

14. *King Lear*

In *Hamlet* and *Othello* the victimised woman is completely passive; she can only suffer and die. In *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* she takes the initiative and redeems her persecutor; but in each case the process is mechanical and unconvincing. In *King Lear* for the first time the tragic suffering and death and the redemption of the persecutor are combined, resulting in an incalculable access of power.

Lear's three daughters are, of course, fully realized free-standing characters. But they are also, without detriment to that, embodiments or projections of forces to which Lear gives birth in his psyche; the warring factions into which we see him divide his own soul in the play's opening scene. The literal-minded reader might well ask how Goneril and Regan, who appear as wholly evil throughout the play, could have managed to keep their true characters hidden from Lear up the point where the play begins. His spiritual blindness alone seems hardly enough to account for that. The point is that, as in the folktales from which the plot derives, the evil they embody is effectively brought into being by Lear's own actions, or at least it is given scope and activated by them.

On a mere whim, to satisfy his vanity, Lear sets up between his daughters a public competition in flattery, and makes the fate of his kingdom depend on it. Cordelia has been criticized as inflexible and self-righteous. Even if these events were happening in the real world, this would not be so. Someone has to attempt to put a stop to the whole charade. We are not dealing with a mere family quarrel. Lear's rashness threatens disaster not only for himself, by committing himself to the 'professed bosoms' of Goneril and Regan, but also for the whole realm by handing over absolute power to the totally unscrupulous sisters. A king is God's vicar on earth, ruling for the good of his people. His kingdom is not his to give away, not part of his private wealth. This power without responsibility is also evinced by the luxury of the court, and by Lear's later admission that he has taken too little care of his poorer subjects. The ship of state is heading for the rocks. When Kent says to Lear: 'I tell thee thou dost evil', he is not exaggerating. Evil breeds from Lear's irresponsibility like children.

Cordelia's 'nothing' is not mere stubbornness. It is her courageous and selfless stand against that evil. Nor can she find words to express the total unconditional love she feels for her father that he would understand, any more than the father in one version of the folktale understands that the daughter who says she loves him like salt (which is necessary for life) is saying much more than those who profess to love him like sugar or honey. Cordelia does not remain silent. She tells Lear that she loves him according to her bond. The whole play turns on the meaning of that word. Gloucester takes as a sign of universal disorder 'the bond cracked twixt son and father'. Lear himself appeals to the same bond when he tells Goneril:

thou better knowst
The offices of nature, bond of childhood.

It is indeed an office of nature, a bond of natural filial love and gratitude so strong that not even death can break it. It is an absolute; what the Greeks would have called a theos. And it should be mutual. Cordelia, by all the laws of nature, deserves her father's benediction, not his curse. But Lear has already repudiated that unconditional love by trying to force Cordelia to heave her heart into her mouth and convert it into flattering words.

But we are, in any case, not in the 'real' world, but in the much more real world of poetic tragedy, where we are not concerned with papering over the cracks, but with exposing the reality beneath. It is no part of Cordelia's concern not to rock the boat; that is what has brought things to their present pass. The whole purpose of tragedy is to rock the boat, to push matters to a conclusion. In tragedy everything must be paid for, in full.

The three sisters are, at one level, the triple goddess, and the triple goddess is both Nature (which Lear proceeds to blame for all that happens) and his own soul. In repudiating the unconditional, gentle, natural love of Cordelia, Lear is violating and inverting nature itself, and giving himself hostage to what repudiated love converts itself into, the savage, unnatural malice of her sisters.

The first scene contains the seeds of the imagery which carries the play's deepest meanings. Lear's decision to 'divest' himself of rule, territory and cares of state, commits him to much more than that, to be stripped of all lendings until he is as unaccommodated as mad Tom and bereft even of what the world calls sanity. At the play's nadir he is left with, precisely, 'nothing'. Goneril's protestation that she loves her father dearer than eyesight introduces a crucial image soon to be echoed by Lear's 'Out of my sight!', to which Kent replies 'See better, Lear'. The rest of the play is about the cruel curing of Lear's blindness. The frequent and potent images of sight and blindness soon link up with the other main streams of images, those, for example, expressing sub-human, unnatural savagery and monstrosity. Gloucester, before his own blinding, tells Regan that he has sent the King to Dover

Because I would not see thy cruel nails
Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister
In his anointed flesh rash boarish fangs.

Ironically it is Cordelia ('wretch whom Nature is ashamed / Almost t'acknowledge hers') whom Lear first accuses of unnaturalness and monstrosity. France comments:

Sure her offence
Must be of such unnatural degree
That monsters it.

When Lear says

Better thou
Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better.

and

So be my grave my peace as here I give
Her father's heart from her.

and

We
Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
That face of her's again.

the logic of tragedy takes him at his word. His dying words are:

Look on her, look, her lips, Look there, look there!

Lear's inversion of natural values in the opening scene has consequences both cosmic and comic. The cosmic equivalent of the chaos he brings to his family and state is the storm. The comic equivalent is in the jests of the Fool:

Thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; thou gav'st them the rod and putt'st
down thine own breeches.

The Fool, like Cordelia before him (they were almost certainly played by the same boy) is concerned to make Lear face facts. He succeeds; but they are facts Lear cannot cope with. His recognition of the unacceptable face of the goddess in two of his daughters obsesses him and blinds him to the countervailing value of the third:

This tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there - filial ingratitude!

Like Hamlet he generalizes to condemn the whole sex, the whole human race, Nature itself for making such hard hearts. He can see nothing but the face of Goneril which he projects onto all women, onto Gloucester ('Goneril with a white beard'), onto a joint-stool, onto the face of Nature herself. His vision of evil poisons his imagination. He prays to Nature to convey sterility into Goneril's womb, but soon extends the curse of sterility to Nature herself:

Crack Nature's moulds
All germens spill at once that makes ungrateful man.

If Nature means people preying on each other like monsters of the deep, then better there should be no more Nature.

The Fool cannot hold Lear back from madness. Things have gone beyond the point of no return, the point at which they could still have been resolved in laughter, in comedy's terms of common sense and common humanity, as very similar problems were resolved in *As You Like It*. The Fool tries to pull Lear back

from the brink. Mad Tom, who now replaces the Fool, encourages him (as he encourages his father) to jump over it. He knows that only on the other side of an ego-death is there hope for either of them. Having performed that function he reverts to being Edgar, leaving Cordelia to complete the process of regeneration.

In Act III no such regeneration seems possible, because we have as yet been given no intimation of any sanctions, human or divine, which could be appealed to against the play's horrors. The gods, if they are active in the play at all, seem to be so only in the spirit of wanton boys torturing and killing for sport. And Nature has been defined for us primarily by Edmund. His Nature is that of Hobbes, where life is nasty, brutish and short and man's life is cheap as beast's; a Nature which, far from giving man laws, gives him license to pursue his own ends as ruthlessly as he likes. Edmund and the sisters subtract from life any belief in order, bonds, kindness, any divinely or naturally sanctioned morality, and what is left is absurd.

King Lear is a play about sanctions. Edmund and the sisters believe in self-interest as the ultimate sanction. Lear finds his in the inherited pattern of hierarchies, roles and ceremonies (which he later dismisses as 'pomp'). The Fool's sanctions are common sense and proportion. Cordelia embodies sanctions also deriving from Nature, but a very different Nature from Edmund's, a Nature which sanctions the affections and loyalties of the heart, a Nature of benison and riches which restores and blesses. Edgar appeals to the 'kind gods', who are often cruel in order to be kind, in whose hands the ripe man must place himself unreservedly; whose service brings Joy even with the bursting of the heart.

The first three acts strip away all claims to value or meaning. The play demolishes everything that can be demolished. The challenge is to see what, if anything, survives. At this point it seems that Nature cannot redeem anything because Nature itself is in need of redemption. All our images of Nature thus far have been images of fallen Nature, Nature reversed and purely evil. Nature is under a curse 'which twain have brought her to'. The twain are, on the surface, Goneril and Regan; but at a deeper level they are Adam and Eve, who, by choosing forbidden knowledge, (in Lawrence's words 'knowledge of the self-apart-from-god'), 'disbranched them from their material sap', that is, cut themselves off from Nature, the tree upon which humanity is a leaf. In this respect Lear is everyman, his spiritual blindness is that of Western man's single vision, projecting onto the world our own inner chaos, and Cordelia is the lost soul of each of us. To redeem Nature is to restore it to itself. With Cordelia's return the curse is lifted and we see Nature transfigured, respiritualized:

All blest secrets
All you unpublished virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears! be aidant and remediate
In the good man's distress!

It is not enough that Shakespeare, even with the finest poetic expression in the language, should tell us this. It would fall on deaf ears had there been no corresponding radical reversion in the reader. Difficult, paradoxical truths are being enforced throughout the fourth act, demolishing received values to instate their

opposites. Poverty and madness are the positives by which Lear must be stripped, emptied and cauterized to make him capable of receiving what Cordelia now brings him.

At the beginning of the play the evil characters had been in league, the good at odds. In the fourth act this pattern begins, like so much else, to be reversed. Edgar and Cordelia take over as prime movers in the action, and the play moves towards reunion, forgiveness and redemption through an accumulation of images of bounty and grace. The play is also moving away from a socioeconomic frame of reference, with power and greed as the primary motives, to a moral-spiritual context in which sacrifice is seen as blessed. Also, the main plot and the sub-plot, which had seemed to be parallel, now converge. The correspondences between Lear and Gloucester are obvious, but the differences are also important. Gloucester's has been a sensual fault, and he therefore passes through the sensory purgatory of blindness. Lear's is a spiritual fault and his appropriate purgatory is madness. Lear's temptation is towards cynicism and misanthropy; Gloucester's towards despair and suicide. Both directions are unregenerative. As Lear's kingdom was not his to squander, so Gloucester's life is not his to dispose of. Edgar preserves his father by deception, then says:

Think that the clearest gods who make them honours
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.

This would be continuing deception unless we recognized that it is only through people that the gods operate in this world.

The turning point in the play, the beginning of the upward movement, is perhaps Albany's condemnation of Goneril at the beginning of Act IV sc.ii:

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vilde offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.

It seems that Albany is asking for divine intervention, but a mere peasant with sufficient indignation has just killed Cornwall, and the remaining servants, like the old man who leads and clothes Gloucester 'come on't what will', display a humanity which cares what wickedness or goodness it does. And this is how the gods operate throughout the play (as also in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*). The heavens do send down their visible spirits, called people. When Lear's true vision is restored it is that spirit he sees radiant in Cordelia: 'You are a spirit, I know'.

Spirit radiates through the transparent language Cordelia speaks:

O my dear father! Restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made!

Was this a face
To be oppos'd against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning? to watch - poor *perdu!* -
With this thin helm? Mine enemy's dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
Against my fire. And wast thou fain, poor father,
To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn,
In short and musty straw? Alack, alack!
'Tis wonder that thy life and wits at once
Had not concluded all.

Her language simplifies still further into 'And so I am, I am'. 'No cause, no cause'. This language seems to pass from Cordelia, like medicine, to those she comes in contact with, the Gentleman who describes her to Kent (IV iii) and Lear himself in the restoration scene. It is not only a new and distinctive language, purged of style, but is, as H.A.Mason has claimed, in its strong tenderness and simplicity, no less than the finest expression English has ever yielded. This is what her 'nothing' at last opens into: a speech which is capable of expressing the truth of the heart. The restoration which flows from her lips is words, words completely of a piece with her gestures, her kiss, her kneeling, her tears. Shakespeare was unable to hold on to this language, but there are echoes of it in the speech of most of the late heroines.

Gone now are all the previous characteristics of Lear's speech, the authority, the bluster, the rage. Now he wants nothing but Cordelia:

Come, let's away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

How remote now seems that world of court news and power politics. They are poor rogues who care about it, still locked in their single vision like a prison, prisoners of time and contingency. Lear and Cordelia no longer inhabit that world. Their newly-reaffirmed love has created for them a world which cannot be touched by external events. The absoluteness of Cordelia's love lifts it beyond the worst that time and chance and evil can do to it. And Shakespeare makes sure that the worst they can do

is done. When the sisters die, nothing remains of them. But when Cordelia dies, what she had stood for and embodied is actually validated and reinforced by her death:

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The Gods themselves throw incense.

Such absolutes the Greeks called theoi, gods. Cordelia is the goddess in her most benign unconditionally loving aspect, the aspect Christianity separated out as Christ. Whitman's characterization of Christ is also (with the substitution of one word) the best characterization I know of Cordelia:

Many times have I been rejected, taunted, put in prison, and crucified, and
many times shall be again,
All the world have I given up for my dear [father's] sake, for the soul's sake,
Wending my way through the homes of men, rich or poor, with the kiss of
affection,
For I am affection, I am the cheer-bringing God, with hope and all-enclosing
charity,
With indulgent words as, to children, with fresh and sane words, mine only,
Young and strong I pass knowing well I am destin'd myself to an early death;
But my charity has no death - my wisdom dies not, neither early nor late,
And my sweet love bequeathed here and elsewhere never dies.

['Chanting the Square Deific']

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