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KING LEAR

An analysis and history of the play by Shakespeare

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KING LEAR WEEPING OVER THE DEAD BODY OF CORDELIA
A painting by James Barry, c. 1786

As in *Macbeth* terror reaches its utmost height, in *King Lear* the sense of compassion is exhausted. The principal characters here are not those who act, but those who suffer. We have not in this, as in most tragedies, the picture of a calamity in which the sudden blows of fate seem still to honor the head which they strike, and where the loss is always accompanied by some flattering consolation in the memory of the former possession; but a fall from the highest elevation into the deepest abyss of misery, where humanity is stripped of all external and internal advantages, and given up a prey to naked helplessness.

The threefold dignity of a king, an old man, and a father, is dishonored by the cruel ingratitude of his unnatural daughters; the old king, who out of a foolish tenderness has given away everything, is driven out into the world a homeless beggar; the childish imbecility to which he was fast advancing changes into the wildest insanity, and when he is rescued from the destitution to which he was abandoned, it is too late. The kind consolations of filial care and attention and of true friendship

are now lost on him; his bodily and mental powers are destroyed beyond hope of recovery, and all that now remains to him of life is the capability of loving and suffering beyond measure. What a picture we have in the meeting of Lear and Edgar in a tempestuous night and in a wretched hovel! The youthful Edgar has, by the wicked arts of his brother, and through his father's blindness, fallen, as did Lear, from the rank to which his birth entitled him; and, as the only means of escaping further persecution, is reduced to the disguise of a beggar tormented by evil spirits. The king's fool, notwithstanding the voluntary degradation which is implied in his condition, is, after Kent, Lear's most faithful associate, the wisest counsellor. This good-hearted fool clothes reason with the livery of his motley garb; the high-born beggar acts the part of insanity; and both, were they even in reality what they seem, would still be enviable in comparison with the king, who feels that the violence of his grief threatens to overpower his reason. The meeting of Edgar with the blinded Gloucester is equally pathetic; nothing could be more affecting than to see the ejected son become the father's guide, and the good angel, who, under the disguise of insanity, saves him by an ingenius and pious fraud from the horror and despair of self-murder.

The story of Lear and his daughers was left by Shakespeare as he found it in a fabulous tradition, with all the features characteristic of the simplicity of old times. But in that tradition there is not the slightest trace of the story of Gloucester and his sons, which was derived by Shakespeare from another source. The incorporation of the two stories has been censured as destructive of the unity of action. But whatever contributes to the intrigue of the dénoument must always possess unity. And with what ingenuity and skill are the two main parts of the composition dovetailed into one another! The pity felt by Gloucester for the fate of Lear becomes the means whereby his son Edmund effects his complete destruction, and affords the outcast Edgar an opportunity of being the savior of his father. On the other hand, Edmund is active in the cause of Regan and Goneril, and the criminal passion which they both entertain for him induces them to execute justice on each other and on themselves. The laws of the drama have therefore been sufficiently complied with, and it is the

very combination which constitutes the beauty of the work.

The two cases resemble each other in the main; an infatuated father is blind toward his well-disposed child, and the unnatural children, whom he prefers, requite him by the ruin of his happiness. But all the circumstances are so different that the stories, while they each make a correspondent impression on the heart, for a complete contrast for the imagination. Were Lear alone to suffer from his daughters, the impression would be limited to the powerful compassion felt by us for his private misfortune. But two such unheard-of examples taking place at the same time have the appearance of a great commotion in the moral world; the picture becomes gigantic and fills us with such alarm as we should entertain at the idea that the heavenly bodies might one day fall from their orbits. To save in some degree the honor of human nature, Shakespeare never wishes his spectators to forget that the story takes place in a dreary and barbarous age; he lays particular stress on the circumstance that the Britons of that day were still heathens, although he has not made all the remaining circumstances to coincide learnedly with the time which he has chosen.

From this point of view we must judge of many coarsenesses in expression and manners; for instance, the immodest manner in which Gloucester acknowledged his bastard, Kent's quarrel with the steward, and more especially the cruelty personally inflicted on Gloucester by the duke of Cornwall. Even the virtue of the honest Kent bears the stamp of an iron age, in which the good and the bad display the same uncontrollable energy. Great qualities have not been superfluously assigned to the king; the poet could command our sympathy for his situation, without concealing what he had done to bring himself into it. Lear is choleric, overbearing and almost childish from age, when he drives out his youngest daughter because she will not join in the hypocritical exaggerations of her sisters. But he has a warm and affectionate heart, which is susceptible of the most fervent gratitude; and even rays of a high and kingly disposition burst forth from the eclipse of his understanding. Cordelia, with her heavenly beauty of soul, reminds us of Antigone. In the entire play little more than a hundred lines are assigned to her; yet, throughout the five acts,

we can never forget her, and at the close she lingers in our recollection as if we had seen some being more beautiful and purer than a thing of earth.

After surviving so many sufferings, Lear can only die, and what more truly tragic end for him than to die from grief for the death of Cordelia? According to Shakespeare's plan, the guilty, it is true, are all punished, for wickedness destroys itself; but the virtues that would bring help and succor are either too late or are overmatched by the cunning activity of malice.

The legend of Lear had unquestionably been dramatized before Shakespeare produced his tragedy. "The true Chronicle History of King Leir and his three Daughters, Gonorill, Ragan and Cordelia, as it hath been divers and sundry times lately acted," was printed, probably for the first time, in 1605; but there can be no doubt that it belongs to a period some ten or perhaps twenty years earlier. In 1594 an entry was made at Stationer's hall, of "The moste famous Chronicle Hystorie of Leire King of England, and his Three Daughters." Shakespeare's story of Lear is taken from Holinshed's account of the legend, one dated back to the time when Joas reigned over Judah, or, according to Geoffrey of Monmouth's, to the days of Isaiah and Hosea. A garbled version of the play as written by the poet was prepared by one Nahum Tate, who, not understanding the art of Shakespeare and having no dramatic art himself, thought to adopt the original to the popular taste. For over a century this abortion helf possession of the stage, until Macready restored to us the work of the great master, since cleansed from its remaining impurities by able commentators.

In tragical pathos, in dramatic force, in grandeur of sentiment and diction, Lear has no superior in all the wide range of the world's drama. The language often rises to or exceeds, of possible, the sublimity of Aeschylus, and the tragedy has the further advantage of dealing with human beings, human passions, and human frailties, and not with the affairs of gods and demigods. The modern play-goer does not greatly concern himself with the deeds and thoughts of the powers supernal, and if he can see human beings set forth on the stage, with

their virtues and infirmities, would willingly leave the gods to manage their own affairs.

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