

THE KING LEAR PERPLEX

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First Printing, May 1960 Second Printing, January 1961 Third Printing, December 1962

L.C. Cat. Card No.: 60-9978

Printed in the United States of America

Manufactured by American Book-Stratford Press, Inc.

THE KING LEAR PERPLEX

P. 43

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PREFACE

So much has been written on *King Lear* that the student coming to a study of the play is likely to be overawed by the sheer weight of previous comment. All too often he despairs of so much as even beginning to discover and understand the best of what has already been said; and he is likely to think that even if he could overcome this first obstacle, he would then find it impossible to add anything of his own to the *King Lear* "perplex." This book is intended to help the student overcome both of these obstacles. It offers the reader key portions of a discussion in which many of the finest critical minds of three centuries have participated. And that discussion is not over. I am confident that this book will raise for the alert student as many questions as it settles and therefore encourage additional thought and research on a work of literature that can never be exhausted.

Just as the critics quoted use earlier critics for help, even if only as whipping boys, the student who comes to this book from a fairly fresh reading of the play will in turn use the insights of his predecessors. He will find that more remains to be done. Although our wonder at Shakespeare's achievement may be no greater than the wonder which Johnson or Coleridge so eloquently expressed, we have the benefit of their insights as well as of our own.

In selecting material, I have tried to keep a balance between the best and the most representative. Although those readers who prefer to approach the material by major themes and problems may do so easily with the help of a topical index provided at the end of this volume, the selections are arranged chronologically to give the student a sense of historical development. He will discover that the play has said different things to different generations. Modern readers will find some of the early critics naïve and ignorant, but no more so than many of our present-day commentators will seem in a century or two. Although the reader is spared the most blatant extremes of the ridiculous, he is not spared all. If he is alert, he will recoil here and there at specters of bad logic, narrowness, unjustified self-confidence, and downright lapses of taste. He will find that before Coleridge almost no critic discussed the play in any detail, and that it was another hundred years before the nineteenth century emphasis on character gave way to the kinds of exploration we have come to take for granted-hard looks at Elizabethan conventions behind the play, at the philosophy, language, and imagery which are, together with character, aspects of

the complex work of art we admire. Of the chief schools and styles of critical approach to *King Lear* represented here, some have fallen into general disrepute or are simply out of fashion; now in disrepute, for example, is the first selection in this book, Nahum Tate's revision of the play, which held the English stage for 150 years. The reader must therefore discriminate critically in using the material here collected. But if he finds weak spots in some of the criticism, he will also find information applied with resourcefulness and perceptiveness, often with a wisdom that has been directed at few other works of literature.

I cannot pretend that there is any real substitute for digging up the material for one's self, experiencing the delight of stumbling onto an occasional oasis in the hot wastes of critical discussion. But only months of reading in the best libraries will begin to cover the thousands of pages here reduced to under two hundred. This compression has forced me to exclude entirely some worthy discussions of the play and mercilessly to extract the gist of others. To compensate for the numerous exclusions and excisions, I have included a fairly extensive bibliography which lists not only additional criticism, but also certain technical or scholarly matters outside the bounds of this book: sources, editions, dating, textual emendations, staging problems, relation to other works, and so on. This bibliography is arranged by topics, and most of the entries are briefly annotated.

For the convenience of those who wish to use this book as a guide to literary study, I have left the selections as true to their originals as is practicable. Editing has tended to remove comment irrelevant to the objectives of this collection, excessive or repetitive quotations from the play, and scholarly, historical, and biographical matters. The spaced ellipses (. . .) are mine, as opposed to the unspaced ellipses (...) of the originals. Unnecessary footnotes are omitted, and those remaining renumbered. Where the bracketed number, which indicates original pagination, would have fallen in the middle of a word because that word was divided between two pages, the number has been set at the end of that word. And since students are already sufficiently confused about matters of punctuation, I have normalized the most extreme vagaries to accepted American usage, but have otherwise made every attempt to be faithful to the original, even to the extent of reproducing little inconsistencies and currently unacceptable quirks of style. I have not altered all quotations to conform to one edition of the play. Only a few obvious errors have been silently corrected.

The student in search of an essay topic will find the index designed for his need, and the excerpts themselves can serve as models of what may be done. Then if he wishes to explore beyond the present selections he would do well to consult the most searching critics further, to whose extended commentaries excerpting cannot do justice: notably H. N. Hudson, A. C. Bradley, Harley Granville-Barker, R. B. Heilman, G. Wilson Knight, W. H. Clemen, William Empson, and

D. G. James. If material for a longer study is wanted, the student can turn to the annotated bibliography. The best student will inevitably rely on the play itself and on his own sense of it for primary source material, but he will find that true originality, in criticism as in literature and the arts, almost certainly presupposes a knowledge of what others before him have accomplished.

H. B.

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PART ONE

THE KING LEAR PERPLEX: SELECTED CRITICISM

Duff-Muggli, who now may be quoted by very kind arrangement . . . , first called this kind of paddygoeasy partnership the ulykkhean or tetrachiric or quadrumane or duck and drakes or debts and dishes perplex. . . . —James Joyce: Finnegans Wake

Nahum Tate

From "The History of King Lear" [1687]. London, 1745.

Scene, A Prison

Lear asleep, with his Head on Cordelia's Lap.

CORD. What Toils, thou wretched King, hast thou endur'd To make thee draw, in Chains, a Sleep so sound? Thy better Angel charm thy ravish'd Mind With fancy'd Freedom; Peace is us'd to lodge On Cottage Straw. Thou hast the Beggar's Bed, Therefore should'st have the Beggar's careless Thought. And now, my Edgar, I remember thee: What Fate has seiz'd thee in this general Wreck I know not, but I know thou must be wretched, Because Cordelia holds thee dear.

O Gods! A sudden Gloom o'er-whelms me, and the Image Of Death o'er-spreads the Place.—Ha! Who are there?

Enter Captain and Officers with Cords.

- CAPT. Now, Sirs, dispatch; already you are paid In Part, the Best of your Reward's to come.
- LEAR. Charge, charge upon their Flank, their last Wing halts. Push, push the Battle, and the Day's our own.

 Their Ranks are broke, down with Albany.

 Who holds my Hands?—O thou deceiving Sleep,

 I was this very Minute on the Chace;

 And now a Prisoner here.—What mean the Slaves?

 You will not murder me? [65]
- CORD. Help, Earth and Heaven!
 For your Souls sake, dear Sirs, and for the Gods.
- Off. No Tears, good Lady; no pleading against Gold and Preferment.

 Come, Sirs, make ready your Cords.
- CORD. You, Sir, I'll seize,
 You have a human Form, and if no Prayers
 Can touch your Soul to spare a poor King's Life,

If there be any thing that you hold dear, By that I beg you to dispatch me first.

CAPT. Comply with her Request; dispatch her first.

LEAR. Off Hell-Hounds, by the Gods I charge you spare her; 'Tis my Cordelia, my true pious Daughter; No pity?—Nay, then take an old Man's Vengeance.

> Snatches a Partisan, and strikes down two of them; the rest quit Cordelia, and turn upon him.

Enter Edgar and Albany.

Epg. Death! Hell! Ye Vultures, hold your impious Hands, Or take a speedier Death than you wou'd give.

CAPT. By whose Command?

EDG. Behold the Duke, your Lord.

ALB. Guards, seize those Instruments of Cruelty.

CORD. My Edgar, Oh!

Edg. My dear Cordelia! Lucky was the Minute Of our Approach; the Gods have weigh'd our Suff'rings; W'are past the Fire, and now must shine to Ages.

GENT. Look here, my Lord, see where the generous King Has slain two of 'em.

LEAR. Did I not, Fellow?

I've seen the Day, with my good biting Faulchion
I cou'd have made 'em skip: I am Old now,
And these vile Crosses spoil me; out of Breath,
Fie, oh! quite out of Breath, and spent.

Alb. Bring in old Kent; and, Edgar, guide you hither Your Father, whom you said was near; [Exit Edgar. He may be an Ear-Witness at the least Of our Proceedings. [Kent brought in here.

My Eyes are none o'th'best, I'll tell you streight;
Oh Albany! Well, Sir, we are your Captives,
And you are come to see Death pass upon us.
Why this Delay?—Or is't your Highness's Pleasure [66]
To give us first the Torture? Say ye so?
Why here's old Kent and I, as tough a Pair
As e'er bore Tyrant's Stroke.—But my Cordelia,
My poor Cordelia here, O pity—

Alb. Take off their Chains.—Thou injur'd Majesty,
The Wheel of Fortune now has made her Circle,
And Blessings yet stand 'twixt thy Grave and thee.

LEAR. Com'st thou, inhuman Lord, to sooth us back
To a Fool's Paradise of Hope, to make
Our Doom more wretched? Go to, we are too well
Acquainted with Misfortune, to be gull'd
With lying Hope; no, we will hope no more.

ALB. I have a Tale t'unfold, so full of Wonder
As cannot meet an easy Faith;
But by that Royal injur'd Head 'tis true.

KENT. What wou'd your Highness?

Alb. Know, the noble Edgar
Impeach'd Lord Edmund, since the Fight, of Treason
And dar'd him for the Proof to single Combat,
In which the Gods confirm'd his Charge by Conquest;
I left ev'n now the Traitor wounded mortally!

LEAR. And whither tends this Story?

ALB. 'Ere they fought,
Lord Edgar gave into my Hands this Paper;
A blacker Scroll of Treason and of Lust,
Than can be found in the Records of Hell;
There, Sacred Sir, behold the Character
Of Goneril, the worst of Daughters, but
More vicious Wife.

CORD. Cou'd there be yet Addition to their Guilt! What will not they that wrong a Father do?

Alb. Since then my Injuries, Lear, fall in with thine, I have resolv'd the same Redress for both.

KENT. What says my Lord?

CORD. Speak, for methought I heard
The charming Voice of a descending God.

Alb. The Troops, by Edmund rais'd, I have disbanded; Those that remain are under my Command. What Comfort may be brought to chear your Age, And heal your savage Wrongs, shall be apply'd; For to your Majesty we do resign [67]
Your Kingdom, save what Part yourself confer'd On us in Marriage.

KENT. Hear you that, my Liege?

CORD. Then they are Gods, and Virtue is their Care.

Lear. Is't possible?

Let the Spheres stop their Course, the Sun make halt,

The Winds be hush'd, the Seas and Fountains rest;

All Nature pause, and listen to the Change.

Where is my Kent, my Cajus?

KENT. Here, my Liege.

LEAR. Why I have News that will recall thy Youth:
Ha! Didst thou hear't, or did th'inspiring Gods
Whisper to me alone? Old Lear shall be
A King again.

KENT. The Prince, that like a God has Pow'r, has said it.

LEAR. Cordelia then shall be a Queen, mark that:
Cordelia shall be a Queen; Winds catch the Sound,
And bear it on your rosy Wings to Heav'n—
Cordelia is a Queen.

Re-enter Edgar with Gloster.

ALB. Look, Sir, where pious Edgar comes,
Leading his Eyeless Father. O my Liege!
His wond'rous Story well deserves your Leisure;
What he has done and suffer'd for your Sake,
What for the fair Cordelia's.

GLOST. Where's my Liege? Conduct me to his Knees, to hail His second Birth of Empire: My dear Edgar Has, with himself, reveal'd the King's blest Restauration.

LEAR. My poor dark Gloster.

GLOST. O let me kiss that once more scepter'd Hand!

LEAR. Hold, thou mistake'st the Majesty, kneel here; Cordelia has our Pow'r, Cordelia's Queen. Speak, is not that the noble suff'ring Edgar?

GLOST. My pious Son, more dear than my lost Eyes.

LEAR. I wrong'd him too, but here's the fair Amends.

Eng. Your Leave, my Liege, for an unwelcome Message.
Edmund (but that's a Trifle) is expired.
What more will touch you, your imperious Daughters,
Goneril and haughty Regan, both are dead,
Each by the other poison'd at a Banquet:
This, dying, they confess'd. [68]

CORD. O fatal Period of ill-govern'd Lives!

Lear. Ingrateful as they were, my Heart feels yet A pang of Nature for their wretched Fall.—