless and impotent, and this as a consequence of his own fault and folly. Therefore he beseeches the “noble anger” which will give him strength to protest against a travesty of justice, even though his own justice was deeply at fault and he no longer knows how he shall compute just dealing or where in reason it is to be found. His muttered imprecations of revenge are at the edge of breakdown, a lashing-up of energy at the point of extinction. His age and frailty and the weight of sorrow make themselves felt in the tears it is impossible to control. He has indeed good cause for weeping, but it is the passionate pride of his daughter Cordelia, magnified and intensified, that speaks in “this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws/ Or e’er I’ll weep.” He will be destitute, defenseless, and wretched to a degree only matched by the poorest and most despised of his subjects; but his rage as he rushes out into the storm, as he wills his exposure to the elements, to wild nature, to the driven beasts, measures both the anguish and the stature of his spirit. For Lear has made the choice that was impossible.

The total reversal of his status and situation, the complete disintegration of his identity, is what the peripeteia of Act III exhibits. Its seven scenes are symmetrically arranged, a scene upon the heath alternating with an episode from the subplot, with the first scene as an overture to the complex orchestration of voices, themes, and encounters. The gentleman’s account of the King in the storm announces the themes which are presently to be writ large. He is
Contending with the fretful elements;
Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
That things might change or cease; tears his white hair,
Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,
Catch in their fury, and make nothing of;
Strives in his little world of man to out-storm
The to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain.
This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs,
And bids what will take all.

(III.i.4-14)

The description establishes the analogy between the storm in Lear’s mind and the storm in nature, which attacks him in its blind fury, makes “nothing” of his white hair. The metaphor personifies the storm’s impetuous blasts and naturalizes Lear’s conflicting passions, so that it is the composite, mythopoetic figure of a titan—as obdurate as the elements themselves—which presently calls down destruction upon the cosmos. Lear is the storm’s alter ego and antagonist in the speech that follows, in which he bids what will take all. As Job cursed the day of his birth and the night of his conception, so Lear calls down the curse of barrenness, now universalized and magnified to include the principle and source of generation itself; only so can the child’s offense, grown so monstrous and so general, be removed. But the titanic indictment is shot through with suggestions of confusion, of disorientation, expressed by the tonal range of his epithets. The lightning flashes—vaunt couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts—are thought-executing, the thunder all-shaking. But these suggestions of an apocalyptic judgment, an omnipotent governing force, are juxtaposed with suggestions of mere malice, of a grotesque and anarchic demonism: “Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout rain!” “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!”

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makes the wind-cherubs at the corners of old maps appear imps of mischief. Thus, in Lear’s frenzied fantasy, nature and the heavens have turned as inexplicably inimical as his own daughters, like them under the dual aspect of punishment and malevolence. To the fool’s plea, “Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters blessing,” Lear makes no reply, but the interruption clears his mind and enables him to make a crucial distinction:

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness.
I never gave you kingdom, called you children,
You owe me no subscription.

(III.ii.16-18)

It is at this point that Lear invokes his prototype—the pattern of all patience—and by a natural transition turns to arraign the agents of affliction not as servile ministers, but as the great gods themselves that keep this dreadful pudding over our heads. What was inchoate in his previous imagery of world-destruction is now fully divulged. It is doomsday, the day of absolute justice, that he sees figured in these sheets of fire, these bursts of thunder, these groans of roaring wind and rain; and himself that he sees before the seat of judgment.

Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulged crimes
Unwhipp’d of Justice; hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjur’d, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous; caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practiced on man’s life; close pent-up guilts,
Rive your concealing continents and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinn’d against than sinning.

(III.ii.51-59)
He does not curse God and die; he arraigns what is accursed—that which is within and shall be revealed—inner truth, inner guilt. But the great effort to achieve clarity and understanding and a just assessment of himself collapses into the renewed sensation of an unimaginable fracture in nature that he cannot encompass, and his physical plight impinges upon his consciousness. From the vision of judgment Lear descends to his creatural situation: cold, desolation, tenderness for the faithful being at his side, and the great lesson in relativity which the body teaches:

My wits begin to turn.
Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?
The art of our necessities is strange,
That can make vile things precious.

(III.ii.67-71)

The alternating scenes which follow combine to present the state of division and disintegration to which the customary frame of things is reduced. In the subplot Edmund seizes his opportunities and climbs into Cornwall’s favor, making Gloucester co-victim with Lear of a limitless inhumanity, deriding Lear’s vision of judgment. The alternating subplot scenes produce such effects of retrospective savage irony throughout Act III, casting upon the scenes of the agony on the heath the hideous mockery of a demon’s laughter. Yet there is a principle of progression powerfully at work as well. Evil, it seems, contains its own divisive principle. There is constant rumor of division among the dukes and of the French army approaching the gates of the kingdom. Good, on the other hand, not only remains steadfast, in the clogged faithfulness of Kent and the fool, but proliferates. Both these immanent human possibilities are actualized in the climactic scene of Act III, where Gloucester is blinded and Cornwall’s servants rebel against their master.
In the main scenes Lear’s progress takes the form of decline, of increasing fragmentation, of nightmarish glimpses into the fractured mirrors which pass before his eyes—the fool, Poor Tom, Gloucester. The whole sequence is a tour de force of montage effects, phantasmagoric in their wildly arbitrary juxtapositions, yet cumulatively unified by the obsessive themes: filial ingratitude, punishment, and sorrow; exposure of the truth, of the flesh; these themes make a surface incoherence yield to the impression of a single powerful undercurrent.

The second storm scene reverses the relation of Lear to the storm. It is no longer an adversary but his friend, distracting his attention from the greater malady, the tempest in his mind. He welcomes it, as he welcomes the physic he can derive from it for pomp. The rhythm of the alternating scenes dilates the play’s beat, its systole and diastole of passion and compassion. Just as “Strike her young bones,/ You taking airs, with lameness!” expanded till it became “Crack Nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once,” so “I have one part of my heart/ That’s sorry yet for thee” becomes “Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are.”

At the very moment when Lear, exposed to feel what wretches feel, is contemplating a justice of distribution that shall be based upon creatural weakness rather than creatural strength, Edmund is contemplating his fair deserving—the betrayal of Gloucester which must draw him that which his father loses—no less than all. And it is at this ironic midpoint of the play that Edgar, Lear’s fellow refugee, taking the soundings of the deluge, emerges from his hovel to precipitate in Lear the madness that he has dreaded.

LEAR. What! has his daughters brought him to this pass?
Couldst thou save nothing? Wouls’t thou give ’em all?
(III.iv.63-64)

Now the universe is entirely demonic, presenting to Lear no intimations of a greater order of justice, but only the crazed fragments of Edgar’s devil-lore and his daughters’ wolfish features.
Death, traitor! nothing could have subdu'd nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
Is it the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters.

(III.iv.69-75)

That which was an aberration of nature, a disease in his flesh which he must needs call his, is now the iron law of a nature which generates only depravity, evil, obloquy, and pain; Lear’s thirst for truth, the will which drove him into the storm to seek it, will be slaked by nothing less than an enactment of the truth that he has discovered, which has been hidden from him till now by the trappings and the lendings, the masks and appurtenances of civilization. He will embrace it and embody it, he will sophisticate it no longer. He will be what he sees that he is—the naked thing itself, sufferer and generator. Tearing at the button he attempts to strip himself of the garment of falsehood:

Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncover'd body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.

(III.iv.103-112)

The rhetorical figure, the “distributer,” articulates yet another distribution, in justice, of “to each his own”; and to man his naked body which is all in sober truth he can say that he possesses. In his mad joy Lear refuses to be parted from his philosopher, his good Athenian, as he is coaxed into the hovel. Edgar's
Child Rowland to the dark tower came;
His word was still: Fie, foh, and fum,
I smell the blood of a British man.

(III.iv.185-187)

which closes the scene suggests, with its garbled fragments of legend, a perspective of desolate and irreversible collapse.

In the third heath scene in the hovel, Lear’s descent into darkness is completed in the key of grotesque parody. The lunatic cacphony of fragments includes his own voice gloatingly invoking hell fire: “To have a thousand with red burning spits/ Come hissing in upon ’em” (III.vi.15-16). Still he does not relinquish his quest for justice. He will arraign Goneril in legal form, have the evidence against her brought before the court. But there is no redress. The court is corrupt, the judge false, and the accused escapes. The vision of a day of judgment has dwindled to this abortive travesty in which the fool and the madman are the learned justicers and a jointstool the daughter who kicked the poor King, her father. Completely enclosed now within his own frenzy, he recognizes no one about him and no object possesses its real identity. The jointstool is Goneril, Poor Tom’s rags are a Persian fashion, the bench in an outhouse is a curtained royal bed. Nothing is left of Lear’s mind as he is borne away to Dover, not even the consolation Edgar can draw from companionship in adversity.

But Lear is spared what the audience must still witness: another form of travesty, not in crazed fantasy but in the play’s evil reality of predatory power. The blinding of Gloucester is a fitting culmination to these scenes of sparagmos in Act III, for King Lear is a play that stops at nothing. But Lear is, for the moment, preserved from further suffering by his madness, while Gloucester becomes his proxy.

It is generally held that Gloucester is a replica of Lear upon a lower level. Where Lear’s original sin, it is held, was of the spirit, his was of the flesh. He therefore suffers the loss of his sight, Lear the
loss of his reason. But the logic of levels breaks down at this point, since the attempt to measure the atrocious suffering he undergoes as “worse” or “less” than that of Lear is surely to winnow the wind and to fall into the very dichotomy of spirit and flesh which Lear’s discovery of the whole man transcends. In the episode of his blinding Gloucester becomes the play’s paradigmatic heroic figure. Not, I would wish to emphasize, because suffering “ennobles” him, as is often held—Shakespeare knew the great truth that suffering ennobles noble natures and debases base natures—but because in and by suffering the inmost being is tested and revealed. The tragic protagonist discovers under duress that in which he believes, and its furthest cost. What “ennobles” both Lear and Gloucester is the choices they make. Lear chooses the heath (“touch me with noble anger”), Gloucester, with terrible irony, the defense of Lear (“Because I would not see thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes”). But Gloucester, basically submissive, save in this one instance, lacks Lear’s spirit—the very “noble anger” which many minds of the period were ready to recognize as heroic virtue. Gloucester is a mirror-image of Lear, blindness, past and present, of the eye or the mind, constituting the identity, and the cruder tragic movement consequent upon his low-spiritedness (in which recognition proceeds from affliction, rather than affliction from recognition) constituting the inversion. It is Regan’s ferocious sadism, and no spontaneous insight, which adds to his physical injury the terrible knowledge of his injustice to Edgar. Whereas Lear’s recognition of error constitutes a major part of his affliction throughout.

In the agony on the heath, justice has been passionately invoked, questioned, sought, challenged, parodied. In the travesty of Gloucester’s trial it is finally derided, trodden underfoot, obliterated. And “Turn out that eyeless villain. Throw this slave upon the dunghill” gathers up in its blunt brutality the whole inventory of evil that the third act, in action and image, has presented: dispossession, degradation, obloquy, and the infliction of pain; hunger, nakedness, poverty;
the stocks, the rack, the whip; brute existence, belly-pinched, savage, wretched, and repulsive. It is the triumph of the demon, the utter subversion of that human dignity which Lear fought to maintain until his wits turned, and Gloucester defended at the cost of his sight.

Yet there is a defeat of the demon too. In the very moment of triumph the servant who cannot stand by and watch Gloucester’s martyrdom turns upon his master. It is an action that speaks louder and reverberates more potently than any of the play’s numerous and contradictory statements of belief in ultimate providence which the course of events turns to irony. To these servants the relation of act and consequence is an open question:

SECOND SERVANT. I’ll never care what wickedness I do
If this man come to good.

THIRD SERVANT. If she live long,
And in the end meet the old course of death,
Women will all turn monsters.

(III.vii.98-101)

But the service which they render:

Hold your hand, my lord!
I have served you ever since I was a child;
But better service have I never done you
Than now to bid you hold.

(III.vii.73-76)

and the flax and white of egg which they apply to Gloucester’s bleeding sockets is the voice which opposes Cornwall’s satanism. In them speak all the good and faithful servants of Act III, who act as they do out of the spontaneous impulse of the heart, for the hardness or tenderness of which no cause can be found in nature. Few things in Shakespeare are more significant or more moving than this anonymous ser-
vant’s disinterested, uncalculating, gratuitous act of faith, and it is the first of the miracles (“nothing almost but misery sees miracles”) which lighten the darkness of the second half of the play.

Evil concupiscence breeds further contrivance from every contingency; Goneril finds Cornwall’s death will serve her purposes, though a widowed sister is a dangerous rival in the competition for Edmund’s favors. Nevertheless, in the outcome it is the death of Cornwall that in fact reverses the play’s decline into chaos, and stems the tide of evil. The plot from now until the catastrophe works toward restoration. The King’s party finds a new champion in Albany, whose conviction that “You are above, you justicers” lends power to his repudiation of his wife; and a succoring power in the army from France. The incriminating letters fall into Edgar’s hands and Cordelia returns to England.

Act IV presents an antiphonal dialectic of comfort and despair, of sympathy and isolation, in which pathos—the “art of known and feeling sorrows”—and the irony of situation combine in complex orchestration. Edgar, régisseur of consolations, counterpoints Lear’s relentless Jobian progress from bad to worse:

EDGAR. Yet better thus, and known to be contemn’d,  
Than still contemn’d and flatter’d, to be worst.  
The lowest and most dejected thing of Fortune,  
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear:  
The lamentable change is from the best;  
The worst returns to laughter.

(IV.i.1-6)

But his imagination of options is immediately followed by Gloucester’s pitiful entrance; his father’s sufferings distract his thoughts from himself and produce his acknowledgment of a further vista, perhaps infinite, of the misfortune that can be sympathetically felt by one who is pregnant to good pity:
EDGAR. O gods! Who is ’t can say “I am at the worst”? I am worse than e’er I was . . . the worst is not So long as we can say “This is the worst.” (IV.i.25-27)

The dialogue between Cordelia and the doctor provides a further gloss upon the theme of remedy. Nature itself produces from its own resources that which is remedial, sustaining, and restorative. Lear, mad as the vexed sea, is crowned with herbs which, the older pharmacopoeia tells us, are of “bitter, biting, poisonous, pungent, livid and distracting properties.” Cordelia places these emblems of Lear’s agony in a pastoral perspective—“the idle weeds that grow/ In our sustaining corn”; and implores “All bless’d secrets,/ All you unpublish’d virtues of the earth” to spring with her tears. Tears indeed, both those that scald like molten lead, and those that are in very truth wet and flow for another’s distress, symbolize and enact the remedies of Act IV—remedies, however, which do no more than counterpoint and subserve the progress into despair of the protagonists.

Gloucester’s despair—“As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’ gods,/ They kill us for their sport” (IV.i.36-37)—issues in the attempt at suicide upon the cliffs of Dover. The episode is anticipatory of Lear’s experience in Act IV, and it gives us our bearings upon that experience. Gloucester can be saved by the fabricated miracle which Edgar stages upon the cliffs of Dover: naturalistically, because his recent blindness has led to sensory disorder; figuratively, because his despair is a form of resignation. It is significant that his compassion for poor naked wretches, the concomitant of suffering in the good nature, is an echo of Lear’s, but finely distinguished from it not only by the absence of the latter’s expressive, vivid imagery, but in that it takes the form of a prayer to the powers that be for a more righteous distribution, where Lear waited upon no power but his own to show the heavens more just. Gloucester has from the beginning believed in the great opposeless wills, which he is content to think tyrannical, determining men’s for-
tunes in arbitrary mystery. He has never felt Lear’s need nor made Lear’s imperious demand for an absolute justice made manifest and intelligible. He has never required Lear’s God. Therefore he is not compelled to Lear’s promethean agon, and his salvation is irremediably undignified. His renunciation of the world is a submission of the will, an escape from that before which his intellect stands defeated. Lear’s denunciation of the world is the fearlessly radical and unmitigated conclusion he draws from experience fully faced. Conversely, for Lear is reserved the genuine miracle.

A further reach of Edgar’s “worst” is exhibited in the encounter between mad Lear and blind Gloucester. Lear is at first completely withdrawn in the inaccessible fastness of his madness, his lunatic mutterings the broken fragments of memory loosed from its moorings. Recollections of the royal professions of soldiering and hunting mingle with the weird incongruity of a mouse and a piece of toasted cheese. As he dimly recognizes Gloucester—Goneril with a white beard, Goneril who escaped his learned justicers in the previous scene—the past pain throbs like the ache in an amputated limb. What is suggested by the disassociated lucidity which replaces his incoherence has the effect of a pure distillation of experience so tempestuous and profound as to have exhausted all but its simplest and most fundamental elements:

They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say “ay” and “no” to everything that I said! “Ay” and “no” too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found ’em, there I smelt ’em out. Go to, they are not men o’ their words: they told me I was everything; ’tis a lie, I am not ague-proof.

(IV.vi.96-108)

All rhetoric is spent; all the grander conceptions drained and extinguished. Lear’s very speech is stripped, so to speak, to the bone, to the rhythms, idioms, and usages of common speech, his metaphors,
scarcely seeming such, composed of those elements of bodily experience most universally and immediately available. “The trick of that voice I do well remember,” says Gloucester. And it is perhaps not fanciful to suppose him to be calling attention to the great stylistic achievement “the trick of that voice” represents. “Ay, every inch a king,” in its inimitable irony and limitless pathos, is representative of the stylistic device which marks the remainder of the play: all experience presents itself to Lear under the aspect of the simplest physical sensations, qualities, and dimensions: “Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality” (IV.vi.135). In his bewildered return to sanity he seeks assurance of his condition in a pinprick. Later with Cordelia, unsure of time, place, or identity, he will ask “Be these tears wet?” finding in unmediated sensory reality the only assurance and guarantee of authentic truth. This simplicity plays a subtle role in the articulation of the tragic experience of self-discovery, but it is so incomparably moving in itself that one is led to speculate whether this is not Shakespeare’s master stroke in the mode of encounter between high and low that is so marked a feature of his fourth acts. He has absorbed into the figure of his great King himself the perspective of common humanity, which in other tragedies is given its separate personae.

“Every inch a king” restores to Lear’s mind a further measure of lucidity. He will enact again a king’s prerogative to pardon and condemn, and so he launches into yet another of the parodies in the play’s rich gamut of such parodies:

When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.
I pardon that man’s life. What was thy cause?
Adultery?
Thou shalt not die: die for adultery! No:
The wren goes to ’t and the small gilded fly
Does lecher in my sight.
Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester’s bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters
Got ’tween the lawful sheets. To ’t, luxury pell-mell!
For I lack soldiers. Behold yond simp’ring dame,
Whose face between her forks presages snow;
That minces virtue, and does shake the head
To hear of pleasure’s name;
The fitchew nor the soil’d horse, goes to ’t
With a more riotous appetite.
Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above:
But to the girdle do the Gods inherit,
Beneath is all the fiend’s: there’s hell, there’s darkness,
There is the sulphurous pit-burning, scalding,
Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!
Give me an ounce of civet; good apothecary,
To sweeten my imagination.
There’s money for thee.

(IV.vi.111-134)

Lear has sought love and he has sought justice with all the energy and passion of his nature. Now he abandons the enterprise, for he can discover no transcendent value in the name of which to pardon or condemn. Once the wolf, the tiger, the kite were metaphors for aberration. Now Lear’s view is larger. Now man’s animal nature is all his nature and no man shall die for the coital function he shares with the fly, the fitchew, and the horse. Love is copulation; justice a dog in office; measure for measure handy-dandy. Robes and furred gowns hide all, and all is vice, interchangeably venal and venereal, the bribe and the brothel; the obscene concupiscence masked by the mincing virtue of women; the lust which wields the beadle’s whip. Still obsessively tearing off his clothes, he prefers, like Diogenes, the minimal dignity of nakedness to the fulsome lie with which accommodated man covers and compounds the lechery and savagery of the innocent contemptible beasts. All that is left of the old passion, the old indignation, is the repulsion aroused by
the thought of the face between the forks of the simp’ring dame (the figure of woman which has taken the place of the lost Cordelia in his imagination), nausea at the universal stench and corruption, and the harsh sardonic mirth with which he bids Gloucester get him glass eyes like a scurvy politician and seems to see the things he does not.

It is all, indubitably, true enough. But it is not the whole truth. It is not even the limited local truth, for Gloucester’s bastard son was not kinder to his father than Lear’s lawfully begotten daughters. But the fool is gone, Kent is hidden in his disguise, Cordelia lost; nowhere in life is there a source of sweetness, enchantment, or pleasure. He has been cut to the brains. “I’ll not love” is an abdication made out of despair—perfect antithesis to his original abdication made in confident expectation of continued order. “None does offend, none I say, none” is forbearance founded upon an abyss. If this black despondency were all that these speeches express, they would still shake our hearts with the silent compassion that is their due. It is an old man’s bitter cynicism that we hear, but it is phrased with splendor; with the fearless energy, rigor, and candor of an intellect which will not merely submit to the way the world goes, content with agnosticism. His nihilism is invested with a transcendent courage, an indomitable will to face realities, to have no truck with the admirable evasions of whoremaster man, who lays his goatish disposition on the charge of a star. It is this that measures the stature of the figure of Lear, and it is this largeness of spirit which, by a superlative stroke, is contrasted and mingled with the simplicity and humility of the unadorned anagnorisis he has of himself. Lear needs no wry fool’s wisdom to inform him of the impotence, the finitude, and the physical bondage of human existence; he is himself the vessel of all ironic knowledge of the great stage of fools to which mankind is born. The scene ends with the collapse again of Lear’s lucidity into shattered fragments of impulse: he will kill these sons-in-law; he will die bravely like a smug bridegroom; if he is a king commanding obedience, then there’s life in’t; they shall get him, if at all, by running.

In the greatest of all Shakespeare’s scenes of fourth-act pathos—
Lear’s awakening in the presence of Cordelia—Lear is granted recovery. No longer distracted, his “ingenious feeling of his huge sorrows” is articulated in an image which catches in its net of associations the entirety of his situation. The wheel of fire is a rack, an inferno, a timeless fixation of anguish in the passage of time. Sun king and promethean Ixion (rebellious father of centaurs) and majesty fallen to fortune’s fool are contained in it; the wheel is laden with connotations from Renaissance iconology, but the scalding tears are Lear’s own: a final distillation of his odyssey of suffering, passion, and guilt. Nowhere (save in the very last scene) is Shakespeare’s mixture of styles more effective than in the superimposition upon this figure of crucifixion of the frail senex pathos, the touch of irrelevant garrulity in “fourscore and upwards, not an hour more nor less.” Lear, thus transfixed in the searing knowledge of his irremediable pain, uncertain of his own condition or even of his own identity, perceives self and other in a single act of compassion: “I should e’en die with pity/ To see another thus.” And to Lear, thus transfixed, is granted the miracle, the genuine irreducible miracle that Gloucester’s factitious salvation foreshadowed: all that has been restorative, healing, and serviceable to man in the second half of the play is summed up and contained in this reconciliation. It is a cancellation of all debt; an atonement and an absolution, freeing the soul from its intolerable burden of guilt.

Had you not been their father, these white flakes
Did challenge pity of them. Was this a face
To be oppos’d against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning? to watch—poor perd!—
With this thin helm? Mine enemy’s dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
Against my fire.

(IV.vii.30-38)
The speech articulates that which renders their reunion so dramatically compelling. Its expressive shifts encompass the whole range of feelings which constitute fullness of love between father and daughter. “Poor perdu” marvelously suggests a tenderness more than half maternal in its loving protectiveness, its recognition of Lear’s dauntlessness, for the “enfans perdu” to which the phrase refers were the most reckless and intrepid volunteers for military exploits regarded as desperate ventures. And this transcendence of the merely filial (one remembers “according to my bond; no more nor less”) is answered by a transcendence of the solely patriarchal (one remembers “Better thou/ Hadst not been born than not t’ have pleased me better”) in Lear’s admixture of chivalric deference to a father’s possessiveness: “For, as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child Cordelia.” All the abused and disrupted parental relationships of the play, all the displaced and substituted filial ones (Edmund’s relationship to Cornwall, for instance, and the fool’s to Lear) here fly together, so to speak, in a scene which affirms the possibility of freedom, harmony, and reciprocity between parent and child. The exchange between them is a reciprocal confession in which both declare themselves in ways which are characteristic of their essential natures: Cordelia’s “No cause, no cause,” expressive of unspoken inner depths in its very inarticulateness and reticence; and Lear’s

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.

(IV.vii.72-75)

expressive of a characteristic resolute candor.

Though momentarily and immediately the pathos of the scene functions to bring sweetness from strength, to affirm not loss but gain, beyond price and beyond computation, nevertheless, since all is lost, in the outcome this unlooked-for and inordinate joy becomes the measure
of the gratuitous and inordinate pain which is its obverse. Had Lear
died in the despair of his darkened vision, his self-knowledge would
have been incomplete. With no more to lose than is already lost, he
would have been released from a vision of hell; not bereft of the actual-
ity of a soul in bliss. “You do me wrong,” he says, “to take me out of the
grave.” But he is taken out of the grave to suffer the agony of the loss of
that which is of infinite and transcendent value. It is this that makes of
the catastrophe of Act V Shakespeare’s most unmitigated and quintes-
sential tragic outcome, pitched as it is against an opposing pull toward
restoration in the plot itself.

Cordelia’s French army is defeated, but the savage intrigue between
the sisters has issued in Regan’s poisoning; the vigilant Edgar is armed
with the incriminating letters. The exposure of the wicked is a matter
of time. And it is just this matter of time which provides the catastro-
phe of the play with its thematic leitmotif. Men are as the time is, says
Edmund, as he persuades the Captain to undertake the “man’s work” of
the hanging. When, wounded to death, with the dead bodies of Regan
and Goneril before him, he acknowledges the wheel of nemesis and
would reverse what he has set afoot, it is too late. Edgar’s stoic natural-
ism, “Ripeness is all,” whereby he rationalizes fortitude, gives way to
the realization that he did wrong to withhold from his father the heal-
ing joy it was his to confer. Commentators have wrongly, I believe,
read Edgar’s “ripeness” as referring to the character of the steadfast
man to whom increase of spirituality accrues from his capacity pa-
tiently to endure. The topos is as stoic as it is Christian in the Renais-
sance, and its nonprovidential connotations have been fully exploited
by Shakespeare’s own Jaques, in a play which is in many ways a comic
obverse of Lear. It is time itself, I believe, that is the referent in Edgar’s
exhortation. His judgment of the fullness and ripeness of time deter-
mines his actions, his disguises, his emergence from concealment,
even his view of the poetic justice of the gods: “the dark and vicious
place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes.” But the repeated blows the
catastrophe deals to the optimistic conviction that there is a time for ev-
Everything culminate in a plethora of special ironies: the entrance of Lear with Cordelia immediately after the prayer to the gods to protect her; “And my poor fool is hang’d” immediately after Albany has announced a providential scheme of retributions and rewards. Edgar is saved just in time by time’s vicissitudes from the burden his conscience would have had to bear if Gloucester had died before he revealed himself to him. But an unexpiated guilt for the fault of unnecessarily drawing out Gloucester’s pain, committed in the name of a ripeness he presumed to judge, is expressed, it may be, in the last words of the play: “The weight of this sad time we must obey; Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.”

Nevertheless Gloucester does die in joy at the miraculous preservation of Edgar. For him, in that moment, all losses are restored and sorrows end. For Lear is reserved the ultimate tragic recognition of his nature as man. Nothing could more intensify the obdurate fact of tragic existence than the tension between the inevitable and the merely untimely in the final outcome. Shakespeare must be supposed with perfect deliberation to have so framed this greatest, because most universal, of his tragic experiments. Suppose, we may imagine him saying, suppose the very worst is to happen after all; the very worst that can be conceived by human terror, after such contest, after such affliction, after such restoration: what then?

Lear expresses his complete conviction of the power of love renewed in reconciliation to redeem all sorrow, to compensate for all loss, to sweeten all adversity, and to confer blessedness upon the most meager and wretched of material conditions. For Lear the fullness of time is identical with the fullness of the spirit:

Come, let’s away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out;
And take upon’s the mystery of things,
As if we were God’s spies: and we’ll wear out,
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th’ moon.

(V.iii.8-19)

But there is a powerful irony in the very conception of the speech. For if birds singing in a cage represent a canonization of love in a hermitage of the blessed, they are nonetheless helpless and captive creatures. Lear’s Olympian indifference to the ebb and flow of the power-seekers and the time-servers is an ironic image of the indifference to remote, frail, and petty life of the heavenly powers to whom Lear had thundered his demand for care, concern, and justice. For himself, he possesses all that his soul desires, therefore he has become godlike; Cordelia’s sacrifice is the object of the obeisance of the gods themselves; and they, God’s spies, are within ecstatic sight of the very mystery of things. So he consigns the world to the devil and embraces eternity. The unreconstructed hubris of the speech, the unextinguishable vitality of the spirit, is the most necessary prelude to the death blow to follow. It is his heroic distinction, this resilience, this capacity for renewal, which has survived unheard-of trials, and risen triumphant like the phoenix from the ash heap of affliction.

But if it is in Lear’s imaginative compass to be king of infinite space in an eternity of blessedness, it is Lear’s irreversible tragic destiny to suffer the loss of the life upon which that blessedness solely depends, to suffer the finitude of the human condition in the bitterest and highest degree. It is unaccommodated man who enters with his beloved child dead in his arms. In the play’s final mirror-image Lear hangs upon Cordelia’s lips in death as he did once in life, but all that was concealed from him then has emerged into the clearest light. Cordelia’s
death hurls Lear back into his Jobian posture of irreconcilable, insconsolable protest against the arbitrary and inexplicable slaughter of innocence.

O! you are men of stones: . . .
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.

(V.iii.257-308)

But for him there is no voice from the whirlwind, no conviction of a Being or a realm of being beyond the absolute temporality of life. Lear’s gods are dead, as dead as earth, and Lear is one who knows when one is dead and when one lives. Kent’s question “Is this the promised end?” suggests apocalypse but leaves the question ironically open. For the play’s last scene is an image, perfect and undeviating, of anguish at the finitude of an existence infinitely desired.


Notes
4. R. W. Chambers, King Lear (Glasgow, 1940), p. 49. The neo-Christian case has been effectively challenged by W. Elton, King Lear and the Gods (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1966), who has amassed an impressive body of evidence for his contention that Shakespeare has carefully and deliberately dramatized varieties of paganism in the characters of Lear; the good and the wicked alike. He invokes the troubled skepticism of the Renaissance as background, and concludes that the optimistic Christian interpretation of the play is invalid since (a) no evidence exists to show that Lear arrives finally at “salvation,” “regeneration,” or “redemption” and (b) “the pur-
ported benevolent, just or special providence cannot be shown to be operative” (p. 336). Elton’s book is a mine of invaluable information about the Renaissance topoi embedded in the play, and of insights into the dramatic deployment of them. I have leaned heavily upon his scholarship at innumerable points, though his thesis, that Lear’s pagan progress to despair provided Shakespeare with an analogue for the theological crisis of his day, is at a tangent to my own concerns.

5. The term forms part of the title of P. Jorgensen’s illuminating study, Lear’s Self-Discovery (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967), but the author, basing himself upon Renaissance treatises on nosce teipsum, takes self-discovery in a sense somewhat different from and more general than mine.


8. W. B. Yeats, “Meru.”


10. The Beginning, Continuance and Decay of Estates (1606).


16. The neat distinction is Elton’s, p. 127.


22. Elton quotes King James, “I love not one that will never bee angry: For as he that is without Sorrow, is without Gladnesse: so hee that is without Anger, is without Love”; Bacon, “To seek to extinguish Anger utterly is but a bravery of the Stoics”; and the author of a commentary on Thessalonians who wonders whether those “whom no crosse from God or men can affect to sorrow . . . their patience is it, or rather their blockish senselessness?” (pp. 275-276).

24. The best account of the way the expressiveness of common speech is exploited in *King Lear* is in W. Nowottny, “Some Aspects of the Style of *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare Studies*, XIII (1960), and “Lear’s Questions,” *Shakespeare Studies*, X (1957).

25. For documentation see Elton, *King Lear*, p. 369, index entry.
