

KING LEAR : A READING OF THE PLAY IN THE LIGHT OF ITS «DIVINE BACKGROUND»

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Shakespeare's tragedies have often been studied and discussed. Indeed, the religious aspects of Shakespeare's tragedies, in particular, have been frequently dealt with, but generally with reference to *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* but not with *King Lear*. The numerous Christian references in these three tragedies have allowed them to be considered as tales of «human destiny» described in Christian terms. *King Lear*, on the other hand, has not received such attention, nor does the play (on first reading it) seem to call for it. It is true that some critics have acknowledged the importance of the religious references found in it, (1) yet no complete study has as yet been dedicated fully to the study of the religious aspect of the play. Hence, it is my intention to examine *King Lear*, not in a generalized sense, but instead to study the aspect of the play denoted by the term «divine background».

This study has, in fact, been inspired indirectly by the chapter on Religious Drama in H.D.F. Kitto's *Form and Meaning in Drama* (2). But I must emphasize the fact that Kitto neither analyses *King Lear* as a religious play, nor does he allude to it as a religious tragedy. He does not even mention the play at all. But he has a comprehensive theory dealing with religious drama in general and Greek drama in particular. The reason why I mention him at all in my study is that I found his overall definition of Religious drama useful in so far as it seemed to me to throw light on and illuminate *King Lear*. Hence I

(1) A.C. Bradley, for instance, mentions that in *King Lear* «references to religious or irreligious beliefs and feelings are more frequent than is usual in Shakespeare's tragedies, as frequent perhaps as in his final plays». See A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London 1963), p.222.

(2) H.D.F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama*, London, 1959.

am making use of one aspect only of Kitto's theory and applying it to *King Lear*. The analysis in this study as well as the conclusion that follows are entirely my own as distinct from that of Kitto.

It is Kitto's theory that religious drama is distinct from secular drama in the fact that the former's real focus is not the tragic hero, in the Aristotelian concept of the term, but the «divine action». I do not here intend to discuss *King Lear* in the light of Kitto's theory; for the play, generally speaking, is too rich and varied to conform to Kitto's thesis. Instead, I propose to examine the aspect of the play denoted by the phrase «divine background», as embodied in the medium of verbal references to the heavens, the gods, and all the other forms of supernatural elements that seem to control the destiny of men. This has been done in the hope of proving that *King Lear* is a religious rather than a secular play because its real focus is not on the hero, Lear, but on the background of «divine action».

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S.L. Bethel, in an essay discussing the diabolic images in *Othello*, (3) shows that the religious imagery not only contributes to the development of the characters and the structure of the tragedy, but also helps towards an understanding of the play. Hence, a study of the *background of «divine action»* (4) in *King Lear* may afford something of the same guidance and give emphasis to a particular reading of the play. In this, I hope, lies my contribution because such a study as I propose attempts to deal with an important side of the play which has been so far neglected.

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There is an obvious explanation why *King Lear* has been differently treated from the rest of the tragedies: like all of the play's sources except for the most immediate (5) it has a pagan setting, and hence virtually no references to specifically Christian concepts. If we compare *Hamlet* with *Lear*, we find that the former has 51 references to heaven, 10 to hell, and 15 to God, whereas the latter has

(3) S.L. Bethel, «Shakespeare's Imagery: The Diabolic Images in *Othello*», *Shakespeare Survey*, 5 (1950).

(4) My underlining.

(5) The Chronicle History of King Leir. For a full study of the play's sources see W. Perrett «The story of King Lear from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Shakespeare», *Palaestra* XXV (1904).

respectively 16, 1, and none. Christian terms appear to be persistently avoided, with the exception of some of the speeches of the disguised Edgar ; and these will be separately considered. «Heavens» is frequently employed in place of «heaven» and words like «angel» and «devil» rarely occur. Yet what Kitto sees as the one constant in his idea of religious drama, «the assertion of a world-order, symbolized by the presence or activity of the gods» (6) is detectable in *King Lear*. This world-order, however, is conveyed, not as in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, by the physical presence of the supernatural or as in *Othello*, by vivid images of angels and devils, but by the persistent suggestion that the actions of all the characters arise from the influence of, or are to be judged in relation to, a background of supernatural or «divine» activity.

Within a monotheistic background the conception of evil is constant and unanimous. In *Othello*, for example, where the concept of evil is the same for all the characters, Iago describes himself as a «divinity of hell», and we feel he knows, together with Othella and Desdemona, the true nature of hell. But in *King Lear* the characters can only be described as «good» or «bad» according to their relations to the gods ; for the concept of the gods here is not a constant factor. Hence references to the gods in *King Lear* are immense in their diversity : they have no universally accepted connotations. They can be instruments of justice, or authors of revenge ; they are even sometimes described as indifferent. In that respect they are quite unlike those in any other of Shakespeare's plays. But divine action is in some shape or other omnipresent, and obvious particularly in the destiny of those characters who betray no consciousness of it.

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Indeed the background in *King Lear* is particularly important owing to the fact that certain references made to it, contribute towards dividing the characters into opposed extremes of «good» and «evil». The balance of the play depends on this precarious oppositions of extremities of «good» and evil which should be maintained in any critical approach. Once the critic loses sight of the sharp and well-defined oppositions of these extremities, or attempt to neutralize them, the balance of the play suffers immensely. This.

(6) Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama*, p. 238.

in fact, is a new element in Shakespeare's works (7), one perhaps more linked with the later plays than with the tragedies. Some Shakespearian critics, however, tend to neutralize these extremes, by arguing that Edmund is one of the most attractive of the dramatist's villains, and that Lear's Knights must have been a great nuisance to Goneril. Again Coleridge tries to elaborate on the «little faulty admixture of pride and sullenness» which he sees in Cordelia. This and other critical tendencies, however, no doubt, seem to upset the balance of the play. *King Lear* appears to me to be more balanced and thus more meaningful if the element of good as against evil is stressed or maintained. The «bad» characters frequently turn out to be those who refer to the gods either disrespectfully or rarely. For instance, Cornwall as well as Oswald rarely allude to the gods whereas Goneril mentions them only once where she characteristically swears «by my life»; she does not say «by the gods» or «by heaven». Her sister Regan unintentionally and instinctively cries, «O the blest gods» (II.iv.166), (8) when Lear curses Goneril, but does not mention them again in the play. Edmund, on the other hand, alludes to the gods five times, because it is in relation to his attitude towards them that he is first contrasted with his father. His allusions to the gods are significantly either flippant or hypocritical and are always characteristic of his specific vision of the divine forces. He, for example, flippantly urges the gods to «stand up for bastards». (9) He also hypocritically mentions them twice in the play; first, after contriving Edgar's disgrace he tells Gloucester, «I told them the revenging gods / 'Gainst parricides did all their thunders bend» (II.i.44); and second, when he is discussing Edgar's treachery with Cornwall, he says, «O heavens; that this treason were not, or not I the detector» (III.v.11). It is significant, however, that he does not refer to the gods at his death. Instead, his vision of the divine forces controlling human destiny embodies only an impersonal Nemesis, an impartial goddess Fortune; he sums up his creed in these last dying words: «The wheel has come full circle; I am here» (V.iii.173). This conspicuously contrasts with his brother Edgar's preceding reference to the same subject, «The gods are just.»

Indeed, the universe that the «good» characters envisage is of-

(7) See D.G. James, *The Dream of Learning* (Oxford, 1951), p. 85.

(8) The text of *King Lear* used here is taken from *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. by Kenneth Muir, London, 1972.

(9) Edmund, by the way, is the only character who tends to treat the gods lightly and disrespectfully.

ten subject to human supplication and prayer whereas that of the evil characters is not. Hence, Cordelia, Gloucester, Lear, Edgar, Albany, and Kent all pray for each other, whereas no «bad» character prays or is prayed for. When Cordelia, who is the embodiment or the standard of goodness is referred to, she is often spoken of in relation to the heavens or the gods. A gentleman describes her tears falling «like holy water from her heavenly eyes» ; her father, Lear, in his renovated state of wisdom, ⁽¹⁰⁾ alludes to her perfection in religious terms ; hence, to him, she is a «soul in bliss», a beneficent spirit. Many other descriptions of her are made in terms which have theological connotations : speaking of her Kent says, «The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid» (I.i.181) ; and a gentleman says to her father : «Thou hast one daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse / Which Twain have brought her to» (IV.vi.202). Indeed, Cordelia's own words and speeches throughout the play emphasize this impression. More than once she prays the gods and calls upon them to assist her in her sore need. For instance, in her predicament over her sick father she invokes the gods to cure him with these words :

O you kind gods,
Cure this great breach in his abused nature.
Th' untun'd and jarring senses, O, wind up
Of this child-changed father ! (IV.vii. 14).

With the same ardent sincerity she invokes «All bless'd secrets / All you unpublished virtues of the earth» to «spring with» her tears to be «aidant and remediate / In the good man's distress» (IV.iv.15)

Cordelia, the standard of goodness, is the only character whose link with the «divine background» is all the time of this order. However, in the last scenes of the play three other «good» characters seem to have a similar attitude to that of Cordelia ; these are Edgar, Kent and Albany. Of the three it is Edgar who comes nearest to share the same pious attitude as that of Cordelia. His speeches throughout display a piety as remarkable, singleminded and consistent as that of Cordelia. Again, it is he more than any other character in the play who best shows that he is consciously «religious». He refers to the incident of preserving his father's life in religious terms calling it a miracle worked by «The clearest gods, who make them honours / Of men's impossibilities» (IV.vi.73), and

(10) It was Bradley who suggested that the play might be called «The Redemption of King Lear».

he alludes to Gloucester's attempt at suicide in theological terms describing it as a temptation by a fiend, a diabolical creature. Later on, he twice begs his father to pray (IV. vi. 217, V. ii. 2). More over, we perceive that the first accusation he directs against his brother, Edmund, is that he is «False» to his «gods» ; and in his view both Edmund and Gloucester have been treated by gods who are implacably absolute in their justice.

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us ;

The dark and vicious place where thee he got
Cost him his eyes. (V. iii. 169).

Edmund accepts his brother's verdict but he interprets it in pagan terms describing it simply as the last turn of Fortune's wheel.

The second of the group approximating to Cordelia's standard of goodness is Kent ; his attitude is constant and undeveloping. Of the three «good» characters, it is he who possesses most a powerful sense of divine benevolence and whose actions seem to point out an inevitable feeling of a controlling world-order. He calls upon the gods to receive Cordelia into their «dear chelter» ; he invokes «heaven's benediction» and hopes that «The gods» would «reward» Gloucester's «kindness». His most powerful expression of religious faith is seen in his declaration of the existence of a divine order which is implicit in even the most dire and terrible of events :

It is the Stars,
The stars above us, govern our conditions ;
Else one self mate and make could not beget,
Such different issues, (IV. iii. 33)

Kent condemns the cruelty with which Goneril and Regan treat the father ; and he also regards Edmund's treatment of his father Gloucester, as wicked. But he accepts this kind of cruelty as part of the pattern of human life and does not rebel against the forces which have brought about such things to happen.

This same view Albany comes to accept in the end. This kind of religious references he makes throughout the play show a change of attitude expressing a spiritual development⁽¹¹⁾ culminating in this kind of acceptance. At the beginning of the play we perceive Albany's weakness, a weakness which is stressed the more as it

(11) See L. Kirschbaum, «Albany», *Shakespeare Survey*, 13 (1958), 20-1

t against Goneril's strength ; when King Lear curses Goneril, his
der daughter, Albany is appalled and cries, «Now, gods that we
ore, whereof comes this ? (I.iv. 288). After this very little is seen
him until he rises to sudden prominence in act four. Shakespeare
liberately chooses not to present him at Gloucester's blinding scene,
that his commitment, either to his evil wife or to her enemies,
ould appear to be delayed until the time that he learns of the deed.
re he makes three important speeches ; in the first he says ::

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits,
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (IV. ii. 46)

the second, he lets out :

See thyself, devil !
Proper deformity shows not in the fiend
So horrid as in woman. (IV. ii. 59).

ally, he cries out :

This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes,
So speedily can venge ! (IV. ii. 79).

re Albany's utterances bear no doubtful meanings ; they are clear
& unambiguous. They express a faith that is as strong as Kent's
, display a hope that is even greater than that of Kent. For
areas Kent visualizes the force of life embodied «in stars» that
vern our conditions», Albany sees it in «visible spirits» sent down
heaven to «tame» our vile offences. We must also notice that in
antithesis he makes of heaven and hell, hell is shown as a chaos,
reakdown of order, where humanity will «perforce prey on itself/
monsters of the deep». He is truthful and honest enough to see
monstrosity in his own wife and to point out its significance by
pregnant epithet «devil», which is unusual in *King Lear*. Later on,
Act V, scene iii, he seems to accept the death of his wife Goneril,
her sister Regan, considering it as the just and fearful judgment
he gods ; he describes this punishment in strong terms calling it
is judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble» (12). In this
h he sees the workings of divine, absolute justice.

(12) Act V. iii. 229.

Hence both Kent and Albany express their firm belief in the divine intervention of the gods and their power to punish the vile and reward the good. This belief is even more deeply rooted in Edgar, who is directly aware of this divine power of the gods. To him these gods are neither harsh nor difficult to understand; they are, on the contrary, impartially «just».

Indeed, the part played by Edgar is very important as it contributes towards the total effect of the «divine background» of the play. Hence, a discussion of the speeches Edgar makes when he is disguised in the person of Poor Tom is invaluable.

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The role of Edgar as Poor Tom is perhaps unique in Shakespeare. This uniqueness lies not so much in the use of disguise which is a common Shakespearian dramatic device, but rather in the divorcing of the speeches made by Edgar in his own person from those made by him when disguised as Poor Tom. It is rare in Shakespeare for the speeches a character makes when in disguise to have almost no relation to those he utters in his own person. Yet that appears to be the case with Edgar. To begin with, Poor Tom does not stand for a single unified figure; he signifies or represents three different symbols of spiritual poverty, each is distinguished by a different type of language. This language, however, which is clearly and obsessively religious in nature, is taken from a book, published only a few years before *King Lear* was first acted, in 1603 (13). This book is called *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* and is written by Samuel Harsnett, an anti-Catholic priest. It relates the story of a false exorcism performed on a number of household servants by a Catholic preacher, who, the writer said, had forced the young men to confess untruthfully to being possessed by the devil. This, Harsnett claims, has been administered through sheer fear. That Shakespeare should have resorted to the use of such a recent book as a source for his play, must have created in the Elizabethan audience a strange effect. It must have seemed to them like «a timeless parable» (14), whose views certainly seemed to apply directly to them.

Poor Tom, as mentioned before, combines in himself the significance of three different aspects of poverty. The first of these is the outer poverty. He is the emblem of the Elizabethan Bedlam beggar

(13) See K. Muir, «Samuel Harsnett and King Lear», R.E.S. New Series IX (1951), 11-21.

(14) The main plot and characters belong to centuries of old folk-lore tradition.

whose outward appearance and aspect Edgar has simulated. Here he is seen as a victim of the savagery of nature, a prey of the evil that reveals its effect in the shape of devils like Flibbertigibbet, who «begins at curfew, and walks till the first cock; he gives the web and the pin, squinies the eye, and makes the hare-lip; mildews the white wheat and hurts the poor creature of earth.» (15) Poor Tom is the victim of such a devil. He alludes here to such physical deformity as would perhaps have been the cause of making great numbers of the beggars the outcasts that they were, in a community that thought the physical condition was a symbol of the spiritual. Hence, it follows that their fiend would be a creature who distorted their physical constitution and prevented them from the source of healthy living.

The second aspect of Poor Tom is quite different in many ways from the first and can hardly be connected with it. It brings to mind the devilish hero in Harsnett's book. He is the servant who painfully affects the manners and behaviour of a master, fashionable Elizabethan gentleman. As such he is a conventional object of ridicule to the Elizabethans. Hence he is not a victim of evil but the symbol of evil itself, the evil of «the superfluous and lust-dieted man». He enumerates the bad deeds he has performed as one who «served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her; swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke them in the sweet face of Heaven; one that slept in the contriving of lust and wak'd to do it». He proudly claims that he was «false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand». (III. iv. 84). This kind of evil man that Tom here describes befits the character of Edmund, Goneril and Regan. It is the character which King Lear himself denounces when he speaks about justice in Act IV. Scene vi :

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 soiled horse goes to't
With a more riotous appetite.
Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above : (II. 117 ff).

The third aspect of Poor Tom is difficult to identify for, unlike the other two, it takes no definite form, but stands for the «unaccommo-

(15) Act III, Sc. iv, ll. 112 ff.

dated» man. As in the first aspect, here Poor Tom is a beggar ; but unlike the second he *has been* a servant. In other words, Poor Tom here truly symbolizes the «superfluous» upstart serving man. His consciousness of life seems to be utterly limited by his complete deprivation of any possession, either physical or spiritual. Hence he is aware of the forces that control life, only in so far as they join hands to persecute him. He ironically represents the concept of Lear when he talks of man, man who lives on the filth of the earth, man whose life is «cheap as beasts», and who wears clothes «that very dogs disdain», who owes «the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume.» Hence Poor Tom's impact on the final concept of *King Lear's* «divine background» is most striking ; his attitude has a dual effect : for while the concepts of contemporary witch-lore and diabolism which he sets forth belong to Christianity in a particular phase, his notion of Man as a weak creature completely at the mercy of destructive and hostile forces is timeless. These two distinctive attitudes seem to be, in a way, the outer extremes in the framework of the religious ideas in *King Lear*.

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Lear and Gloucester, however, are the two chief characters singled out as showing a noticeable development in their religious attitudes. As the play proceeds each begins to display an awareness of the universe around him to such a degree that he comes to repent of and to deliberately abandon the view he maintained at the beginning of the play. They are similar in many ways but whereas Lear attains full insight defining his attitude to the gods, Gloucester's insight is only half consciously realized ; for he dies groping after a truth that Lear comes to supersede.

Indeed, Lear's basic view of the universe undergoes a violent change following each fresh catastrophe. At the beginning of the play, in the first and second acts, he swears by pagan gods and prays to nature. We have him, at one time, for example, cursing «by the sacred radiance of the sun». But a shift is noticeable in the third act, where he connects the heavens with the idea of justice. It is not until we reach Act V, however, that we come to realize the tremendous development in his religious attitude and the extent of his newly acquired awareness of life and the universe around him. In the final Act Lear feels himself truly «allied» with, rather than «opposed» to, the gods and the heavens.

Lear, none the less, is from the very beginning continually conscious of the gods but his vision of them differs according

to his state of mind and varies with his mood. When angry or miserable, in need of physical strength or spiritual assistance, his immediate reaction is to invoke the supernatural. His first mention of the supernatural is associated with a divine setting completely unrelated to that which he evolves in the end. His first allusion to the gods is in connection with his youngest daughter, Cordelia. He swears by the gods to disown her :

For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
By all the operation of the orbs-
From whom we do exist and cease to be,
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever. (I. i. 108).

As is obvious, this curse is connected with the concept of a natural order. But we must also remember that the curse of a daughter may seem to the Elizabethans to be a most unnatural thing. Lear is swearing by the natural and social order to disown or cast off a daughter : a most unnatural procedure. And here lies the paradox which is at the heart of the play and which appears continually in Lear's chief utterances on justice. The powers Lear calls up in this curse are referred to as supernatural forces, manifested in the mysterious workings of nature. Taking the form of planetary influence they do not deliberately set themselves against human kind but stand aloof. Yet these forces control man's birth and death and reaffirm the curses of a man against his fellow men. To LEAR they apparently have as yet no other role to play. Indeed, all his first allusions to the supernatural take the shape of curses. For example, in Act I, scene iv, we have a terrifying curse directed against Goneril, reminding us of the earlier curse on Cordelia. Here he invokes Nature to «convey sterility» on his ungrateful daughter :

Hear, Nature, hear ; dear Goddess, hear.
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful !
Into her womb convey sterility !
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her ! (I. iv. 274) (16).

(16) Besides such violent curses we also meet with little oaths like—«Now, by Apollo», or «By Jupiter», «Darkness and devils».

Lear's curse here teems with contradictory meanings and is characterized by irony. At the beginning of the curse he reminds us of Edmund's words when he invokes nature to support and assist him in accomplishing an unnatural deed, that of proceeding to cheat his own father, whereby he says : «Thou, Nature art my goddess ; ;to thy law/ My services are bound» (I. ii. 1). But whereas to Edmund the word «goodess» suggests merely an abstract idea or a symbol, to Lear it is a deity, ironically a female. Lear's «goddess», the powerful supernatural force which brings about fertility, is called upon to bring about sterility on his daughter ; she is in charge of the earth and its fertility. Lear curses Goneril once more ; yet before doing so he invokes «sweet heavens» to protect him from madness : «O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heavens ; / Keep me in temper ; I would not be mad» (I v. 42). Here we detect a note of humility and pain. This pathetic prayer, however, is soon followed up by a passionate curse again directed against Goneril. Lear invokes Nature or the Natural powers to blast and destroy Goneril's youth and beauty and infect her eyes with blindness :

You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes ! Infect her beauty,
You fen-suck'd fogs, drawn by the pow'rful sun,
To fall and blister her ! (II. iv. 163).

But when Lear is defeated in his purpose and the blind forces of nature refuse to grant him his wish and circumstances begin to get worse for him, he becomes subdued and appeals for divine help and assistance ; he cries out pathetically :

O heavens,
If you do love old men, if your sweet sway,
Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,
Make it your cause ; send down and take my part !

(II. iv. 188)

There is an unmistakable change of attitude here ; the supernatural forces that he invokes in his former violent attack on Goneril are blind and destructive forces, whereas the powers he calls upon now (in the above context) are visualized in a different light : they are characterized by pity, compassion and «sween sway» ; they succumb to a well-disciplined order. But there still is a link between the two attitudes ; for the powers Lear invokes in both cases seem to be on his side. He even suggests that he has authority over them. He

declares that he does not intend to curse Goneril once more ; but implies that he could, if he wished to, cause her harm and that such powers are obedient to him :

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.
(II. iv. 223)

At a later crucial stage, when he undergoes severe suffering at the hands of his second daughter, from whom he expects a greater kindness, he relinquishes this arrogant attitude and moves toward a greater humility. When faced with the same filial ingratitude and cruelty at the hands of Regan, Lear does not resort to violent curses as he would have done before, but begs «the heavens» for patience and strength (17) to bear up with his tribulations :

You Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need !
You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age ; wretched in both.
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts,
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely. (II. iv. 269)

These words indicate a noticeable development in Lear's general attitude ; he for the first time in the play, admits of his lowliness and incapacity to command the gods. He even concedes that these gods are in full control over him, and that they can if they choose, oppose and work against him. This significantly happens just before he loses his reason. (18) When he after that associates himself with the supernatural forces, he does so in a very different mood.

It is significant that before Lear becomes mad, nature also loses its harmony. Kent declares that the raging violence of the storm and «the wrathful skies» are unprecedented : «man's nature cannot carry/ Th' affliction nor the fear» (III. ii. 43). The gods are deliberately manifesting their power in this double chaos. That Lear is conscious of this cannot be doubted ; for the «nature» images he uses anticipate that double chaos in nature and in man. It is also

(17) He does not as formerly demand justice or assistance but craves for the capacity «to bear it tamely».

(18) Here we are reminded of K. Muir's double paradox «of reason in madness and madness in reason» See K. Muir, Introduction to the Arden Edition of *King Lear*, 1972, iv.

clear in the religious terminology with which he comes increasingly to give vent to his ideas. The problem of divine justice seems to rule his thoughts and occupy his mind in his later moments of sanity ; hence he visualizes the storm as an expression of the wrath of the gods against those who try to disobey their commands or defy their holy orders :

Let the great Gods,
That keep dreadful pudder o'er our heads,
Find out their enemies now. 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 I am a man
More sinn'd against than sinning. (III. ii. 49)

Lear recognizes in the Bedlam beggar a living example of the poverty he has been pitying and he identifies that «poor, bare, forked animal» with himself. Stripped of his pride, stripped of everything except the bare necessities, «man's life is cheap as beast's.» Hence Lear becomes aware of the common humanity he shares with the poor, miserable wretches. He exhorts pomp to «shake the superflux to hem» ; and as Gloucester, he preaches equality on earth to show the absolute justice of the heavens :

Take physic, Pomp ;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the Heavens more just. (III. iv. 33)

But he also visualizes in Poor Tom the image of his own cause ; thus he most dramatically moves from the general to the particular and his conception of the supernatural concentrates on the local rather than the universal. For seeing Poor Tom, he asks, «What, have his daughters brought him to this pass ? ». (III. iv. 62) Also a little later, Tom's distracted words about foul fiends that bite his back excite in his mind an image of his cruel daughters Goneril and Regan being punished for their evil in a typically Elizabethan hell : «To have thousand with red burning spits/Come hissing in upon'em-» (III. i. 15). In short, his mind becomes obsessed with this one idea and his insanity grows more marked, his speeches also, like the mad Tom, become increasingly expressive of the concept of hell as expounded by Harsnett, exposed by Shakespeare and shared by the Elizabethan audience. Lear condemns sex partly because, like the popular mor-

alists of the time, he sees in women the cause of his predicament : sexual desire is to blame for the birth of unnatural children like his ungrateful daughters ; and his thoughts are diverted from the particular case of himself and his daughters to the general condition of womanhood. Generalizing he perceives in «woman» the embodiment of hell :

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 — (IV. vi. 123).

In this violent denunciatory harangue, we can detect the two «voices» of Lear : the voice of the pagan-king and that of the Christian priest. In one way Lear here is still the pagan sovereign who once invoked the forces of nature to bring down woe on his daughter and who beseeched Apollo to inflict vengeance on the wrong-doers. In another, he is the Christian priest, who condemns sinners and wrong-doers for committing that which deprives them of everlasting bliss, turning them into beasts and monsters of the deep. In short, Lear here dwells on the kind of «divine background» related to human affairs which the Elizabethan audience would have found most relevant and meaningful.

It is not until a little later that we notice a development in Lear's attitude : that occurs when he meets with Cordelia, his third daughter, and a reconciliation takes place. He for the first time becomes aware of hell not as embodied in his two vicious older daughters but in himself. This new attitude comes from his awareness of the true character of Cordelia and his new perception of the relationship between them. This consciousness brings about a balance in his character, a balance that is, no doubt, accompanied by a painful process ; so that he is resurrected as a new man. It is then that we hear him admitting the painful truth about himself and declaring the true worth of Cordelia :

Thou art a soul in bliss ; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead. (IV. vii. 46)

The change is unmistakable ; he is now penitent and humbly admits that the daughter he has cursed, banished, and described as «a wretch

whom Nature is ashamed. / Almost t'acknowledge hers,» (19) has now become to him «a soul in bliss,» and he is nothing but «a very foolish fond old man.» (IV. vii. 60). His tears «scald» him but with Cordelia's reunion new «blessed virtues» will arise out of the earth. The feeling of penitence and repentance which have started just before his madness become, now that he is restored to sanity, an experience as agonizing as that of passing through purgatory.. Yet the tremendous suffering he has been through is far greater than what he, in fact, deserves and the new life he finds after his absolution does not lead to joy, but to greater suffering. In this complicate picture we are conscious of two opposing concepts, running side by side : the Christian and the non-Christian. On the one hand, the suffering that leads to bliss is a Christian concept and Lear's use of words like «soul» and «bliss» are quite appropriate here. On the other, the image of the «wheel of fire» is a symbol of endless agony which is a non-Christian concept. As K. Muir remarks, the image «expresses the suffering not only of Lear, but of man; and the suffering itself perhaps more important than its causes» (20) Hence the suffering Lear bears seems to be not for his sins alone but for all humanity. Nevertheless what this last speech implies (21) is consistent with the one that follows, although a huge spiritual progress occurs in between the two speeches. After the reconciliation scene Lear says to Cordelia :

Come, let's away to prison ;
We two alone will sing like birds i' the 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 take upon's the mystery of things.
As if we were God's spies. (V. iii. 8).

Hence, Lear considers his imprisonment with Cordelia a new kind of liberty, whereby he and his beloved daughter will «sing like birds i' the cage» — we notice that the duality still persists. Lear visualizes a new kind of future with Cordelia, where they both will excise a new kind of freedom in the service of the gods. They will take

(19) Act I. l. 211.

(20) See K. Muir, Introduction to the Arden Edition of King Lear, 1972, IV.

(21) I am referring to LEAR'S speech which begins by addressing his daughter Cordelia as «a soul in bliss» (Act IV. vii. 46 - 48).

upon them «the mystery of things», as if they were «God's (22) spies»— In other words, they will *look down* on earthly things in a detached way and will no longer be part of them. At this point the development of Lear's religious awareness is at its highest peak : his intense suffering and immense injustices have disappeared gradually into the vagueness of the long and ugly past. So it is not surprising to hear him murmuring, as though to himself : «Your sisters/Have, as I do remember, done me wrong, (23) as though he was remembering an unpleasant dream. Even Edmund's command to the officers and soldiers to «Take them away» to prison, does not seem to affect the «resurrected» Lear, who, unconscious of what is being said, goes on hopefully :

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense. (V. iii. 20).

Their reunion is so exhilarating that the old king visualizes it as a divine act sanctifying him and Cordelia. We now see the close contact between Lear and the controlling power of the gods. In his and Cordelia's renunciation of the world, he finds his succour and salvation.

Yet Lear's quoted speech is all the more tragic and powerful owing to the heart-rending irony of the situation which accompanies it and follows close upon it. For we cannot help seeing that Lear's wonderful dream can never be realized on earth. We do not even need Edmund to remind us of the bitter irony. The painful self-assurance with which Lear himself ends up his speech makes this horrifying fact all the more powerful :

(22) This is the only time in the play where the singular form of «God» occurs. Kenneth Muir, in his «Arden Shakespeare» edition (open University Set Books, 1972), p. 188, uses «Gods», explaining in the foot note that since «There is no apostrophe in F or Q», he follows Perrett «in assuming that Shakespeare intended the plural since he was writing of a pagan world». On the other hand, J. Dover Wilson, in his New Cambridge Edition of Lear (Introduction), considers this singular instance out of keeping with the rest of the play, which in his opinion is a pagan play. In his view this solitary Christian reference shows «Shakespeare's carelessness». No doubt, this instance is unusual, but I believe it is unlikely that Shakespeare should commit such a «careless» mistake at such a point in the play. If it means anything, it rather suggests Lear's close link with the controlling power of the heavens. Hence the reference seems to me to embody the dual extremities contained in the framework of the play. For even if Shakespeare intended the word «God» to be in the singular, the reference of the whole, does not constitute an orthodox Christian belief.

(23) Act. IV. vii. 72 ff.

Have I caught thee ?
He that parts us shall bring a brand upon heaven,
And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes.

(V. iii. 21).

Nevertheless, Cordelia *dies* and they are *parted*. The irony is all the more poignant owing to Albany's prayer for her (24), the very moment that her father comes in carrying her dead body and howling with-
agony :

Howl, howl, howl, howl ! O, you are men of stones !
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That Heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.

(V. iii. 257)

The intensity of such agonizing and agonized cry gives a powerful effect of the feeling of injustice which the old king experiences by the death of his youngest child. Other instances of the same irony of fate is seen in the case of Gloucester, (25) who dies through Edgar's «fault». This fault could have easily been evaded. Hence, it appears that both Lear and Cordelia meet their end as a result of Edmund's undue delay. Another example of irony is seen in Kent, who although true and loyal to the end, never receives due recognition from his beloved master. The wicked characters all die (as Albany rightly suggests), manifesting the «judgment of the heavens» in action, whereas the forces which have controlled the lives and deaths of Lear and Cordelia appear to function in a manner that is much less wary and cautious, almost, indeed, as capricious and despotic as Kent hints when he says near the end of the play that «If Fortune brag of Two she lov'd and hated, / One of them we behold» (V. iii. 279).

* * *

It is Kent, however, who makes one of the last religious references in the play. When he sees the distracted Lear entering with the dead body of Cordelia in his arms, he inquires with bitterness and irony, «Is this the promised end ?» To which Edgar says, «Or image of that horror ?» Albany adds, «Fall and cease». (26) These

(24) Albany says, «The gods defend her», just before Lear re-enters with the corpse in his arms. Albany's prayer for Cordelia brings to mind other examples of irony in the play : for example, Kent's prayer for Gloucester, whereby he invokes the gods to reward the old man's kindness, uttered just before Gloucester becomes blind.

(25) Cf. In «Some Aspects of the Style of King Lear», Shakespeare Survey, 13 (1958), p. 50, W.M.T. Nowotny, claims that these instances are «aimed at intensity rather than the structure of an experience.»

(26) Act V. iii, 263 — 265.

references remind us, perhaps, of Doomsday as prophesied by St. Mark, in the *New Testament*, chapter xiii, verses 8 - 13. Mark writes :

«Now the brother shall betray the brother to death, and the father the son; and the children shall rise up against their parents and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake ; but he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved». (27).

This prophecy brings to mind Gloucester's own words at the beginning of the play, when he says :

«These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us : though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus ... We have seen the best of our time : machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves.» (I. ii. 100 ff)

St. Mark, however, ends his prophecy by predicting that those who bear up patiently and endure to the end shall be «saved». And we observe that the «good» characters in *King Lear* have endured, and have accepted their fate. Albany, Kent and Edgar all have suffered patiently, without complaint. They have never grumbled against the injustices of the gods, or the heavens. They even have conformed to the gods' cruel order and authority and recognized the existence and superiority of the «justicers» in the heavens, whereas Lear and Gloucester were easily irritated by them ; they often complained and were rebellious.

* * *

Yet like Lear, Gloucester develops in his awareness of the universe to such an extent that he too comes to regret his former attitude and willingly gives up the attitudes which he upheld at the beginning of the play. However, Gloucester dies groping after a truth that Lear comes to supersede. When we first meet with Gloucester, he is spiritually overbearing, arrogant and presumptuous. His allusions to the gods reveal a character that is oddly divided upon itself : for, while his trust in the gods, in the belief that they support all his actions, is so strong that he describes them as «Kind»; yet he is extremely superstitious ; and his presumption is seen in his foolish pride of the birth of his illegitimate son. Indeed, his spiritual blindness and incapacity to see the truth remain unchanged till the third act, when his physical blindness shakes his former confidence in himself. Through this agonizing experience he, for the first time, comes to

(27) St. Mark, The New Testament, ch. xiii. 8 — 13.

see the truth. He is tied up, insulted and cruelly treated in his own house. His indignation reaches its climax when he is dragged into the room where Regan and her followers are consulting ; but his reaction to this unfair treatment is strangely toned down and qualified by his instinctive use of the characteristic word «kind»

By the kind Gods, 'tis most ignobly done.
To pluck me by the beard. (III. vii. 35)

Nevertheless, Gloucester's confidence in the Gods and his faith in the existence of a higher justice are not yet completely disrupted ; for he can still appeal to «The winged vengeance» to «overtake such children» (III. vii. 64). The words of Gloucester, however, betray an unmistakable feeling of bitterness ; it is a cry for vengeance against those «cruel» children. (28) Hence his attitude reveals a shift of orientation towards a harsher position. The word «winged» itself has a pagan implication for it suggests retribution. But his agonizing cry when Cornwall plucks out his eyes — «Give me help ! O cruel ! O you Gods ! (29) — conveys suffering that is free from rebuke. Moreover, when he is just informed of Edmund's treacherous trick, his faith in himself is badly shattered, but his confidence in the gods still persists. His reaction to the bitter news of Edmund's mean treachery is somewhat unexpected : the sad truth seems to sober him ; for his first thought is not for himself but for his wronged son, Edgar, for he cries out :

O my follies ! Then Edgar was abus'd.
Kind Gods, forgive me that, and prosper him !
(III. vii. 89)

As we see, the word «kind» is here again evocative, and particularly so because Gloucester uses it for the first time with full awareness of its implications.

After this incident, we notice an unmistakable development in Gloucester's attitude ; for he never regains his former self-confidence. What is more, his self-assurance is transformed into a deep despair, not only for himself but for the whole of humanity, who is represented collectively as a pastime for the gods :

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods ;
They kill us for their sport. (IV. i. 36).

(28) Cf. «The Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Romans», The New Testament, ch. 12, verses 17 — 19.

(29) Act. III. sc. vii ; l. 68.

These are perhaps the most pessimistic words in the whole play, uttered by Gloucester at his most vulnerable and wretched state, when he meets the disguised Edgar on the heath. The gods that Gloucester visualizes here are the more terrible in so far as they are considered as beings who are deliberately spiteful and actively wanton and cruel like children. They are not merely powers endowed with impersonal cruelty or malignity but they are forces which set themselves on purpose to harm human beings. Yet here it is essential to notice that throughout this scene, whatever Gloucester says, must be qualified by the irony of the situation. For the argument upon which he bases his proposition is that his son, Edgar, has been lost to him for ever through his own spiritual blindness. He now mourns because he was unable to see the true worth of Edgar. But he is unable to perceive that another blindness, this time physical, has prevented him from seeing that the man to whom he is complaining is his own son Edgar. Another ironical situation that is closely linked with that one is when Gloucester describes Poor Tom as one «Whom the heav'ns' plagues/ Have humbled to all strokes.» (30). Here Gloucester is unaware that these same words apply to his son, Edgar. The irony here is that «the plague» that has «humbled» Edgar is in reality the gullibility of Gloucester himself.

Gloucester's attitude to the heavens, even after his blinding, does not change radically ; for he still considers the gods or the heavens as the means by which order and justice can be achieved. He is affected by the nakedness and wretchedness of Poor Tom in the same way as Lear is by the Fool and he calls for equal distribution of wealth among all men :

Heavens, deal so still !
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly,
So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough. (IV. i. 65)

We see Gloucester painfully learning wisdom and rising in moral stature ; for he is now capable of hearing «The still sad music of humanity, / Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power/ To chasten and subdue.» (31) His disinterestedness helps him to sympa-

(30) IV. i. 63 — 64.

(31) From Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, *Wordsworth's Poetical Works*, ed. E. De Selincourt, Oxford, 1940 — 1949, Vol. ii: p. 259.

thize with the suffering of humanity symbolized in Poor Tom ; yet he has no more hope in the possibility of divine help for himself. (32).

The bitter and wretched loud protest against the harshness of the gods is rendered less sharp by the hopeless acceptance that follows immediately :

O you mighty Gods !
This world I do renounce, and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off ;
If I could bear it longer, and not fall
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
My snuff and loathed part of nature should
Burn itself out. (IV. vi. 34).

Feeling utterly despondent and defeated by the unconquerable omnipotence of the gods he gives way to his wretchedness and prepares to commit suicide. The seeming miracle (33) of his deliverance momentarily renews his hope and he determines to put up with his worldly «Affliction till it do cry out itself/ Enough, enough' and die.» (34) There is a relapse, however, when the wretched Gloucester meets with the distracted Lear in all his madness. The experience of that «side-piercing sight» shakes him to the core and he again begs the gods, whom he now significantly calls «ever-gentle», (35) to bring about his death promptly before he again is tempted to kill himself. And, when Edgar offers a hand to help him, he prays that the «bounty and the benison of Heaven», will be his lot ; but his own feelings for himself are of a different kind, for he cries desperately :

The King is mad : how stiff is my vile sense
That I stand up, and have ingenious feeling
Of my huge sorrows ! Better I were distract
So should my thoughts be sever'd from my grief,
And woes by wrong imaginations lose
The knowledge of themselves. (IV. vi. 276).

(32) Giving to Poor Tom money, he significantly says :

«Here, take this purse, thou whom the heav'ns' plagues
Have humbled to all strokes : that I am wretched
Makes thee the happier » (IV. i. 63).

(33) Act IV. vi. 55.

(34) Act IV. vi. 76.

(35) Act IV. vi. 214. The description «ever-gentle» suggests Gloucester's desire to conciliate or win over the gods from hostility.

An even greater feeling of despair is expressed later on when he hears of the misfortune befalling King Lear and his daughter, Cordellia. For when Edgar offers to lead him away to a safe place he ejaculates :

«No further, sir ; a man may rot even here».

(V. ii. 8)

These sad and despairing words are nearly the last we hear from him in the play. When we next hear of him, it is when Edgar gives us the account of his death ; we are told that «his flaw'd heart, / Alack, too weak the conflict to support' / 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly.»⁽³⁶⁾

Gloucester dies «smilingly», yet we feel that the calamity might have been avoided had Edgar revealed his true character to his father earlier. Gloucester has met with a cruel and ruthless end, although he, of all the other characters, is the one who persistently believed in the benevolence of the gods.⁽³⁷⁾ Yet we must take into consideration the fact that he prayed for death, that he was old, and that death did not overtake him except when his one wish, to be reunited with his son Edgar, had been granted. Such considerations alone are enough proof to refute his former premise that the world is governed by forces or gods like wanton boys, who kill us for their sport. The force of this fact becomes even clearer when we realize that it may even be that Gloucester is finally confirmed in his firm belief that the gods are fair, and even «kind» ; for they granted his wish, and he died «smilingly».

* * *

Thus the structure of *King Lear* does not deny the existence of a world-order governed by gods, who are not actively cruel or spiteful as thoughtless children, yet it allows the innocent to suffer. The suffering and the death of Cordelia, who is perfectly «good», is probably the most difficult of all to justify. Nevertheless, all the good characters die in a spirit of acceptance. None rebels. True, Oswald describes his death as «untimely» ; but the destiny of most of the good characters though, at times, is accompanied by the sense of irony (which is often stressed rather than given a false lustre), leaves no impression of this «untimeliness» at their deaths. Perhaps the comment which H.D.F. Kitto makes on Greek tragedy may be relevant here ; he writes :

(36) Act V. iii. 195.

(37) Except for one temporary loud protest against the injustice of the gods, Gloucester has been the strongest of all the others in his faith in the gods.

«In these plays, the innocent do suffer, and their suffering is not 'revolting' ; and the reason for this is that their suffering is seen to be part of a world-order, which, though not always beneficent, is at least intelligible.» (38)

The permanent and persisting presence of this world-order, seen in the characters' continual consciousness of the gods and their influence on human life, has been noticed at every stage of the action in *King Lear*. The terms Shakespeare uses to signify this world-view varies : sometimes he takes it from pagan sources (which are found in folk-lore) ; at others, he derives it from Christian theology ; but most of the time he uses more generalized sources. Hence, although *King Lear's* «divine background» does not have the same coherence which characterizes Greek tragedy, nor (which is perhaps more significant), does it have the coherence of Shakespeare's other tragedies yet the play is religious rather than secular in the sense that its real focus is not on the hero but on the «background of divine action». This background is constructed by repeated suggestions that the actions of all the characters are to be in connection with an ordered system of supernatural or divine activity. Attitudes towards the supernatural divide the characters into extremes of good and evil. Good characters refer to the gods quite frequently ; they call upon them for assistance and invoke them in prayer. Whereas bad characters rarely refer to the gods and most of their allusions betray a feeling of disrespect or frivolity. Religious allusions establish Cordelia as a paragon of goodness, and Albany, Kent and Edgar finally approach her belief in a recognizable world-order. Lear as well as Gloucester show complete change of attitude as the play develops : Gloucester from superstition to a deeply felt belief in divine justice, Lear's from pagan pride to sanctification. The fact that these characters could survive and even come to accept without much resentment or rebellion the cruel justice of the heavens is a vindication of a world-order which, though not beneficent, is «intelligible».

(38) H.D.F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama*, p. 236.

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