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King Lear

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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KING LEAR

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William Shakespeare

Edited by
CEDRIC WATTS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series presents a newly-edited sequence of William Shakespeare's works. The inaugural volumes are *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry V*, followed by *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear* and *Othello*. Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive paperbacks for students and for the general reader. Each play in the Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is, however, concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potently influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

King Lear is widely regarded as Shakespeare's most intense, profound and powerful tragedy. To people reading or seeing it for the first time, it can seem dauntingly strange. It is variously realistic, archaic, grotesque, implausible, absurd, horrific, tempestuous, poignant and heart-rending. Vividly, it raises enduring questions about human nature, human suffering, morality, religion and life's significance. The literary modes employed vary from functional prose to passionate poetry, from doggerel verse to miraculously lyrical flights. Critics are usually reluctant to concede that in Shakespeare's greatest works we find incongruous mixtures of weakness and strength, but, in *King Lear*, both are amply present.

Any reader soon notices some conflicts between what the action requires and what the Jacobean stage permits. When, after dividing the kingdom, Lear visits Goneril, she complains that 'his knights grow riotous': apparently Lear has a retinue of 'a hundred knights and squires' who, she says, are wild and randy, devoted to 'epicurism and lust' . He replies that they always behave impeccably: they 'all particulars of duty know'. But, infuriated by her desire to reduce the retinue by half, he and his followers leave for Regan. Regan tells him to return to Goneril; but Lear says that she will only accept fifty followers, whereas Regan will take a hundred. Not so, says Regan: twenty-five should suffice; indeed, adds Goneril (who has joined her sister), why do you need even five? At this point, Lear, overcome by rage and grief, sweeps out on to the heath. Thus, to the reader, a big question is presented. Are Lear's followers riotous, as Goneril says, or well-behaved, as Lear says? But this leads immediately to the other question, where *is* this huge retinue? In Act 1, scene 4, Lear is attended, according to

the earliest text (1607–8), only by some servants; whereas, according to the 1623 text, he is there attended by an unspecified number of knights. Certainly, thereafter, we see no large body of armed supporters. When Lear visits Regan in Act 2, scene 4, he is accompanied by the Fool and a retinue of one – either a single knight or a single gentleman (as those early texts again differ). Later, when Lear roams the heath, there is no sign of the large retinue, even though (at 3.7.15–19) thirty-five or thirty-six knights were said to be escorting him to Dover. Fair-weather friends, perhaps, or incompetent map-readers? In the Prologue of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the speaker explains that the only way in which the battles in France can be made plausible in the theatre is for the audience to use its imagination: 'Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.' In *King Lear*, in the absence of such a frank admission of the disparity between what Shakespearian staging permits and what the story suggests, the disparity is the more glaring and confusing. We recall the small stage, the limited budget, and the actors who were used to playing several rôles in one production. The rapid absence of Lear's large – but necessarily invisible – retinue is made embarrassingly evident; and the question about their conduct remains unanswered in the text. (Peter Brook's film version, in 1971, filled the gap by showing numerous riotously unruly followers: textual gaps are directorial opportunities.)

Another example of the oddity of the plot is provided by Gloucester's leap. It also illustrates Wilson Knight's argument that in *King Lear*, tragedy is perilously close to bathos, absurdity and grotesque humour.[1] Blinded and despairing, Gloucester seeks to kill himself by leaping from an imagined cliff-top. (Usually, in the theatre, Gloucester jumps forward a metre or so and falls down on the stage.) Edgar, his disguised son, assures him that he has fallen a huge depth and has been miraculously saved. 'Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it', explains Edgar; and, for a while (though not durably), Gloucester does seem determined to bear his lot with patience. Nevertheless, the sequence has been peculiar. 'Trifling with despair' seems to sacrifice plausibility on the altar of contrivance. A far better cure for despair would have been for Edgar to reveal himself to his father. (Indeed, Edgar himself says that it was 'a fault' not to have identified himself

sooner.) But that would rob the plot of a number of twists and turns which culminate when Edgar defeats Edmund and at last publicly identifies himself. If you ask why the blind Gloucester wants to walk all the way to Dover Cliff to kill himself, the most plausible answer is structural: so that he can meet Lear, who has been directed to Dover, where Cordelia's forces are encamped.

Repeatedly, then, we find that odd conduct by characters has been solicited by plot-requirements. To put it more severely, Shakespeare has sometimes been unable to reconcile characterisation with the story. Perhaps the most important example is provided in Act 1, scene 1, when Cordelia's initial response to Lear's demand for a statement of love is so curt and legalistic as to provoke Lear's wrath. Elsewhere in the play, Cordelia speaks with warm sensitivity and tact; but, in that first scene, it is necessary that she should speak with provocatively resentful logic so that the subsequent plot, depicting the consequences of Lear's wrathful dismissal of her, can unfold more or less as it had done in the various sources available to Shakespeare. Of course Lear is wrong to set up so crazy a bargain with his daughters (so much land in return for so many declarations of love), but her response – 'I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less' – is asking for the trouble that the story-line requires. It's not surprising that that opening scene reminds us of folk-tale and fairy-story: Cordelia, Regan and Goneril may even bring to mind Cinderella and her two ugly sisters. Again, Edgar's initial gullibility (when Edmund advises him to hide from Gloucester), coupled with his readiness to flee instead of vindicating himself before his father, implies a weaker character than that displayed by Edgar subsequently; but that credulity is a product less of his personality than of the later plot-requirements. Gloucester himself helps the story along by his belief in the forged letter (though, in reality, Edgar would have communicated with Edmund orally) and by his ready acceptance of a travelling companion who is variously a madman, two different gentlemen and a yokel.

Some of the most remarkable breaches of realism (or, at least, of passably realistic consistency) occur when the Fool jokes at the expense of the audience in the theatre. At the end of Act 1, scene 5, for instance, when in the company of Lear and the gentleman, the Fool says:

> She that's a maid now, and laughs at my departure,
> Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter.

In other words, 'Any virgin in the audience who dares to laugh as I go off-stage will soon will be deflowered (unless penises are docked)'.[2] At the end of Act 3, scene 2, he offers the audience a recitation of prophetic doggerel, and surrealistically concludes: 'This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time': in other words, 'I cap my prophecy by telling you it isn't mine: in fact I prophesy that Merlin (the legendary magician who has not been born yet) will make it.' Nevertheless it has already been made – to the Fool's audience in the present time of 1605 or so. Shakespearian comic characters are often holders of the magical pilot's licence permitting them to travel through space and time. They thus anticipate those jokes in pantomime and in modern plays and films which depend on breaches of a fictional convention that is normally respected. (An example of such a breach: Groucho Marx, in the film *The Big Store*, turned to the audience and said of a villain, 'I could have told you in the first reel he was a crook'.) Even so, the prevailingly grim atmosphere of *King Lear* makes the Fool's banter with the audience seem oddly discordant. Not surprisingly, this banter is often cut from stage or film productions. A famous 'loose end' of the play is the mysterious absence of the Fool from Acts 4 and 5, though feminists may not regret this lacuna. Directors sometimes fill the gap by letting him be seen, a mute (or dying) observer, towards the end of the action. Like other Shakespearian works, *King Lear* is usually treated, in the theatre or the cinema, less as a text to be faithfully rendered than as a body of textual material to be cut and adapted as is thought desirable by the director and others involved in the production. (The disparities between the earliest printed texts suggests that similar adaptation was common in Shakespeare's day.)[3]

Of course, the Fool's reference to Merlin as a prophet in the future raises the question of the period in which the action of *King Lear* is supposed to be set. Culturally, the play's references are baffling. Characters invoke God, Satan, Adam and Eve, St Mary, churches and holy water: so the action may seem to belong to the Christian era. Yet the legendary Lear was a pre-Christian ruler, and

characters also invoke 'the gods', Jupiter, Juno, Apollo, Hecate and Nature: so now the action seems to be located in a post-Roman but pre-Christian Britain. Other references (to Tom o'Bedlam, schoolmasters, spectacles, and fops who frequently visit the barber, for instance) suggest times virtually contemporaneous with Shakespeare's. So, culturally – and, above all, theologically – the story slithers about and sometimes is glaringly inconsistent. As Samuel Johnson remarked:

> Our authour by negligence gives his heathens the sentiments and practices of christianity . . . [He] commonly neglects and confounds the characters of ages, by mingling customs ancient and modern . . . [4]

Theological muddles were not unusual then: for example, in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592), a slain Catholic is judged by Pluto and Proserpine in the classical underworld. But, given the intense religious questioning within Shakespeare's play, in *King Lear* the muddle becomes more frustratingly prominent.

On the other hand, some parts of *King Lear* are expertly co-ordinated: notably various prominent themes and ironies. The story of Lear (or Leir) had been told by diverse writers before Shakespeare: notably, Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Historia regum Britanniae*, John Higgins in his part of the *Mirror for Magistrates*, William Warner in *Albion's England*, Geoffrey Holinshed in his *Chronicles*, Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, and the author of the anonymous play entitled *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*. Shakespeare's great innovation was to link the Lear material with another story, which he had found in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. That was the story of the King of Paphlagonia. This king has two sons, one legitimate and the other illegitimate. He is tricked by the illegitimate son, Plexirtus, into disowning the legitimate son, Leonatus. Subsequently, Plexirtus blinds his aged father and casts him out. Leonatus then serves as his guide in the wilderness, deflecting the old man from suicide, and with friends defeats Plexirtus and his men. The king dies after being fully reconciled with Leonatus, who inherits the throne.

Obviously, Shakespeare has used this story of the Paphlagonian king as the basis of the sub-plot in *King Lear* which involves Gloucester, Edmund and Edgar. By interweaving this with the

Lear story, Shakespeare has created a large number of parallels and thematic echoes. We now have two misguided fathers, and more than two instances of rivalry between siblings; twice we see a father being cruelly treated by a son or daughters; each father is exposed to the harshness of nature; and, in both cases, there is poignant reconciliation with the misjudged loving child. Lear may be 'a man more sinned against than sinning', but he has breached the morality of the family and the law of statecraft, and thus helped to bring his suffering on himself. Gloucester, too, had breached the morality of the family, by fathering Edmund during 'good sport' outside wedlock. Gloucester loses his sight; [5] Lear his sanity. Each has a disguised helper, 'Poor Tom' and 'Caius' respectively. During their wanderings, both men have remarkably similar moral insights. Lear says:

> Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp:
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
> And show the heavens more just.

Gloucester says to 'Poor Tom':

> Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens' plagues
> Have humbled to all strokes: that I am wretched
> Makes thee the happier. 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.

The duplication (and even the word 'superflux' echoes in 'superfluous') emphasises the theme: through suffering, people who were once rich and powerful may come to appreciate the needs of the poor and humble, and advocate charitable provision. This isn't socialism, it's *noblesse oblige*: recognition of the obligation of the

nobility to be charitable. Both stories show a noble figure being reduced to hapless dependence on others; both juxtapose the formerly mighty with the lowly: Lear with the Fool, Gloucester with 'Tom'. The play is shot through with madness: the raging dementia of Lear, the deranged babbling of the supposed Bedlam beggar. The disguised Edgar appears now before Lear, now alongside Gloucester. The interweaving of thematic and ironic connections is deft; and the eventual meeting of the king with the blinded lord is one of the most telling in literature. 'O, let me kiss that hand!', says Gloucester. 'Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality', is the resonantly ambiguous reply. Later:

> I know thee well enough: thy name is Gloucester.
> Thou must be patient. We came crying hither;
> Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air
> We wawl and cry . . .
> When we are born, we cry that we are come
> To this great stage of fools.

In any good stage-production, it's a powerfully poignant scene; and the words can live on, outside their dramatic context, as memorable epitomes of human experience: 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.'[6]

Critical discussions of *King Lear* often bear on the problem of theodicy. That is the problem of reconciling belief in divine justice with evidence of injustice here on earth. It is an ancient and continuing problem for religious believers, and it is the central issue in the long tradition of literary tragedies. If divine justice exists, why does it permit the existence of apparent injustice all around us? Why is it that good people often suffer, while bad people often prosper? *King Lear* seems determined to express this problem in particularly vivid, searching and harsh ways. Repeatedly in the play, characters invoke or cite a variety of deities and metaphysical forces. Repeatedly there's a questioning of the entities that may govern our lives: are they kind, blind or cruel? Insistently, too, the play gives instances of the very kinds of suffering that make people seek some consolatory pattern in events. The suffering of Lear is painful enough; but the blinding of Gloucester is notoriously horrifying ('Out, vile jelly!' – in the theatre it can still make people flinch and look away); and the death of Cordelia seems to

set the problem of theodicy with appalling starkness. Lear, referring to Cordelia as his 'poor fool' (which editors usually regard here as a term of endearment), cries out in his misery:

> And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
> And thou no breath at all?

It is a question which commentators often try to answer. Samuel Johnson, in the 18th Century, found the death of Cordelia so painful that he could not bring himself to read again the ending of the play until his editorial duties obliged him to do so. He contemplated sadly this text in which 'the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry': sometimes, alas, Shakespeare 'seems to write without any moral purpose'.[7] Other critics have seen the play as an affirmation of Christianity. G. I. Duthie, for example, in his introduction to a Cambridge edition of *King Lear*, says:

> God overthrows the absolutely evil – he destroys the Cornwalls, the Gonerils, the Regans: he is just. God chastens those who err but who can be regenerated – the Lears, the Gloucesters – and in mercy he redeems them: he is just, and merciful. But again, God moves in a mysterious way – he deals strangely with the Cordelias of this world. His methods are inscrutable. Shakespeare presents the whole picture . . . This, however, can mean 'pessimistic' drama only to those who cannot agree that the play is a Christian play.[8]

If we seek guidance to Shakespeare's intentions by looking at his adaptations of the various source-materials, a big paradox emerges. His adaptations seem designed both to confirm and to subvert the sense of divine ordinance of events.

As we have seen, his innovative addition of the Paphlagonian material to the traditional Lear story provides duplications of events and themes, and thus creates evident patterning; and evident patterning implies a pattern-maker: we may infer some destinal force at work within or above the action. That's the first half of the paradox. The second half is well known. In all the surviving previous versions of the Lear story (whether by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Higgins, Warner, Holinshed, Spenser, or that anonymous playwright, or yet others), the story of the king ends