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Class notes: Mary Caroline Richards Shakespeare  
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Gift to the project, from Henry Bergman

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K I N G    L E A R

h   b e r g m a n

f e b r u a r y   4

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Very interesting paper, indeed, but  
I wanted more explanation of  
the end, where you introduce  
the business of social structure  
and "cultural patterns"  
This is genuine  
B.H. Bond 316-100000

All of the many attitudes with which it is possible to approach the reading of a play (or any literature) have been present in varying degrees in the various members of our class. They range from the "I don't know — tell me what it means" attitude to the "I have a theory" psychosis; from the neophyte, waiting and wanting, to be led to the inveterate reader in whom the ignorance of long experience has instilled a predilection for reading words of devious meaning into every semi colon and to whom a simple explanation is simple-mindedness.

Vanity keeps me from identifying myself with the former and an instinctive distrust of complicated explanations expels me from the ranks of the others; a few words clarifying my viewpoint might therefore be in order.

I do not believe that all things are as simple as they seem, nor do I believe that things are necessarily as

complicated as we sometimes like to make them. It is fine to read Shakespeare's plays as entities in themselves and to get what one can (and there is a great deal to be gotten in this manner) from them; at the same time, it is good to remember that they are part of a vast literary context in which they also have meaning; a larger meaning than just the play for, and by, itself.

My intention in taking the Shakespeare course was not to become a Shakespearean scholar, a specialist in imagery, language, or a maker of complicated plot-structure analyses. Rather, it was to read Shakespeare for enjoyment; to see what he could mean to me as an individual. It is from this viewpoint that I approach my paper on King Lear. I am not especially interested in either agreeing or disagreeing with critical opinion.

"I love you mother"  
Said little Nell.

"I love you more  
Than tongue can tell."

.....

"I love you mother"  
Said little Nan,  
"Today I'll help you  
All I can."

.....

"I love you too"  
Said little Sue.

.....

--- I'll let you guess  
Which of the three  
Loved mother best.

In this fragment of a nursery rhyme,  
imperfectly remembered (or forgotten, as the  
case may be) from my second grade days,  
lies the same basic theme of King Lear.  
Little Nell ran into the yard, <sup>and played</sup> all day; Little  
Nan, in spite of her laudable vocalizations,  
swung in the garden swing; and little Sue,

least voracious of the offspring, did the dishes, swept the floor, helped mother bake, and was generally just too dutiful and angelic to be true. To point out such a similarity in a saccharine bit of nursery doggerel and the work of a literary giant might seem silly if not a downright insult to the work of the latter. There is no disparagement intended; rather, the fact seems to indicate to me that there are certain basic themes running through all levels of human thought, certain currents which run through all ages and times.

Good

Folk literature has always been strongly moral and ethical in character; if it dealt in hobgoblins and supernatural phenomena, it has dealt no less with real and lasting human morality. Legends, fairy tales, nursery rhymes etc., have always been full of rigidly stereotyped characters and symbols. Good has always been very, very good and is always victorious. Evil, very, very, evil and always punished. Princes have been young, brave, handsome;

Princesses young, beautiful virtuous; Stepmothers cruel and youngest daughters most beautiful, best beloved, and dutiful. I cannot recall ever having read a tale of this type which did not bolster up rigid stereotypes of ~~Human~~ Virtue and Vice and uphold the moral and ethical status quo.

In borrowing such a legend as the core of his drama, Shakespeare carries on the tradition which must have begun soon after Man discovered an ethical structure was necessary if he was to live with himself in any kind of harmony. If he gives us violent and exciting drama and beautiful poetry, he gives us no less a morality tale; a fairy story brought into the realm of man's affairs.

In a sense, all literature is a morality tale. The material with which the writer has to work is the material of human existence and one cannot go to any great depth in the realm of human life without encountering moral and ethical problems. How he handles these

problems is up to him. He can either defend existing mores or attack them in an attempt to replace them with others; in either case, his product is implicitly or explicitly a morality tale in that it is capable of changing human behavior.

Shakespeare seems to be fully conscious of this in writing King Lear; of all of his plays which I have read, this one seems most fairy-tale like. The characters and their reactions are all excessive and clear cut. The action is violent and almost too tragic. Even the device of taking a legend and treating it as part of English history is excessive; to the literal-minded it is unbelievable. It is my opinion that Shakespeare was aiming at a higher truth than literal fact and his distortions were in the interests of a higher plausibility.\*

\* "It is easy to put things together in a logical sequence and arrive at plausibility. It is the task of the artist to combine excessive gentleness and excessive brutality, to mate the nightingale and the elephant and to make the marriage more plausible than sheer fact by its very incongruity"



3. All of the characters in King Lear possess certain traits to excess; Lear himself, though old, is extremely strong and willful. Edmund, though young, is the most completely off-hand and thoroughgoing I have yet encountered (and is almost likable for it). Kent, whose extreme honesty sends him packing into exile and whose extreme loyalty brings him back in disguise to serve his king, is the completely blunt and honorable man; Regan and Goneril, two vipers with no discernable redeeming characteristics. Cordelia in her duty to Lear is virtuous to the point of saintliness; and Gloucester, though admirable in all other ways, is sentimental to the point of blindness.

Here is certainly a fine array of Virtues and Vices in human form; conflict, and therefore drama, is inevitable.

The action begins when Gloucester allows his sentiment to get the best of his moral judgement. He has broken his marriage vows to beget Edmund and has never quite gotten around to repentance because "though this knave came something sanely into the

world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making—." He allows this sentiment to blind him to the true nature of this son he has not seen for nine years.

At the same time, Lear has decided to "shake all cares and business from our age, conferring them on younger strengths, while we, unburthened crawl toward death." His willfulness has led him to escape the cares of state against both his oath and the good of the kingdom and has led him to see that in his daughters which he wants to see and blind him to what he does not want to face.

From here the action proceeds on the two different levels indicated. Edmund, the false son, unsatisfied with his lot, plots to supplant his brother Edgar in his father's estimation and aided by Gloucester's sentimental inclinations, is successful in jeopardizing Edgar to the point where he must flee in disguise to escape his father's wrath. Lear, infuriated by Cordelia's honesty, deprives her of her rightful share

exposed  
how?

in the kingdom and marries her to the King of France who takes her, dowdless, as a prize in herself. Lear divides Cordelia's inheritance between Regan and Goneril, whose protestations of love have completely addled his judgment.

Lear, having given his all to Regan and Goneril, is humiliated and mistreated by them. His retinue of knights is depleted at their instigation and he finds himself despised and unwanted, his only follower the honest Kent who was banished for siding with Cordelia and who has returned in disguise to serve his king, and the Fool, his conscience, who stings and lashes him unmercifully for his folly in giving up his lands, titles, and duties.

This interpretation of the role of the Fool, the personification of Lear's conscience, is borne out by the fact that he no longer appears in the action after he has fulfilled his dramatic function by driving the King mad with his taunts and jeers and forced him to see that which he should have known all along. It is in the scene in which

Don't something  
wrong with  
his criticism?

Lear in his madness (which somehow is more sane than his sanity) tries Regan and Goneril in fancy for their treachery with the Fool and the feigning mad Edgar for justices that the Fool last appears. His fate is known only in the last scene when Lear says, "My fool is hung," shortly before he himself dies.

The two themes of the plot begin to unite when Gloucester aids the king, who has retired to the heath in the midst of a howling storm and who is hurling challenges to the elements as his mind, unable to bear the taunts of the Fool now his eyes have seen what his thoughts would not admit, begins to crack. Edmund denounces ~~him~~ his father to Cornwall, Regan's husband, who puts out Gloucester's eyes. Edgar, deposed son of Gloucester, is found hiding, disguised as a madman, in the hovel in which the king shelters.

From here the sides in the conflict are clearly drawn; Edmund, Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall on the side of Evil: Cordelia,

Kent, Edgar, Albany, the mild and honorable husband of Goneril who takes no part in her plottings, Gloucester and Lear on the side of Good.

The resolution of the conflict is inexorable and inevitable. Each of the evil-doers is the instrument of his own punishment. Edmund is killed by Edgar, whom he had wronged; Goneril, through lust for Edmund, kills her sister and then stabs herself ~~for~~ when her husband discovers her perfidy; Cornwall is killed by his servants who were incensed at his treatment of Gloucester.

But if Evil is punished by the results of its own machinations, even Virtue is no less punished. Both Gloucester and Lear are betrayed by the children they trusted and succored by the children they wronged. Gloucester's sentimental blindness and failure to repent is the cause of his physical blindness. Though Cordelia's loyalty to her father is commendable, her warring

upon her sisters is punishable; the punishment in her case is death. The punishment of Lear is the most terrible; humiliation, degradation, insanity, and finally a heartbroken death.

Upon finishing the play, I had the feeling that an epilogue might well be added beginning, "And the moral of the story is \_\_\_\_\_."

Certainly many morals might be appended in this manner; morals lifted literally from the literature of many cultures and ages; from Aesop's Fables or the Ten Commandments.

The crime of Lear was the sin of Adam and the crime of Oedipus. He exerted his will in an attempt to escape his Fate and in so doing threatened the structure of society. How similar in content are these lines spoken by the Chorus in Oedipus Rex and the Fool in King Lear

I need more  
appreciation  
of this phrase.

"But if any man walks haughtily in deed or word, with no fear of justice, no reverence for the images of gods, may an evil doom seize him for his ill-starred pride, if he will not win his vantage, nor keep him from unholy deeds, but must lay profaning hands on sanctities."

— Nay, if such deeds are in honor, wherefore should we join in the sacred dance?"

"The old prophecies concerning Laius are fading; already men are setting them at naught, and nowhere is Apollo glorified with honors; the worship of the gods is perishing."

Fool:

I'll speak a prophecy ere I go;  
When priests are more in word than matter;  
When brewers mar their malt with water;  
When nobles are their tailor's tutors;  
No heretics burned, but wenches suitors;  
When every case in law is right;

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When priests are more in word than matter;  
When brewers mar their malt with water;  
When nobles are their tailors tutors;  
No heretic burned, but wenches suitors;  
When every case in law is right;  
No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;  
When slanders do not live in tongues;  
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;  
When usurers tell their gold i' the field,  
And whores + bawds do churches build;  
Then shall the realm of Albion

14



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When slanders do not live in tongues;  
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;  
When usurers tell their gold i' the field,  
And whores and bawds do churches build:  
Then shall the realm of Albion  
Come to great confusion:

*elaborate*  
All the crimes in King Lear are crimes  
of individuals against the social structure;  
actions which ran contrary to the ~~set~~  
cultural pattern. There is no doubt in my  
mind as which side of the fence Shakespeare  
stood.

*Don't be  
cryptic!*