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**KING LEAR**



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# KING LEAR

## NOTES

*including*

- *Introduction*
- *Sources*
- *The Play*
- *Leading Characters*
- *Synopsis*
- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Review Questions*
- *Selected Bibliography*

*by*

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NEW EDITION



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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION. . . . .	5
SOURCES . . . . .	6
THE PLAY . . . . .	9
LEADING CHARACTERS . . . . .	19
SYNOPSIS . . . . .	21
SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES	
Act I —Scene 1 . . . . .	24
Act I —Scene 2 . . . . .	30
Act I —Scene 3 . . . . .	33
Act I —Scene 4 . . . . .	35
Act I —Scene 5 . . . . .	40
Act II —Scene 1 . . . . .	41
Act II —Scene 2 . . . . .	43
Act II —Scene 3 . . . . .	46
Act II —Scene 4 . . . . .	46
Act III—Scene 1 . . . . .	52
Act III—Scene 2 . . . . .	53
Act III—Scene 3 . . . . .	54
Act III—Scene 4 . . . . .	55
Act III—Scene 5 . . . . .	58
Act III—Scene 6 . . . . .	59
Act III—Scene 7 . . . . .	61
Act IV —Scene 1 . . . . .	63
Act IV —Scene 2 . . . . .	65
Act IV —Scene 3 . . . . .	67

Act IV – Scene 4 . . . . .	69
Act IV – Scene 5 . . . . .	70
Act IV – Scene 6 . . . . .	72
Act IV – Scene 7 . . . . .	77
Act V – Scene 1 . . . . .	79
Act V – Scene 2 . . . . .	80
Act V – Scene 3 . . . . .	82
<b>REVIEW QUESTIONS . . . . .</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .</b>	<b>91</b>

# King Lear Notes

## INTRODUCTION

On November 26, 1607, the following entry was made in the Stationers' Register, in which were recorded all works authorized for publication in accordance with the royal charter granted to printers who were members of the Stationers' Company:

Master William Shakespeare his historye of Kinge Lear,  
as yt was played before the Kinges maiestie at White-  
hall vppon Saint Stephens night at Christmas Last, by  
his maiesties servantes playinge vsually at the Globe  
on Banksyde. . . .

This information relating to the command performance is repeated in the First Quarto, which was issued in 1608. A second Quarto was published in 1619 and, of course, the play was included in the First Folio, 1623. Although the First Quarto contains some 300 more lines than are found in the Folio, the latter version, which itself contains about 100 lines not found in the Quarto, is definitely superior.

The Whitehall performance establishes an upper terminal date of publication. But since *Macbeth* unquestionably belongs to the year 1606, the consensus is that *King Lear* was at least started earlier. It so happens that an edition of *The True Chronicle of King Leir*, the play which is chief among Shakespeare's sources, was published in May, 1605, although it had been entered in the Stationers' Register in 1594. This fact has led to two conjectures relating to the dating of Shakespeare's play. Those who believe that Shakespeare made use of the 1605 *Leir* argue in favor of that year or, in some instances, the early part of 1606; those who believe that the old play was published in 1605 in order to capitalize upon the popularity of Shakespeare's tragedy, favor 1604 and the first part of 1605. But the essential point is that the poet-dramatist had reached the height of his powers as a tragic writer when he wrote *The Tragedy of King Lear*.

## SOURCES

Some knowledge of Shakespeare's sources and of his use of them adds appreciably to one's understanding of *King Lear*. The story upon which the main plot is based is a very old one, widely disseminated in folklore. In one version, for example, the youngest of the king's daughters, when asked to declare how much she loves her father, replies that she loves him as much as salt. Ultimately the old king learns what his daughter really meant: *salt* may be used to refer to the elect—the perfect, or those approaching perfection, as in the biblical expression “salt of the earth.” Out of just such a variant of the Cinderella story emerged one of the greatest tragedies in world literature.

The name *Leir* and the fully developed narrative is found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1135), the pseudo-historical work which includes an account of “the kings who dwelt in Britain before the incarnation of Christ.” It is this account which was used by Raphael Holinshed for his *Chronicles of England* (1578, 1587), a work recognized as one of the most important source books used by Shakespeare. In these two accounts Cordeilla and her husband, King of Gallia, rescue Leir and restore him to his kingdom, where he reigned in peace and happiness until his death two years later. To all this a sequel is added. Cordeilla succeeds her father. Five years later her nephews revolt and place her in prison. In despair, she commits suicide. It may be noted that Shakespeare retained the setting in pre-Christian Britain and included as a major plot element the violent death of Cordeilla.

The story appeared in John Higgins' *The First Part of the Mirrour for Magistrates* (1574). There the name *Albany* is introduced and first reference is made to the King of France, rather than of Gallia. Next, the story was briefly retold by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, Book II, x, (1590). Since this book is devoted to examples of intemperance and the results thereof, the Lear story had an appropriate place. Spenser contributed two elements of some importance: the spelling of Cordelia's name, *delia* being a familiar Renaissance anagram for ideal; and her death by hanging, although she remains a suicide in this version.

This brings us to *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, which, particularly in view of several verbal echoes found in Shakespeare's play, undoubtedly is the chief source of the main plot. Yet at the most it is no more than “a working model from which Shakespeare borrowed

some parts" (Joseph Satin, *Shakespeare and His Sources*, New York, 1966, p. 445). Up to the first scene on the heath it presents essentially the same story involving the same major characters, whose names differ, to be sure, if only in spelling. The division of the kingdom is made on the basis of professed love; Cordella is rejected because she cannot flatter; a courtier (Perillus) courageously challenges the king's willful action; Cordella marries the King of Gallia; Gonerill objects to Leir's knights and urges him to go to Regan, who proves to be harsher than her sister. At this point, however, the King of the old play leaves for Gallia with Perillus. He is reunited with Cordella and ultimately regains his throne. A repentant and now happy Leir voices these words at the end of the play:

Ah, my Cordella, now I call to mind,  
 The modest answer, which I took unkind;  
 But now I see, I am no whit beguiled,  
 Thou lovedst me dearly, and as ought a child.  
 And thou (Perillus) partner once in woe  
 Thee to requite, the best I can I'll do.  
 Yet all I can, aye, were it ne'er so much,  
 Were not sufficient, thy true love is such.

So in *The True Chronicle*, all's well that ends well; evil is punished and virtue rewarded.

The simple outlines of leading characters, Lear, Cordelia, the evil sisters, Kent, and even to some extent Albany, Cornwall, and the time-serving Oswald are to be found in the earlier versions, nondramatic and dramatic. But it remained for Shakespeare to develop these characters and so to adapt and augment the story elements as to achieve genuine high tragedy. His Lear does not leave England; his France cannot invade the country; his titular hero cannot be restored to his throne. His ideal and forgiving Cordelia dies, but does not in despair take her own life. In Shakespeare's play, the banishment of the loyal Kent, his return in disguise, and the creation of the faithful Fool provide telling irony and tragic pity, just as the storm and Lear's madness intensify the tragic force. Moreover, the fact that the deaths of both Lear and Cordelia result from the failure of their cause makes possible a catastrophe unmatched for tragic terror and pity.

Unlike *The True Chronicle*, King Lear is not marked throughout by Christian piety. One finds no reference to a dead Queen who is now "possessed of heavenly joys"; no Regan who feels "a hell of conscience



in her breast"; no Lear who confesses that he has offended against the majesty of God and who gives to Cordelia—

The blessing, which the God of *Abraham* gave  
Unto the tribe of Judah. . . .

As we shall see, there are critics who insist upon a Christian interpretation of *King Lear*, and their views must be taken into consideration. But Shakespeare's play certainly does not embrace the entire system of Christian practices as is true of the old play. In brief, the whole conception of *King Lear* belongs to Shakespeare, whatever he may owe to earlier versions of the story.

The subplot involving the fortunes of the Earl of Gloucester derives from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590), Book II, Chapter 10. Sidney's narrative was sufficiently developed so that Shakespeare had no difficulty in making it a complement to the main plot of *King Lear*, repeating as it does the main theme. It starts with a severe storm, and this may have added to the fainter suggestion in *The True Chronicle* for the inclusion of the storm on the heath in Shakespeare's play. There follow the essential story elements: the old Prince (that is, ruler) of Paphlagonia has two sons, one legitimate, the other illegitimate; the latter blinds his father and drives him from Court; the father wanders helpless and alone until his good son, Leonatus, returns to lead him; he asks to be taken to a high rock in order that he may leap to his death, but the good son refuses to do so; there follows a war of revolt which is won by the followers of Leonatus, who succeeds his father as ruler of Paphlagonia; the father dies, "his heart broken with unkindness and affliction, stretched so far beyond the limits of this excess of comfort as it was able no longer to endure."

Shakespeare transformed this material primarily by depicting Edgar's pretended madness. The activities of this good son disguised as "Poor Tom" and of the evil sisters' love for Edmund, the illegitimate son, made it possible for the poet-dramatist to engraft the subplot to the main plot with such success.

One of the best-known Shakespearean critics, A. C. Bradley, argued that the double action in *King Lear* resulted in serious limitations, although he did not fail to do full justice to the play's "extraordinary imaginative effect." His main argument was that "Shakespeare has too vast a material to use with complete dramatic effectiveness" (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904, pp. 206-07). But even Bradley endorsed the

view set forth almost a century earlier by A. W. Schlegel. The subplot does indeed repeat the theme of the main plot, but

This repetition does not simply double the pain with which the tragedy is witnessed: it startles and terrifies by suggesting that the folly of Lear and the ingratitude of his daughters are no accidents or merely individual aberrations, but that in that dark cold world some fateful malignant influence is abroad, turning the hearts of the fathers against their children and of children against their fathers, smiting the earth with a curse, so that the brother gives the brother to death and the father the son, blinding the eyes, numbing all powers except the nerves of anguish and the dull lust of life.

(*Ibid.*, p. 211)

Thus, the chief function of the subplot, so remarkably well integrated with the main action, is to universalize the tragedy. The one story helps us to conceive the magnitude of the other.

## THE PLAY

Over the years commentators have vied with each other in their praise of *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Shelley lauded it as "the most perfect specimen of dramatic poetry in the world"; a recent critic, E. I. Fripp, declared that it is "the noblest spiritual utterance since *La Divina Commedia*." In tribute to its grandeur, William Empson stated that "whatever one says about this huge play feels very inadequate." And yet it has not been acted as often as other Shakespearean tragedies, and it has been subjected to widely different interpretations. First performed with the gifted Richard Burbage in the title role and Robert Armin as the Fool, *King Lear* did not rival *Hamlet* and *Othello* in popularity even in Shakespeare's lifetime. A prime reason, surely, is that the violent and immediate changes in Lear, the wide range of emotions throughout main plot and subplot make unusual demands upon actors and audiences alike. Charles Lamb's sweeping generalization is famous: he flatly declared that the role of the King is unactable. Yet he gave place to no one in his admiration of the play:

On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness the impotence of rage; while we read it,

we see not Lear, but we are Lear—we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughter and storm.

About three-quarters of a century later, A. C. Bradley arrived at essentially the same conclusion. For him *King Lear* was “too huge for the stage.” Peter Brook, recent producer of the play, referred to it as “a mountain whose summit has never been reached.” Nevertheless, there have been superior productions of *King Lear*, early and late. Stage history emphatically has established the fact that a second-rate production does no more than exhaust and bore an audience; but a first-rate production is one of the most memorable of experiences in the theatre.

Tragedy identifies a principle of good that is coexistent with evil. In the persons of Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar pre-eminently, but also of the Fool, Albany, and the erring Gloucester, this principle is illustrated. But the play's universe is one of cruel strife. The protagonists in both main plot and subplot endure almost incredible punishment; and the peerless Cordelia is hanged. Inevitably the question is posed: in such a universe, what can man believe? Little wonder, then, that many critics have dwelt upon the play's “grand inexplicableness,” the “mystery which we cannot fathom,” and the “sense of inscrutable mysteries.” Audiences, especially those in the past, have tended to expect a purgation of the tragic emotions of pity and fear, a restoration of the moral order, and a reaffirmation of the dignity of man; for so many *The Tragedy of King Lear* does not fulfill their optimistic expectations. It is the resolution of the action which has been and is the root of the difficulty. Writing in the latter half of the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson admitted that he had been so shocked by Cordelia's death that he could not bear to read again the last scenes of the play until he began the task of editing Shakespeare. In his own words,

... Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of the chronicles. ... A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of life; but, since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or that, if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue.

Characteristically, Johnson invoked the principle of *consensus gentium*. "In the present case," he stated, "the publick has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with final triumph from persecuted virtue."

Nahum Tate's version of *King Lear*, which dates from 1681, deserves attention, since it held the stage, at least in modified form, for a good one hundred and sixty years. Such celebrated actors as Betterton, Garrick, and Kemble were acclaimed for their performances of the titular hero in this adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy. In 1768, George Colman revived what apparently was the original play, only to meet with failure. In his dedicatory epistle, Tate does not fail to adopt a tone of reverence when he writes of Shakespeare, insisting, for example, that "none but *Shakespear* could have form'd such Conceptions" as are found in *The Tragedy of King Lear*. Yet he described the play to be "a Heap of Jewels, unstrung, and unpolish'd," however "dazzling in their disorder." His announced purpose was "to rectify what was wanting in the Regularity and Probability of the Tale." H. H. Furness, editor of the *New Variorum Edition of King Lear* (1880), insisted that "There is more of Shakespeare in Tate's Version than there is of Tate" and argued that "if we had not Shakespeare's play to read, surely it were better to listen to Tate than not to know the play at all." A brief summary of some omissions and additions should make one question Furness' judgment.

Tate omits France and the Fool; he deletes some scenes and rearranges or combines others. He gives Cordelia a waiting woman named Arante. As for plot elements, Tate expands some, notably the love of Goneril and Regan for Edmund; and he adds others. In his *Lear*, Cordelia is abducted by ruffians commanded by Edmund, who plans to rape her. Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, comes to her rescue and drives off these villains. Earlier, Cordelia coquettishly had decided that she should test Edgar's love by coldness. But after her rescue and the discovery of Edgar's identity she holds back no longer:

Come to my Arms, thou dearest, best of men  
And take the kindest Vows, that e'er were spoke  
By a protesting maid.

In prison, Lear kills two of the soldiers who have come to hang Cordelia and holds off others until Albany and Edgar come to the rescue. Both the King and Gloucester survive, happily united with their loving and faithful children. To Edgar is given the final lines:

Our drooping Country now erects her Head,  
 Peace spreads her balmy Wings, and Plenty blooms.  
 Divine *Cordelia*, all the Gods can Witness  
 How much thy Love to Empire I prefer!  
 Thy bright Example shall convince the World  
 (Whatever Storms of Fortune are decreed)  
 That Truth and Virtue shall at last succeed.

Tate's world of *King Lear* is indeed the best of all possible worlds.

It is easy to take a superior view of this sort of thing and to conclude that Tate and those many who preferred his version were incredibly naive. But Johnson's expression of distress over the violent death of *Cordelia* and Lamb's contention that the *Lear* of Shakespeare cannot be acted point to the fact that this is a difficult and most disturbing play. The division among twentieth-century critics in their interpretations suggests that in *King Lear* Shakespeare may not have abided the question, but left it to his audiences to provide the answer to the problem of good and evil. The ultimate question is a metaphysical one, and it is possible to point to isolated passages, each of which seems to provide an answer. Consider, for example, the following:

1. Kent, placed in the stocks at the order of the cruel Duke of Cornwall, exclaims: "Fortune, good-night! Smile once more; turn thy wheel!" (II.ii.180). Later in the play, referring to the evil sisters in contrast to the virtuous *Cordelia*, he states:

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.34-37)

In both instances, Kent seems to find in chance, or blind Fate, the answer to the problem of evil. It could be argued that he accepts the medieval view of tragedy, according to which, in an unstable world, good and evil alike are subject to the whims of Fortune. Or, to introduce a related idea, Kent seems to embrace astrological determinism and implies that Nature itself makes things good or evil. Free choice and human responsibility have no place in such a philosophy.

2. In contrast, *Lear*, driven out into the storm by his own wicked daughters, asks: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III.vi. 81-82). This question may imply that evil in the world

\* remains an unsolvable mystery. Very near the end of the play, the old King enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms. "No, no, no life!" he exclaims, and then asks the devastating question which points to a universe devoid of saving grace and justice: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life/ And thou no breath at all?" (V.iii. 305-07). Lines spoken by the blinded Gloucester earlier in the play have been accepted by some critics as the answer to Lear's question:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;  
They kill us for their sport. . . . (IV.i. 38-39)

3. But there are other passages which point to a moral universe and to beneficent higher powers concerned with man's destiny. Albany, appalled at the spectacle of evil following the blinding of Gloucester, voices what amounts to a prayer that there are heavenly spirits, visible ones, to "tame these wild offenses" (IV.ii 46 ff.). And after Gloucester has survived the imaginative leap at Dover, his devoted son Edgar says to him:

Think that the clearest gods, who made them honours  
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee. . . .  
(IV.vi. 73-74)

When Edgar identifies himself to his mortally wounded half brother, he says:

My name is Edgar, and thy father's son.  
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.

To which Edmund, heretofore depicted as the last one to endorse the concept of poetic justice, replies:

Thou has spoken right, 'tis true.  
The wheel is come full circle, I am here. (V.iii. 169-74)

Obviously it will not do to lean heavily upon a selected passage in seeking a definitive interpretation of *King Lear*. Two points must be borne in mind: first, Shakespeare speaks for his characters, but they do not necessarily speak for him; second, the theme of a play emerges from the entire plot, not from one segment.

Unless perceptive and intelligent people find reasons for taking divergent points of view, an issue would not be an issue. This truism is well illustrated by the various interpretations of *The Tragedy of King Lear*. The student's familiarity with leading critical views should help him attain a sound appreciation of this challenging play. After enduring almost incredible suffering, physical and mental, Lear is at last united with Cordelia, the very embodiment of love; following the curative sleep, his reason is restored. But immediately after this reconciliation and healing, we are confronted with the death of Cordelia and then of Lear. To be sure, the fates of the grossly evil Cornwall, Goneril, and Regan are (as Albany foresaw) the monstrous preying of humanity on itself. And Gloucester's illegitimate son Edmund is killed by the virtuous Edgar. The wicked are indeed punished. But why the repentant Lear, the once willful King who had learned at great cost the lesson of humility and how to distinguish appearances from reality, should be made to endure the loss of Cordelia and to die in an excess of passion poses the greatest of critical problems.

Most critics concede that various ethical and religious principles radiate throughout the play, but tend to place emphasis on what they consider to be the dominant element and thus to draw their conclusions regarding Shakespeare's intentions. What may be called the optimistic theories of interpretation deserve first attention.

In *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875) Edward Dowden provided one of the clearest expressions of the Stoic interpretation of the play, which may be considered optimistic, since it emphasizes the heroism and dignity of man:

The ethics of the play of *King Lear* are stoical ethics. Shakespeare's fidelity to the fact will allow him to deny no pain or calamity that befalls man. . . . He admits the suffering, the weakness of humanity; but he declares that in the inner law there is a constraining power stronger than a silken thread; in the rapture of love and sacrifice, there is a charm which is neither air nor words, but, indeed, potent enough to subdue pain and make calamity acceptable. (p. 231)

Dowden pointed out, however, that Shakespeare's intention is not to teach any moral truth, but rather to present "a vision of life and of the enveloping forces of nature" and thus "to free, arouse, and dilate." Wisely, he adds that "each of the principal personages of the play is

brought into the presence of mysterious powers which dominate life and preside over human destiny; and each, according to his character, is made to offer an interpretation of the great riddle. Of these interpretations, none is adequate to account for all the facts" (pp. 239-40). Nevertheless, Dowden himself stressed the Stoic view of *King Lear*. Nor has this interpretation lost ground since it was first propounded with such clarity. Geoffrey L. Bickersteth, who placed quite as much emphasis upon a Christian-Salvation interpretation of the play, made a very good case for it. He cited the several references to Patience, the most conspicuous virtue of the Stoic, and concluded that "Cordelia must die in innocence . . . since nothing short of this will test to the utmost the hero's patience, his power to endure even that extremity of anguish without collapse. And Lear survives this final proof." Through this interpretation, Bickersteth found the resolution of *King Lear* to be reassuring. In his words, "we are overwhelmed with wonder—reduced to awe-stricken silence by this majestic spectacle of man's 'unconquerable mind'" ["The Golden World of 'King Lear,'" *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XXXII (1946), 166].

Best known of the optimistic theories are those based upon a strictly Christian interpretation of *King Lear*. For critics who hold this view, the play is purgatorial and the titular hero dies "at peace" with his condition. Prominent among these is Irving Ribner, who has written as follows:

*King Lear* asserts the perfection of God's harmonious order and the inevitable triumph of justice, with the forces of evil preying upon and destroying themselves. In the process they subvert the good, but finally good must be victorious.

(*Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy*,  
London, 1960, p. 136)

Many commentators have found in the play close affinities with morality plays and with Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Developed during the Middle Ages, the morality play was an allegory on the Christian way of life and thus dealt with the ethical side of religion. The chief characters were personifications of virtues and vices engaged in a conflict for possession of the human soul. Typically the central figure represents mankind in general. One does find in *King Lear* creations of great good and of unmitigated evil. Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, the Fool obviously are virtuous; certainly the first-named has unsurpassed spiritual beauty. In striking contrast are Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund. Lear



and Gloucester, the leading figures in the main plot and subplot, respectively, share good and evil quite like the main character in the old morality play; and the basic conflict—so it is argued—is for their souls. To do justice to those who find such a pattern, it should be stated that they have no intention of turning Shakespeare's play into a simple morality; the consensus is that, although the use of the old morality concept is apparent in *King Lear*, the characters in the play stand nearer to actuality than do personages of allegory. Perhaps it will suffice to make reference to just one well-known Shakespearean critic who takes this point of view, O. J. Campbell:

... *King Lear* is, in my opinion, a sublime morality play, the action of which is set against a back-drop of eternity. Lear's problem and his career resemble those of the central figure in the typical morality play, who is variously called Genus Humanum, Mankind, or Everyman.

["The Salvation of Lear," *ELH*, XV (1948), 94]

Campbell makes clear that Shakespeare's drama is a sophisticated, "greatly modified version of man's endless search for true and everlasting spiritual values"—values which Lear finds just before he must respond to Death's summons. Christianized Stoicism has its place in this interpretation, since the old King first opposes his will against that of the universe and is a slave to passion, in contrast to Kent, who is identified as the "plain stoical man."

So widespread has been the idea that Lear's experiences are purgatorial that some commentators inevitably provide a paradise for Shakespeare's tragic hero. In *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in King Lear* (Louisiana State University Press, 1948), Robert B. Heilman makes several references to similarities between Shakespeare's play and Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. For him salvation is indeed the goal of Lear's actions, and he sees in the play a Christian "transvaluation" of a pagan world. According to this critic, the person who distinguishes between quality and quantity of life must feel spiritual exaltation at Lear's triumph over himself and the world. Paradoxically, then, the tragedy becomes a comedy in the Dantean sense and, in the last analysis is a joyful work. This is one of the more extreme expressions of optimism, but it should be pointed out that many other critics come close to Heilman's interpretation. Convinced that Lear, after having been bound upon his fiery wheel, deserves Heaven, they are willing