

Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542

King Lear

DAVID LOWENTHAL

Boston College

King Lear may be the most tragic of Shakespeare's tragedies. Nothing exceeds in pathos the final spectacle of Lear bending over his dead Cordelia, looking for life in her and then expiring himself. But what should we think of Lear generally? Is he the vain, irascible and doddering old man his critics make him out to be—a view quite close to the one held by his two bad daughters? Why, then, at the end, do we not only pity but admire him as a man of very great soul, a much greater man than the loyal Earl of Gloucester, his lesser counterpart in the play? Is the play named after him only because he was in fact a king or because Shakespeare wanted us to think of him as a king par excellence, a true king, a natural king? Hamlet is called the Prince of Denmark in the title to that play, and Pericles the Prince of Tyre in another, but—apart from the history plays—Shakespeare names no other king but Lear in his titles. What did he mean by this? And is the play, as often remarked about its ending, intended to convey a sense of hopeless despair in a universe devoid of purpose or meaning? How can we square this interpretation with the admiration we feel for Lear, Cordelia, Edgar and Kent: Do they not qualify the universe in the direction of meaning and goodness?

Along with *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, *King Lear* is one of the three tragedies set in northern countries. All the other tragedies are set in the south of Europe: the four Roman, the two Italian (*Othello* and *Romeo*), and *Timon of Athens*. And of the northern tragedies, it alone, like most of the tragedies generally, is pre-Christian in its setting. It may also be the earliest play dealing with Shakespeare's own country, followed by *Cymbeline* and then the history plays themselves.

1. THE SETTING

Shakespeare tells us nothing about how Lear became king, about his parents, his wife and past accomplishments, or about events and conditions in other European powers at the time. Whether Britain is geographically the same or different from the later England is not made clear. It is a country at peace with all its neighbors, and of such repute that France and Burgundy have come to court Lear's youngest daughter. It is also without the slightest sign of inter-

nal commotion or even dissension—such is the respect Lear has won for his rule.

The religion Lear shares with his society is polytheistic and astral: he swears by the gods of pagan antiquity, like Jupiter and Apollo, and seems to associate them with heavenly bodies. Yet some of the states in the play—France, Burgundy—in actual history arose only after the coming of Christianity and the collapse of the Roman Empire. Similarly, the British aristocracy, with its titles, entailed estates and primogeniture, was linked historically during the feudal period with Christianity rather than with the paganism of the play. For reasons unknown to us, therefore, Shakespeare has mixed together unrelated historical elements, with the consequence that Lear's Britain seems both modern and ancient at one and the same time. As such a composite, it is much more the poet's own fabrication than the Roman plays or the English history plays.

As the play begins, the reader is struck by the parallel—and contrast—between the situations of the old king and young Edmund, Gloucester's bastard son. By law Edmund is Gloucester's second son and would not inherit his father's title and estate. By law he is also condemned, as a bastard, to ignominy, so that Gloucester sends him away for nine years at a stretch, despite claiming to love both his sons equally and, this time, bringing Edmund with him to the court. Edmund challenges these laws and customs keeping him down as merely conventional and against the dictates of nature. His bold soliloquy appeals to nature as superior to human laws and customs. By nature he is equally Gloucester's natural son. By nature, by his natural endowment, he is his brother Edgar's equal or superior. Edmund will therefore use deception, and later force, to remedy the artificial injustice of law and custom. He will scheme to get Edgar's lands: "I grow; I prosper. Now, gods, stand up for bastards!"

The play actually opens not with this raucous invocation but with quiet references by Kent and Gloucester to Lear's imminent division of the kingdom, switching to the subject of Edmund only after their brief introductory remarks on this subject. Subsequently, the actual division of the kingdom takes place, though hardly as Lear planned it, and only then does Shakespeare return us to Edmund and have him give the amazing soliloquy quoted above. In this way the play can be said to open with two related topics, the inheritance of Lear's daughters, and the inheritance of Gloucester's sons. But there are also striking differences between the two cases. Gloucester has two sons, one older and legitimate, the other younger and illegitimate. Lear has three legitimate daughters and no sons.

The play gives us no direct indication of how the succession to the throne would normally take place. Was the eldest son expected to inherit, paralleling Edgar's situation? Could a daughter inherit? And why was Lear able to divide the kingdom in three, as if it were his own to do with as he pleases? One gets the impression that law or custom governed the inheritance of Gloucester's land and titles much more definitely. For neither Kent nor Gloucester seems sur-

prised at the kingdom's division, and when Kent later objects to Lear's actions, it is not to the division of the kingdom as such but to his treatment of Cordelia and his surrender of power to her sisters and their husbands. Even the daughters—all of them—express no shock whatsoever at the division. Goneril, for example, never says or hints that it should all be hers: not one of them ever takes Lear to task for violating law or custom in any part of what he did.

Perhaps Shakespeare wants us to understand Lear's situation, in contrast to Gloucester's, as one *not* bound by law, thus leaving his discretion regarding the succession well-nigh absolute. Does this mean Lear could have bestowed the kingdom on whomsoever he pleased? Could he have given it to someone outside his family, like Kent or Edgar? Yet his attention seems to be wholly and exclusively riveted on his daughters, as if there were no other alternative. Moreover, he treats the lands as dowries—i.e., as traditionally obligatory wedding gifts from parents to marrying daughters to bring into their marriage, and he plainly vests political power (after his original plan for a tripartite division breaks down) in the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall rather than in Goneril and Regan. This makes it unlikely that any one of the daughters, whether Goneril, the eldest, or Cordelia, the best loved, could have herself been designated queen of all Britain. It suggests a traditional opinion or unwritten custom favoring maleness in the ruler, thus qualifying the seeming absoluteness of Lear's discretion in arranging the succession. And the priority plainly given by the law to one of Gloucester's sons over the other shows that age usually was the ground of priority in inheritance. Could Lear therefore have given all to Goneril, his first-born, much as Gloucester was expected to give all to Edgar?

Let us piece together the plan for the succession that the aged Lear has formed. Having already divided the kingdom into three parts, he tells the assembled court that he intends to give each daughter a dowry consisting of a part of the kingdom proportionate in worth to the love she expresses for him in a speech. This idea makes Lear look exceedingly vain and not a little dotty. To show how mistaken this impression is—Harry Jaffa was the first to do it in *Shakespeare's Politics*, many years ago—we must take note of a few simple facts. First, as Lear begins to express what he calls “our darker purpose”—i.e., a concealed purpose—the map of Britain he brings in and employs has already been divided into three parts, just as he said. Second, he does not wait for all the daughters to speak before making his allocations but does so one at a time, after each has spoken. Third, it is Lear who sets the order of speaking by asking his eldest daughter to speak first—i.e., by using the order of seniority in which society would usually grant preference. This leads to his giving substantially equal portions to the two elder sisters, who follow one another, leaving what Lear calls “a third more opulent than your sisters” to his favorite, Cordelia. By the time Cordelia speaks, no other part is available to her: she *has* to get the best third. To this way of treating the elder daughters, Gloucester and Kent had both given testimony at the very beginning of the play. It seems they

were shown the map by Lear and expressed surprise only at the equality with which he had treated the two dukes in his division of the kingdom, since they agreed that up to then “the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.”

This means that, contrary to the standard interpretation, Lear did not devise the love speeches as a test of his daughters’ desert: he had already decided upon the allocations before setting up the contest and hearing the speeches! We are not told where these territorial thirds lay, but it is very likely that the third given to Regan and Cornwall was in the south, near Cornwall itself, and the part given to Goneril and Albany near Albany in the north. The “more opulent” third reserved for Cordelia must therefore have lain in the center, between these two. In an earlier move, before the play’s action begins, Lear had in a most unusual action postponed giving Goneril and Regan their dowries at the time of their marriages. This implies that he had devised this scheme for the succession, entailing a “darker purpose,” some time before. But the scheme could not be brought to fruition until Cordelia also married—an event now at hand—thus enabling the eighty-year-old Lear to put into place his momentous and much-needed settlement.

Both the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France are there because both wish to marry Cordelia, but the evidence (again per Jaffa) indicates that Lear intended Burgundy, not France, to be her husband. Only Burgundy was told in advance what dowry to expect with Cordelia, and it is to Burgundy that Lear first turns in offering Cordelia’s hand. Why should this be, if the King of France was obviously the better catch? Marriage to the more powerful France would have threatened to make Britain a dependent subordinate of France politically. Lear seems to have thought that the danger of placing Cordelia’s third between those of her sisters would be sufficiently offset by her link to Burgundy. And he himself would aid Cordelia’s cause by residing for the remainder of his life with her alone, rather than shuttling from one daughter to the other, as he ended up doing with two of them: “I lov’d her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery.”

The language used by Lear throughout leaves no doubt (here I depart from Jaffa) that what he had in mind was an actual division of the kingdom, and not a temporary or merely apparent division. He explicitly says that he is shaking “all care and business from our age,” giving up all “rule, interest of territory and cares of state.” He implies that something like a tripartite council of state would give unity to the rule of Britain. When Cordelia herself thwarts his purpose and he disowns her, he divides her intended portion between the other two and invests his sons-in-laws, the two dukes, jointly “with my power, pre-eminence and the large effects that troop with majesty,” keeping little more than his title and a hundred knights for himself. To these “beloved sons” he gives the “sway, revenue and execution of the rest. . . .” It is unlikely that, in this emergency, Lear would give the two dukes more power than he had origi-

nally intended to give the three dukes together (including the Duke of Burgundy, whose place in Britain was symbolized by the coronet Lear had on hand for the occasion). We can only conclude that Lear's plan really envisioned the tripartite division of a Britain that under him was entirely united, and that these three parts, as he says, were intended for the perpetual possession of the dukes and their heirs.

What drove Lear to this peculiar scheme? In what way did it necessitate his having a "darker purpose?" What were the alternatives he faced? The evidence in the play seems to warrant four premises: (1) that there was in Britain a presumption in favor of hereditary monarchy or keeping the crown within the family; (2) that women would not have been wanted to take the helm directly; (3) that—as in the case of Gloucester's sons—there was a social presumption in favor of the rule of the eldest, though without any binding authority at the level of the crown itself; (4) that Britain was regarded as a possession of the king's which he could even divide up into separate dowries or inheritances. On the basis of these premises taken together, it would appear that the most socially consistent, if not expected, alternative was leaving all to Goneril, the eldest, or rather, through her, to her husband, Albany. This would mean disinheriting both Regan and Cordelia, just as was to occur in the case of Edmund and does occur, as a matter of course, in all hereditary monarchies. But what if Lear's "darker purpose" and his foremost objective was to pass on the greatest share of his power to Cordelia, whose conventional claim, as the youngest, was weakest of all? Perhaps this is why he chose to avoid the problem of succession directly and instead to couch all decisions in terms of giving dowries to all three daughters.

Lear had no personal craving for public expressions of affection from his daughters. As he himself announces, what he wants to do is extend his largest bounty (in distributing the parts of the kingdom) "where nature doth with merit challenge." Merit is his concern, and it is the challenge or claim to the crown posed by nature in the form of merit—i.e., natural merit—that seems to have moved Lear to the conclusions embodied in his divided map of Britain. It is Cordelia's merit that he wanted to find a way of acknowledging in the allocation, and the "love speeches" were the secret means he had devised to do so. They are set up in such a way that the two elder sisters first praise him effusively and thereby inadvertently commit themselves to the more favorable treatment of Cordelia that he saves for last.

This solution, however, is already a compromise with convention: if merit is the natural standard for choosing kings, why should the choice be confined to his offspring? The compromise Lear arranges is that, among his children, merit should receive its due. Those that have descended from his body (his wife, their mother, is never mentioned in the play) will be treated in accordance with their merit, ability to rule, or excellence of soul. Loving Cordelia, Lear thinks he has found in her a person of exemplary virtue like himself, and he wants her

to have the largest and most decisive share in ruling Britain. Dividing the kingdom was the only way of achieving this objective.

This means that Lear preferred dividing the kingdom and giving the best third to Cordelia over keeping it intact and giving it all to Goneril—and this long before he began to think badly of Goneril. But why? Shakespeare seems to have him engage in this radical and highly improbable action in order to indicate the full impact a natural principle is likely to have on the social order. Making Goneril (or Albany) his successor would have had the advantage of strengthening the social presumption in favor of the eldest and thereby bolstering social reliability and stability in the succession generally. This would have been even more important to consolidate on the political level of the monarchy than on the level of the individual aristocratic family like Gloucester's. Historically, the practical alternatives facing monarchies are either hereditary rule or chaos, but Lear does not do what he can to shore up hereditary monarchy and instead undermines it in the name of the principle of merit.

It turns out, therefore, that both Lear and Edmund appeal to nature—to a natural as distinguished from a merely legal or conventional or manmade claim. In Edmund's case, the legal rule working against him is already firmly and formidably established: he tries to break it down. In Lear's case, the legal rule governing succession exists only in an inchoate form and hence is much more open to the impress of what a king of his stature actually decides to establish. Lear can help form the tradition guiding royal succession; Edmund must undo the effect of a tradition already established. Moreover, both appeal to a principle of natural desert rather than age, though with Edmund this principle is understood to be based on manly strength or power, with Lear, on moral virtue in the broad sense. Or—since age can itself be thought of as a natural rather than a conventional principle—we find two natural principles in conflict. Whatever the defects of age as a principle, it has the advantage, for society, of being definite and clear cut. Once cast aside, many more Edmunds will make self-interested claims than Lears. The result will be to encourage injustice and lose all dependability at one and the same time.

Thus, the great question animating this play is whether human justice and political life have a foundation in nature or are merely conventional, and it is this question—applied to the problem of succession—that Shakespeare introduces at the beginning of the play and resolves in the rest. Neither Lear nor Edmund had to invent the term “nature” in the play, for they found it already at hand in their society. But someone had to discover “nature” in this sense. When Edmund exclaims, “Thou, Nature, art my goddess,” and ends by exhorting the gods to “stand up for bastards,” it is unclear whether he really retains any of the polytheistic beliefs of his society, or is rather clothing his radically untraditional beliefs in the traditional garb of religion. For nature is not a goddess in the ordinary meaning of that term. Nature means the necessary working of things due to their own internal makeup or composition, and it can apply

either to particular things, like the nature of men or horses, or to the sum of all such things in Nature. It is distinguished from what men artificially establish, but also from the external will of the gods—from both human making and divine making.

The independent force of nature, taken in this specific sense—and the very word “nature”—had to be discovered by someone at some point: nature is not known to men by nature. In his chapter “The Origin of the Idea of Natural Right” (in *Natural Right and History*), Leo Strauss describes how philosophy itself comes into existence through the discovery of nature, so that the first philosophers were all natural philosophers. Their innovation was to insist on using only man’s natural capacities—his senses and his reason—to discover the ultimate causes of things: their nature. This could not occur without a radical rejection of the traditional authority of both religion and society—of their claim to supply the authoritative account of these causes already. Philosophy, when it arises, challenges all authority as such in the name of the truth it discovers about nature, and in the play Shakespeare actually has Lear recapitulate this radical break with the belief in the gods that is presupposed by the discovery of nature through philosophy.

In the play Lear is first shown believing in a combination of the traditional gods and nature. It is to nature that he appeals as he searches for political merit in his successors; it is by the gods that he swears when punishing his “untender” daughter, Cordelia, and then again it is to nature now understood as a goddess (just as in the case of Edmund) that he appeals to bring sterility to his thankless and cruel daughter, Goneril. He seems to be able to believe in both nature and the gods because, in keeping with the tradition of his society, he looks upon the gods as supporting human justice, particularly through their power of punishing injustice. Thus, the gods seem to be both the source of nature and its rulers, and are capable of interfering with its normal working for the sake of sustaining the cause of justice. This dual belief makes it possible for Lear to address Nature herself as a goddess who can interfere with her own natural effects. Edmund appeals to a goddess he calls by the same name but she is really very different. Lear thinks of the gods as making up for weaknesses or defects in human justice, punishing where human justice cannot reach. Edmund, on the other hand, wants to oppose human justice in the name of a natural order centering on his own interests. He believes justice itself to be an artificial or conventional idea, since its concern for others or for the common good goes against the selfishness natural to us all.

By depicting Britain as a place where there is already knowledge of nature and philosophy, and combining this with a religion based on the identification of the heavenly bodies with personal deities, Shakespeare creates a situation something like the combination of biblical and classical elements that characterized medieval society all the way through to his own day. What Shakespeare sets forth in *King Lear* is a continuous reflection, primarily occurring in Lear’s

own mind, on the relationship of justice to the gods and nature. As Lear goes mad under the impact of his elder daughters' ingratitude and injustice, Shakespeare shows him preoccupied with the subject of justice and following a course of philosophical reasoning. He reaches the radical conclusion that justice is lacking not only in support from the gods but in support from nature as well: it is entirely conventional. This agrees with the position taken by Edmund from the beginning, and the absence of cosmic justice that it teaches seems to receive its final demonstration in the deep pessimism of the final scene, where Cordelia is needlessly murdered and Lear dies over her. But is this what Shakespeare sought to convey in the play? Is it even what the last scene teaches? Does Shakespeare agree with Lear in thinking justice conventional? If not, on what basis can he think otherwise, and why does the play seem to reach a conventionalist conclusion?

2. FATHERS, GODS AND KINGS

To compromise his brother, Edmund writes himself a letter, claiming it came from Edgar, in which he calls for the overthrow of their father's "aged tyranny." He tells his father that he has even heard Edgar maintain "that sons at perfect age and fathers declin'd, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue." In a parallel to this, shortly after Lear has begun his visit with Goneril, she determines to be severe with him:

Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he has given away! No, by my life,
Old fools are babes again, and must be us'd
With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus'd.

Shortly afterward, the fool tells Lear that he has made his daughters his mothers by giving them the rod and pulling down his own breeches.

All these instances involve an overturning of what seems to be the most obvious order of nature, whereby parents raise and rule over their children and are owed grateful obedience. This overturning puts all of society at risk, since the family is the original seat of authority and perhaps the archetype of political authority as such. In the play, Edmund makes it seem that his brother Edgar wishes to end his father's rule and even his life, whereas it is really he who, beginning with an effort to get his brother's inheritance, betrays his father and makes possible his cruel blinding by Cornwall. Similarly, Lear, having rashly and wrongly disowned Cordelia, finds himself cruelly mistreated by his two elder daughters, using the power he has relinquished to them and their husbands. They shuttle him back and forth between them, reduce his company of knights from one hundred to none, humiliate him further by putting his man in the stocks, and, finally, shut him out in a terrible storm.

Filial disobedience and ingratitude have always existed, but as an unfortunate aberration in human affairs and without receiving justification from abstract views. Shakespeare has Edmund express such views, with Goneril and the fool contributing concrete variations of their own. The reason for this is that the coming of philosophy, with its distinction between nature and convention, represents a challenge to even the most sacred and most self-evident authorities, including that of the father. Once philosophy enters the picture, it must be demonstrated why it is that the gratitude and obedience traditionally owed by children to parents are deserved, and other possibilities—including the rule of mature children over aged parents—must be considered dispassionately. The philosophical conclusion may end up supporting tradition—in deep conservatism—but its ground must now be rational proof rather than traditional reverence.

Reverence for parents and reverence for the gods have a clear link to each other. Just as parents create and care for their offspring, the gods, by their operation—Lear calls them “orbs”—generally cause us to “exist and cease to be.” They are the first causes of things, and the things they cause are intrinsically dependent on them. Together, parents and gods introduce into society a marked disposition to favor the old—not only older parents but old people, older generations, and old ways generally. Both Lear and Edmund challenge this domination of the old—challenge Lear’s own authority as an old father, an old man and an old king—when they appeal to nature and natural merit as against tradition and convention. According to the principle of natural merit taken by itself, Lear’s view of it would indicate that perhaps an intelligent young son *should* rule over his old and foolish father, just as Edgar does when he undertakes to guide the blind Gloucester. He should do so *for* his father’s good, and Edgar does so far more wisely than Gloucester could have, left to himself. But by Edmund’s view of nature and merit, the young should rule over the old for their own good, as he attempts to do throughout. In the play as a whole, the overall change that occurs in Britain from beginning to end is a change from the rule of the very old—Lear is an octogenarian—to the rule of Edgar, a young man of the highest quality, who can be expected to reign justly and wisely and who wisely begins his reign by paying apt tribute to the old: “The oldest hath borne most; we that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long.”

Between the customary authority of fathers or parents and the authority of the gods stands the authority of kings or rulers. Lear’s conception of kingship does not emerge all at once in the play, but his original plan for dividing the kingdom is designed to give as much authority as possible to merit—i.e., to Cordelia. This effort for Cordelia is in turn predicated on the notion that a ruler must, above all, be just and virtuous, and so she is, even if lacking somewhat in prudence. It presumes that political rule is for the benefit of the ruled, not of the ruler—in this respect resembling paternal power. It requires of the ruler a nature that commands respect and is capable of command generally, all di-

rected toward the common good. This is why the play takes an interest in the question whether there are any kings by nature—i.e., whether human life is well provided for not only through punitive justice but through just rule and proper authority of all kinds. As part of this interest, Kent, in disguise, tells Lear that “you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master,” and upon being asked by Lear what that is, replies “Authority.” To him, Lear is a natural king and deserves to be not only obeyed but admired and served. As Lear’s madness and his understanding simultaneously deepen, he pursues this question of natural kingship further, at one point affirming that he himself is “every inch a king,” yet immediately contradicting this idea by denying that royal authority amounts to anything more than a farmer’s dog barking at a beggar. Which view is true?

When Lear is mistreated by his elder daughters, his reactions vary in adopting the different perspectives of father and king. It is as their father (“So kind a father!”) that he feels the greater sorrow and anger, unable to comprehend their cruel ingratitude after he treated them so well and had just given them all. But he is almost equally sensitive to derogations from his majesty, marks of disrespect, having to plead where before he could command. Over the issue of the conduct and number of his knights, he curses Goneril and sets out for Regan’s, perhaps with less hope than he expresses. By the end of Act I, helped by the fool’s bitter jests, he has already regretted surrendering his power to these daughters, and recognized that his disowning Cordelia was the originating point of this folly: “O’ Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in and thy dear judgment out!” Already, so early in the play, he fears going mad and begs “sweet heaven” to keep him from going mad. By the end of Act II he has been confronted and humiliated by both daughters together in Gloucester’s castle. Again he appeals to the gods: “O heavens, if you do love old men, if your sweet sway allow obedience, if you yourselves are old, make it your cause; send down, and take my part!” Torn between wanting to be patient and wanting vengeance, he begs the gods as a “poor old man” for patience, yet also wonders if they have caused his daughters’ ingratitude. He asks to be touched by “noble anger” and helped to avoid weeping. Refusing to weep, and threatening to avenge himself on these “unnatural hags,” he again fears losing his sanity: “O, Fool! I shall go mad!”

By appealing to the gods as a poor old man and father, rather than as a king, Lear chooses what he must instinctively sense to be the firmer ground. Being an old father is a natural and enduring condition, whereas being a king is something that can happen and unhappen. While retaining the title of king, Lear had in fact given up his royal power, but he did not and could not give up his status as a father and what was owed to him by his daughters. And this, of course, is the bond that most affects the audience—one they have all experienced and sense to be both natural and of the greatest moment. Nevertheless, something of Lear’s case is lost when he forgoes arguing as a king and even, at times, as a progenitor, for these functions liken him more fully to the gods than

the “oldness” he stresses. Symbolically, however, the challenge to “oldness” mounted by Edmund, Goneril and Lear himself—a challenge to all old things, including custom and tradition—provides the setting for the philosophizing Lear himself soon engages in as he descends into madness. In short, something like the original birth of philosophy is enacted before our eyes, but in a disguise that keeps us from recognizing it as such. It is amazing to discover how much of the play parallels Strauss’s account of how the idea of natural right originated.

By the beginning of the great storm scene in Act III, Lear has more than regained whatever moral ground he had lost at the beginning of his rash and cruel dismissal of Cordelia and Kent. The depth of his love for Cordelia has not yet shown itself full force, but he plainly regrets his injustice to her. We are impressed, moreover, by Kent’s returning in disguise to serve his master, and all the more because of Kent’s independence of mind: it is a deed that speaks as well of his master as of himself. We begin to cringe at the fool’s almost merciless sarcasm at his master’s expense, and cannot but wonder how Lear can tolerate it and preserve his attachment to the fool throughout. Of course we sympathize most strongly with Lear’s suffering at the hands of his elder daughters and begin to appreciate the grandeur, as well as the confusion, of his soul. Thinking back, we realize that his explosion at Cordelia was not simply the result of egotism or even irascibility. It was caused by great love combined with sudden frustration at seeing his elaborate scheme—itsself animated by preference for her—destroyed by her unanticipated obstinacy.

By the end of Act II, then, we are prepared to concede, from watching Lear in action, what the situation in Britain originally implied. Far from being a man of selfish vanity, feeble intelligence and uncontrollable anger, Lear is cast in the heroic mould. He is usually not impulsive, not even given to anger, and certainly not vain. Until then he has combined wisdom with power, and that is why he has no enemies at home, is so well loved and respected by all those who count, and enjoys such standing abroad. His misfortune stems as much from the artificial complication of his scheme and his misunderstanding of his daughters as it does from his inordinate anger at Cordelia. “He always lov’d our sister most,” is all that Goneril and Regan can hold against him, but they do not complain of abuse or neglect. They concealed their vices so long as their father had gifts to give and power to awe; Cordelia, whose virtue he had recognized and loved, had perhaps not yet had occasion to show the contempt she had for her sisters and her inclination to push virtue itself to an imprudent extreme.

3. “REASON IN MADNESS”: THE STORM SCENE OF ACT III

Let us now follow Lear’s words in the storm at night, as he thinks about his daughters’ injustice and his own suffering. First he urges the wind, rain, lightning (“thought-executing fires”—i.e., lightning that executes the thought of

Zeus) and thunder to put an end to “ingrateful man.” Unlike his children, these elements owe nothing to him and so can subject him to what they will without doing injustice. Yet they seem also to be in alliance with his daughters against him, despite his age and weakness, and are therefore unjust, since the daughters, after all, are safe inside Gloucester’s castle while he is made to feel the full brunt of the storm outside.

Lear calls upon himself to be patient, without complaining, and then finds another way of justifying the gods: they must be using this dreadful storm to terrorize undetected criminals and make them beg for mercy. But in that case Lear himself need not fear: “I am a man more sinn’d against than sinning.” At this point he turns sympathetically to the fool—“my boy”—and worries about *his* feeling cold, showing this innate concern for others, just as Kent tries to get him to some shelter in a hovel, showing the same concern.

On approaching the hovel, Lear still hesitates to enter, claiming that the “tempest in my mind” over his daughters’ ingratitude keeps him from feeling the tempest of the storm battering his body. “Filial ingratitude! Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand for lifting food to’t?” He is struck by what an inversion of nature is to be found in such ingratitude, but he will “punish home,” suggesting that their punishment lies in his own hands and not in those of the gods. Meanwhile, urged by Kent to enter the hovel, Lear makes sure the fool enters first and then utters a prayer, as he calls it, for the houseless and unfed poor “that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm.” He himself, he confesses, had not thought enough of the sufferings of the poor. He goes so far as to command those in “pomp”—the wealthy and powerful—to expose themselves to what poor wretches feel and bestow their surplus on them in order to “show the Heavens more just.” With this reflection, Lear has taken his mind off himself and ceased thinking of the storm as a divine means of detecting or punishing criminals and sinners. Storms cannot be conceived as moral instruments, since their victims are the innocent even more than the guilty. Those mainly hurts are the poor, best helped not by prayer to the gods but by pleas to the wealthy, who in helping the poor “show the heavens more just.”

At this point the almost naked Edgar, disguised as Tom o’ Bedlam, is discovered in the hovel. Raving like a devout man, he speaks as if the world is ruled not by a good god or gods but by the “foul fiend,” and even gives his own counterpart of the Ten Commandments. He tells Lear he has led a life of sinful pleasure, but Lear seems not to hear and to be considering only Tom’s uncovered body. At first he thought Tom’s penury must have been caused by the ingratitude of unkind daughters, like his own misery: “Could thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give ‘em all?” Perhaps it was even a “judicious punishment” (without saying by whom) for having begotten such “pelican” daughters. But now Lear is struck by the contrast between naked Tom and the “three of us” (Lear, Kent, and fool) who are clothed and therefore “sophisticated.” “Thou,” Lear says to Tom, “are the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no

more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art”—whereupon he starts to strip off his own clothing (these “lendings”), obviously to make himself like Tom.

Let us try to reconstruct the unspoken movement of Lear’s thought here. Why am I suffering the ingratitude and injustice of my daughters? The storm is not an instrument of the gods for punishing the wicked. In fact, the cause of human wickedness is in men themselves, for they have departed from nature. Man is essentially, or by nature, a simple animal without clothing, possessions or power—unsophisticated—and hence without the possibility of having unkind daughters. The source of human unhappiness and evil is what man adds to his nature, complicating and corrupting it, and, of these inventions and conventions, clothing is the perfect symbol. Stripping himself of his clothing—for now Edgar’s being close to nakedness is a sign not of poverty but of natural purity—is Lear’s way of regaining nature and undoing the evil man himself has caused.

So after Edgar gabbles about assorted evils caused by the foul fiend, about the awful things he eats and about the prince of darkness—thus presenting a view of the world as dominated by evil rather than good powers—Lear responds to Kent’s “How fares your Grace?” with “What’s he?”—i.e., by dismissing “your Grace” as a merely conventional title that has no place among natural things. And when Gloucester, acting against Lear’s daughters’ commands, seeks to bring his king out of this “tyrannous night” to a place where food and shelter are ready, Lear speaks the most amazing lines in the play: “First let me talk with this philosopher. What is the cause of thunder?”

It is to Tom that Lear turns when he speaks these lines, for he has mistaken him for a philosopher. Why? And what does his question signify? Again we must seek the unspoken train of thought. Tom is natural man—man prior to the influence of inventions, conventions and traditions. Philosophy is the exercise of human reason, challenging all accepted beliefs as such and seeking knowledge of nature—of the nature of all things, and the causes of them all. What is more plausible than to believe that this natural man would be in touch with nature or have a natural understanding of nature? For it is nature that Lear himself has discovered in his question, since simply asking the cause of thunder is to doubt what he and his society have always believed—that Jupiter is the cause of thunder, that both lightning and thunder are the “thought-executing” effects of a god, or that beings mentally akin to human beings are the directing causes of all things. It is to attribute the cause of thunder to forces inherent in or natural to the material world. Thus, when a few moments later Lear says to Tom, “Let me ask you one word in private,” we can guess what that word must be, and why the question must be private. In all likelihood, Lear will ask whether the gods exist or, better, just what the fundamental cause of things really is. It is a question that cannot be asked openly or publicly if religion is essential to ordinary human life. And to show that introducing the idea of

philosophy at this point was hardly accidental, Shakespeare has Lear invoke its Greek origins by his references to Tom as “this learned Theban” and “good Athenian,” and identifying him twice more as a philosopher.

If one had to choose a single place in Shakespeare’s plays that proves he wrote more for the study than the stage, for serious private reflection than theater viewing, this is it. Here we find no dramatic interest whatsoever. Nothing happens, no action, passion or perception: the plot stands absolutely still. For this reason, the critics (apart from Harry Jaffa, the first to draw attention to this point) have produced practically no commentary on the lines, which simply baffle them. But if *King Lear* is a play about Lear’s mind and soul, as everyone has to admit, a failure to note the importance of these lines, and what has been happening inside Lear to cause them, is to miss and misunderstand the heart of the play. By making Lear grow increasingly rational as he grows increasingly mad, Shakespeare has him reenact the coming into existence of philosophy in sixth-century Greece.

Earlier in the play Shakespeare had even pointed us back toward the earliest philosophy of nature by twice citing playfully the fundamental maxim of these pre-Socratic philosophers, as we call them. When Cordelia first tells Lear that she will say nothing to express her love for him, he replies: “Nothing will come of nothing,” meaning, in the context, that she will receive no dowry if she speaks no words. Later in Act I, when the fool asks Lear whether any use can be made of nothing, he replies: “Why, no, boy; nothing can be made of nothing.” If the Harvard Concordance is right, this principle is mentioned in no other play, so Shakespeare must have appreciated its unique importance to the rational search for the natural causes of things which was and is philosophy. As Empedocles put it at about 450 B.C.:

From what in no wise exists, it is impossible for anything to come into being;
and for Being to perish completely is incapable of fulfillment and unthinkable . . .

This basic idea—that something must come from something and not from nothing, and cannot in turn become nothing—has often been regarded, quite properly, as the premise of all natural investigation, whether we call it philosophy or science. Rational inquiry into the cause of thunder can only proceed after the idea of its originating with Zeus has been discarded. In the play, natural philosophy as an undertaking seems already to have been known in Britain, just as the word “nature” was known and had even become part of common parlance there. Gloucester actually refers to and rejects the “wisdom of nature” (meaning this very natural philosophy) that can “reason it thus and thus” about solar and lunar eclipses—a wisdom, in short, that refuses to believe them to be the omens of imminent human disorders that (as he thinks) they really are. Privately, Edmund makes fun of his father’s superstitious belief that the heavenly bodies determine our character and fate, but in front of Edgar he acts as if their father’s belief is also his own, drawing from Edgar the criticism implied in the

question, “How long have you been a sectary astronomical?” (we would say “astrological”).

So, while Lear was probably expressing the generally accepted religious view when he spoke of the “operation of the orbs from whom we exist and cease to be,” it does not seem to have been customary at the time to extend this view, as Gloucester does, into an overall deterministic astrology. The gods were expected to influence and intervene into human affairs, but it did not necessarily follow that their role as heavenly bodies or orbs determined the whole course of every life. And it is Gloucester’s credulously taking recent eclipses as omens of disorder and divisions in human life that makes him susceptible to Edmund’s lies about his brother’s hostility to him. Gloucester remains pious and credulous throughout, but Lear leaves his piety far behind.

Having entered the farmhouse provided by Gloucester, Lear is still preoccupied with his bad daughters: “To have a thousand with red burning spits come hissing in upon ‘em. . . .” He is thinking of how he might bring about their suitable punishment, but he will now rely on armed men rather than on the gods, which seem to be the only recourse left to him. Then something must tell him that it would be unjust to punish his daughters without a trial, and his next words are: “It shall be done; I will arraign them straight.” So, guided by what looks like an inherent or natural sense of justice, but relying on the conventional device men have invented to administer justice, Lear appoints a bank of judges consisting of Tom, the fool and Kent. He arraigns Goneril first, charging her with kicking the poor king, her father—an apt physical metaphor for her mistreatment of him and very similar to an action Aristophanes attributes to the influence of Socrates in *The Clouds*. But Lear imagines that Regan escapes, due to corruption in the court—i.e., to a weakness in human institutions for enforcing justice, and after this comes his pathetic reflection, “The little dogs and all, Tray, Blanch and Sweetheart—see, they bark at me.” Not only do his daughters, failing to recognize him as their father and king, treat him with such cruelty, but even his own little dogs (he imagines) fail to recognize him as their old beloved master and bark at him, baring their fangs as they would at a stranger.

Lear’s final remark in the farmhouse returns to the theme of natural philosophy: “Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” This presumes that Regan’s hardness of heart has a physical cause not endemic to civilized life itself, as his pondering of the appearance of Edgar (as Tom) had led him to conclude before, but peculiar to her own body. Thus, in place of explanations given in moral or religious terms, Lear looks for a natural cause in the most physical sense. He seems to have replaced the notion of mind and soul, divine or human, with that of matter, dismissing the idea of a divine superintendence of the world for the sake of justice. On the other hand, he still seems to harbor the belief that “these hard hearts” are an exception to the general rule of nature, which favors softer hearts or justice.

Before proceeding further, we should comment on the connection between Lear's mental wanderings and the physical circumstances surrounding him. A great storm is taking place in nature, and amid this storm Lear is losing his mind: two similar occurrences, both showing a departure from the harmony of nature. Lear tries desperately not to go mad. He has always been in control of himself, patient in the face of sorrow and suffering. But the majesty of his character, combined with the magnitude of his mistreatment by his daughters (and perhaps with his own awareness of having mistreated Cordelia) derange his mind. The chaos of this storm of unparalleled proportions matches the chaos of his mind, or so it seems, and together they absorb us so completely as to make us forget that the normal human condition is one of sanity and the normal condition of nature one of good, or at least nonstormy, weather. The harmony of nature—this goodness of nature—seems difficult to upset and plunge into a great storm, and the human mind even more difficult to render irrational, its proper nature being to remain in control of itself. In this respect, philosophy, by its attainment of truth, may be said to bring the mind into its fullest and most stable possession of itself and thereby to provide its natural perfection or greatest health. It is, intrinsically, the very hallmark of sanity, not madness.

4. "REASON IN MADNESS" AT DOVER: ACT IV

As Lear is about to fall asleep in the farmhouse, Gloucester comes urging him to flee for his life and providing him with a litter to take him to Dover, where Cordelia's army has landed. "Oppressed nature sleeps, says Kent. "This rest might yet have balmed thy broken sinews. . . ." But Lear is permitted no rest, and, subjected to the further motion of flight, not only remains mad but extends his reason-in-madness when we see him at Dover. The first report of his presence there comes from Cordelia. Having evidently escaped from Kent and his litter-bearers, Lear has fashioned himself a crown of weeds to show he is a king by nature and not merely by convention, for unlike flowers or grains, weeds grow spontaneously without cultivation by man.

The scene in the storm outside Gloucester's castle had ended with Lear's giving up on the gods, turning to original nature as his principle, realizing that his wicked daughters must be brought before the bar of human justice to receive their punishment, and then wondering whether there are physical causes of evil itself. At Dover, conceiving of himself as a natural and not merely conventional king, Lear begins by saying: "No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself," adding "Nature's above art in that respect." What he means is something like this: wearing an ordinary crown makes a merely conventional king guilty of counterfeiting ("coining"), since he is counterfeiting being a king, but he, Lear, is a natural king, a real king, and hence superior

to any artificial or conventional king whatsoever. Nature *is* above art in that respect!

His next series of disconnected remarks form a pattern by their reference to activities he associates with kingship, and, except for one, pertain to the practices, attitudes and skills of war. They take it for granted—so obvious must it have seemed to Lear—that the defense of society against attack is the first requirement of political life. This priority of the military also accounts for his symbolic attachment to his knights, his continuing to hunt, even at the age of eighty, and his proud claim toward the end of the play that were he younger he would have done more than kill Cordelia's executioner: "With his good biting falchion" he would have made him skip. The only break in the military pattern of these remarks comes with the mystifying "Look, look, a mouse! Peace, peace, this piece of toasted cheese will do't." Is this meant to show Lear's gentler side—perhaps reliving a child's surprise at seeing a mouse and wanting to lure it out—or are his quieting call of "Peace, peace" and the toasted cheese just clever ways of catching a mouse? We do not know, but this is the only context in which he mentions peace.

Next Lear dwells on the flattery to which a king is exposed, even from his youth. He now knows, he says, that he could not really have been wise when he was young (as they told him), that he has no control over nature's great events, and that he himself is not "ague-proof." He recognizes his limits, and of course is a better man—and king—for doing so. In this way Lear seems to be continuing his reflection on kingship: a true and wise king—a natural king—would have to be aware of his own limitations and realize he is not a god.

A moment later, when the blind Gloucester recognizes Lear's voice and asks, "Is't not the King?", Lear replies "Ay, every inch a king!" and goes on to picture the king in his domestic role as the fearful dispenser of criminal justice—of punishment and pardon. But the picture he now presents constitutes a radical break from the ordinary. He will not, he proclaims, have adulterers killed, since lechery and copulation are the rule of nature for all animals, and for women even more than men, despite their outward modesty: "Let copulation thrive." Let appetite be followed and pleasure sought!

Nor are some men truly just and others unjust: no, in the desire to commit crime there is no difference between the justice and the thief, the beadle and the whore. Moreover, the system of justice is always unjust in its application, allowing the wealthy and powerful to elude its net while wreaking full vengeance on the poor. This is why Lear can find in a beggar running away from a farmer's barking dog the "great image of authority": authority has its foundation in fear alone, not justice. And it is also why this natural king, crowned with weeds of his own picking, can draw the grand and most radical conclusion that "None does offend, none, I say, none; I'll able 'em." What better place to have Edgar characterize Lear's utterances as "matter and impertinency mix'd; Reason in madness"?

About this high point of Lear's thinking the commentators have nothing to say. His claim is stated in the most general form—i.e., philosophically: there are no offenses, no crimes, in the strict sense, no crimes by nature, and he himself will so testify in defense of those accused of crimes. But if all crimes are merely conventional, the laws against them must be devised not out of a devotion to justice but—as we may conjecture—because each individual has a selfish interest in protecting himself from crimes, even though his own natural inclination is to commit them if he could do so with impunity. The general teaching expressed here by Lear in this odd manner is so old that it is traceable to some of the earliest natural philosophers—the ones who discovered nature and relied on “*ex nihilo*” as their first principle.

Shakespeare has already alerted us to that background in the play. He may have known of an expression by Heracleitus to the effect that “To God, all things are beautiful, good and just; but men have assumed some things to be unjust, others just.” Heracleitus means that the distinction between just and unjust acts is not in the nature of things but assumed or devised by men: justice is conventional. Almost immediately after this point in the text, Lear imagines a chimerical stratagem to steal upon his sons-in-law and “kill, kill, kill, etc.,” presumably killing all in sight, including his daughters. But the stratagem raises two questions: Do his sons-in-law deserve to be killed, even if his daughters do? What about innocent members of their households? Would that be just? Is it not more than a conventional rule to refrain from punishing the innocent? And—so basic to the play—is not Lear's sense, and ours, of the guilt of his daughters an indication that some justice is indeed by nature and not simply conventional? Lear's theoretical understanding, in the manner of Heracleitus, seems curiously at odds with the facts of the play.

It was also Heracleitus who declared that all things are in flux, but Shakespeare distinguishes between harmony and chaos, rest and motion in the natural constitution of things. With rest, Lear's mind can recover its normalcy—while of course losing the unnatural ability with which Shakespeare endows it to philosophize in madness. But nature, and the nature of each thing, consists in the control of motion by rest, of matter by form, and, in men, of matter by mind. The world is a cosmos more than a chaos, and so are the natural beings in it. As Lear sleeps still, Cordelia calls upon the gods to cure this “great breach in his abused nature! The untun'd and jarring senses, O, wind up of this child-changed father!” More conventional than her disturbed father, Cordelia relies on the gods to restore the harmony inherent in our nature by which we are rendered normal and sane. Nevertheless, quite appropriately, it is to the harmonies of music that Lear awakens, restored, from his rest.

Let us see the consequences of mad Lear's having adopted the conventionalist view of justice. According to that view, all men have the same, essentially selfish desires bereft of any concern for others, and unrestrained by any natural sense or understanding of justice. But in that case there are no natural crimes,

no natural punishments, no nature-based systems of justice, and—no natural kings! It makes no sense to think of a king as one devoted to the public good and acting justly in the public's behalf—i.e., as a king by nature—if there is no natural basis for his activity. What Lear has done, through his thinking, is to undermine entirely his thought about himself and his daughters. And what Shakespeare has done is to confront us with these philosophical alternatives. If justice is natural, there are natural crimes, natural punishments and rewards, perhaps natural kings as well, and the fundamental injustices and virtuous actions of the play are themselves rooted in nature. If justice is conventional, the distinction between the selfish and the unselfish will prove unfounded, and all apparent justice and virtue will dissolve into selfishness of one sort or another. In that case, the internal foundation of the play itself, and Lear's entire being as a man in pursuit of justice, will collapse and leave no mark. The good and bad characters will fade into each other, and there will be nothing glorious left. But is this what happens in the play?

5. THE LAST ACT

In no other play of Shakespeare's are the good and bad characters so starkly distinguished as in this one. Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Edmund (until the very end) and Oswald are rotten to the core. Lear, Edgar, Cordelia, Kent, Gloucester, Albany are essentially good, whatever their faults. Now it is obvious that Shakespeare does not stand neutrally between these two groups. He makes the good as lovable and admirable as he can, the bad as detestable as he can. But on what is this distinction based? Are the good more natural than the bad? Are the bad to be understood as a falling away from or corruption of the good, or the good as a falling away from or corruption of the bad?

For one thing, it is plain that the principle of selfishness, as it operates in the play, not only wantonly destroys others but destroys oneself. Edmund is directly responsible for his father's blinding, for the death of Cordelia, for his father's mortal pursuit of Edgar, for the mutual jealousy of Goneril and Regan, and, finally, for Goneril's poisoning of Regan. Selfishness is inconsistent with the love and loyalty required in social relationships. But this is far from all. Provoked by Shakespeare's presentations, we in the audience love the good characters and despise the bad: there is something in us to which the poet appeals, and which had already to be there in order for him to make such an appeal in the first place. We are angry with Lear for dismissing Cordelia and Kent, while remaining concerned about his future. We too feel how sharper than a serpent's tooth is filial ingratitude. We suffer with Gloucester when Cornwall sets his foot on his face. We love Kent for his selfless service to a worthy master. We ache with Lear as he painfully loses his mind, and delight

in the touches of love and sympathy he expresses in the midst of his misery. And as his plight worsens, and his daughters grow more repulsive, we wonder desperately with him what support justice has in the world.

We have these reactions because there are natural experiences in life which we particularly identify with being human. Love, friendship, the recognition of human greatness, pity, reflection occur, to some degree, in us all. Despite the constant tuggings of self-interest, good people do not surrender the distinctive content of these experiences. We admire the loyalty of Edgar, Kent and Gloucester, realizing not only that their loyalty is well directed but that it costs them much to be loyal. We recognize a fault in Gloucester when we learn of his having kept Edmund abroad and wince at his credulousness in swallowing Edmund's traducing of Edgar. We see that this weakness in his character should not be there. This judgment derives from the fact that our relationships place requirements on us from within themselves. It is a very warped human being who has no friend or does not love someone and who fails to realize that sacrifice will at times be required of him, even great sacrifice. Are we to abandon our friends and loved ones at an instant? Will it be easy to find friends and loved ones again? Will we think well of ourselves? Would we ourselves wish to be so abandoned? Something similar can be said of ingrates and especially of ungrateful children, who receive benefits without wanting to thank their benefactors and help them in turn, but instead give slights, contempts or harms in return for affection and assistance.

It is to these elementary relationships of parent and child, brother and brother, sister and sister, master and servant, ruler and ruled, husband and wife that Shakespeare turns in this play for his material. While exhibiting some of the complications of ordinary morality, he is anxious to demonstrate its dignity, ground and necessity. By showing both injustice and justice at work, he traces them to their source, and reveals their basis in human nature. In consequence, far from demonstrating the meaninglessness of the universe, and its resistance to justice, the play shows why justice must have a lasting and secure place in the minds and hearts of men. Founded in the social nature of man, justice is conventional only in its forms, while its substance remains fixed and universal. This principle is perfectly consistent with acknowledging that the actual accomplishment of justice is difficult and elusive. Injustice receives its power from the selfishness that resists and thwarts the call of our better natures. Keeping it down depends on the wisdom, justice and power of rulers, who preserve an order in which justice thrives and injustice weakens. When the wicked gain the upper hand, not the principle of justice but its enforcement suffers, with untold consequences for the just and the innocent.

In the last scene of Act IV, when Lear awakens to the strains of music, he cannot believe he is before Cordelia herself, and takes her to be a soul in bliss while he is bound, suffering, to a wheel of fire—for treating her so badly. He wants to kneel to her, but she wants him to bless her. He will take poison if she

desires him to. He thinks she does not love him, and admits she has some cause to do him wrong, unlike her sisters. To which, in what may sound like a contradiction of the root principle of natural philosophy, she says, “No cause, no cause”—meaning only that she has no cause to harm him. Lear asks her to forget and forgive. Obviously, he has forgotten and forgiven the obstinacy on her part that had occasioned his rage, and she, having forgiven his rage, only wishes for his blessing again. Forgiving the errors of otherwise good people seems, in fact, to be a general trait of good people in the play. Cordelia and Kent both forgive Lear; Lear forgives Cordelia; Edgar forgives Gloucester. This forbearance cements the good people to each other, and either prevents, softens or terminates the harms they sometimes do inadvertently, influenced by passion or error.

In the last Act both Lear and Cordelia are captured by the native forces of Edmund, Albany and Regan. Lear wants only to live in prison with Cordelia, blessing and kneeling to each other, praying, singing, discussing those at court and trying to penetrate their motives, “as if we were God’s spies.” Even in seclusion Lear cannot help thinking about politics, though now the rise and fall of “great ones” is of little direct importance to him, their fall being as apparent as their rise. His private relation to Cordelia, which he seems to regard as never-ending, has replaced political life in his mind. On being ordered by Edmund to prison, however, Lear’s old fighting spirit reappears. As they are led off he tells Cordelia to wipe her eyes: “We’ll see ’em starv’d first,” before they shall make us weep.

In the interim, with the help of a letter from Edgar, Albany discovers Edmund’s and Goneril’s deceit, and Edmund is mortally wounded when challenged to personal combat by Edgar, whose identity is then unknown to him. In revealing himself to Edmund, Edgar tries to vindicate the justness of the gods, who “of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us. The dark and vicious place where thee he (Gloucester) got cost him his eyes.” But we may doubt whether this was Edgar’s serious view, since he had tricked his father into believing, falsely, that it was the gods rather than himself who saved him from death at the cliffs of Dover. We are entitled, however, to infer from this combat that, without Edgar’s success defeating Edmund, the whole story might have had a very different conclusion. Moral superiority is not enough: the good must also be physically more powerful than the wicked. Edgar goes on to tell Albany and Edmund of his and Gloucester’s sufferings, and of how Gloucester died after Edgar reveals his true identity, whereupon his heart, “Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, burst smilingly.” Edgar also tells of learning from Kent “the piteous tale of Lear and him,” and seeing the “strings of life” begin to crack in Kent just as he leaves to fight his brother.

A peculiarity of this part of the play concerns Edmund, who, dying but not dead, is unexpectedly moved by his brother’s account of his own and Gloucester’s travails to promise that some good will come out of it, but unaccountably

waits to act until urged by Albany a considerable number of lines later. Only then, on declaring: "Some good I mean to do, despite of mine own nature," does he tell of his order to kill both Lear and Cordelia, the latter by hanging. "The gods defend her," exclaims Albany, but too late, as Lear enters with the limp Cordelia in his arms, calling upon them all to howl against the heavens to protest her death. "Is this the promised end?" Kent asks, as if there had been a divine promise of a good end to life here on earth. Albany simply exclaims, "Fall, and cease!"—wishing, it seems, that the heavens would fall, and all things come to an end. Kent tries to identify himself one last time to Lear, but his master can think only of Cordelia and himself. For he had just killed the man who was hanging Cordelia, and recalls the much greater military prowess of his earlier days. Not even Kent's news of his other two daughters' death disturbs Lear's concentration on Cordelia. He cannot understand why his "poor fool" should be dead while dogs, horses and rats live on. She'll come no more—never, never, never, never, never. "Pray you, undo this button"—Lear probably means on his own tunic, feeling pressure in his chest—and thanks a man (perhaps imaginary) for doing it. For a moment, he thinks there's some sign of life on Cordelia's lips, only to faint himself and finally expire. Edgar calls upon Lear to look up, but Kent wants him to leave "the rack of this tough world," and prepares to follow his master.

There is nothing so tragic in Shakespeare's tragedies as this scene. To no other hero are we so attached as to Lear—not to Hamlet, or Othello, not to Cleopatra and Antony, not even to Romeo and Juliet, to name only those who exercise the greatest attraction for us. In no other case is the protagonist so admired and beloved by the end of the play, his original fault forgotten, his sufferings so prolonged, and with so remarkable a final display of his virtue. Other good people in the play die too—Gloucester, Cordelia and Kent soon enough—so that the ending has the net effect of producing not only the single going down of an excellent man but a collective going down of the good, thus demonstrating the truth of Kent's calling this the tough world on the rack of which Lear must be spared further suffering. Such is the dramatic impact of the play, but is it its deeper philosophical message?

The picture at the end is bleak indeed, but not without promise, for the succession to the throne has been determined, and Edgar—wise and good Edgar—will be the next king, and of a reunited Britain. As the sole surviving son-in-law on whom Lear had bestowed his power, Albany, in the final moments of the play, returns this power to the shattered Lear for as long as he will live. But on Lear's death seconds later, Albany—without explanation—removes himself from consideration by directing Kent and Edgar together to "rule in this realm." Was it in recognition of their greater service and suffering or of the blemishes he himself bore from his connection with Goneril? In any case, Kent expresses his intention to follow his master into death soon, and Edgar is left to accept the "weight of this sad time" and have the last word, remember-

ing the sufferings of the old: “. . . we that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long.”

While it is true that Lear’s own dying picture of the world is as bleak as can be, is it Shakespeare’s too? Or is it meant to provoke in us a reaction in terms of the play as a whole that goes beyond what the dying Lear can feel and see? Lear accuses the world of injustice: his wonderful daughter, Cordelia, is dead, gone forever, never to return. He wants heaven’s vault to be cracked by the howls of men—though without specifically mentioning the gods—and even calls everyone else murderers and traitors for not helping to save her. Why should dogs, horses and rats have life but not Cordelia? But is it against her being murdered or against her mortality itself that Lear rails? He obviously feels there is no moral superintendence of the world, whether divine or natural. Life seems irrational: it doesn’t care about men as compared to rats, or good men as compared to bad. But Lear’s complaint goes too far, for if the world deserves blame for not preserving the life of Cordelia, it must get credit for producing her in the first place. And if men must die while rats still live, it is nevertheless true that the statement itself assumes, and testifies to, the lasting superiority of men to rats. Even so, would the world be improved if all horses and rats were to die before or along with Cordelia? And while every being is unique, will there not be other Cordelias, just as the case of Edgar shows there can be other Lears?

Moreover, the very sense of injustice by which Lear and we are gripped at the end testifies to the goodness with which we are endowed by nature, for it is nature itself that cries out at those features of the world allowing injustice, or failing to sustain the good. Praise arises out of our very condemnation, for the world that kills a Cordelia unjustly has given us the means of recognizing this injustice, and sometimes of averting or punishing injustice, and must therefore be weighed accordingly. As for our mortality, and hence the perishability of all good things and bad, this sad fact is a condition of nature that we must learn to accept, for without it nature is impossible, and therewith all the good things nature produces, as well as its sad and often anguishing limitations. What makes it possible for Edgar to face the prospect of ruling Britain if not a reflection such as this? As he had said earlier to his life-weary father: “Men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither; ripeness is all” (V.2).

Edgar’s final remarks in the play also seem designed to recognize the prejudice in favor of the old that wisdom must encourage, not because the old are necessarily wiser, but because that prejudice keeps us from experimenting—even in the name of nature—with elements of society that cannot be directly drawn from nature. For Lear had wrought an innovation in the name of natural justice in his original succession plan, hoping to favor Cordelia, even at the cost of dividing the kingdom, for the sake of merit. And what else does the play demonstrate but that there is such a natural principle, that Cordelia is far worthier of rule than her sisters, that Lear—in the completion of his powers—

is indeed a natural king, just as Kent is the natural servant of such a king? Even so, the principle of merit, more fundamental than that of age or any other consideration, must—for the sake of justice itself—bow to other more conventional principles that guarantee continuity and stability.

The play calls forth our sense of natural justice particularly by the fate of innocent and good people in it, or of people whose faults are in no way commensurate with the sufferings they are forced to endure. It is fitting and just that Goneril and Regan suffer for the evil they do their father, and Edmund as well. Cornwall should suffer for having blinded Gloucester. But Gloucester's loyalty to Lear did not deserve such treatment; Edgar did not deserve to be traduced by his brother and hunted by his father; Cordelia did not deserve to die by hanging. The play does not try to explain what makes particular people wicked, except perhaps in the case of Edmund and his bastardy. Goneril and Regan seem not to have been abused or badly neglected—they themselves have no complaints on this score—and of Cornwall's background we learn nothing. From these examples—all the more frightening when they have no apparent explanation—wickedness, it seems, can show itself anywhere. The only lesson the good can draw is that they must be constantly on the alert against it and show an ability to outsmart or overpower it whenever it comes to light.

The world is certainly not the kind of place where justice triumphs automatically or independently of man's own effort to sustain it. Neither is it the domain of just gods or—as Tom would have it—of the foul fiend: while engendering virtue and justice, nature cannot help also engendering vice and injustice and an unending struggle between them. Nevertheless, nature generally is conceived in the play as a kind of harmony or rest that encourages the best elements in man in the midst of disharmonies, motions and conflicts it can never completely contain. Its essential character is shown more by good weather than by storm, by normalcy and rationality than madness, by health than by illness, by self-control than by anger or profligacy, by fellowship than by selfishness, by philosophical comprehension than by ignorance, by justice than by war. It is closer to the understanding of nature in Plato and Aristotle than in Heracleitus or the materialists.

We do not know why Edmund suddenly decides to do a good deed in his dying moments, and it is even harder to understand why Shakespeare has him wait so many lines before acting to save the lives of Lear and Cordelia from the death he has already ordered for them. Jaffa believes this has a political explanation—that Edmund's good deed consisted precisely in waiting and letting Cordelia be killed as the head of a French force invading Britain, thus preventing all similar foreign designs in the future. But does this correspond to our sense of retributive justice? And why have Edmund want to do any good at all? Why not simply have Cordelia killed without introducing this complication?

If Shakespeare means to use Edmund to show the redemptive powers of goodness, even in the wicked, he seems not to have prepared the way suffi-

ciently. Nothing in Edmund's past (except, perhaps, his adherence to the standard of power) would indicate this possible improvement on his part, any more than on Goneril's or Regan's. As for his delay, he has already heard of Edgar's devotion to Gloucester and now hears Edgar continue about Kent and Lear, immediately after which we learn the fate of Cordelia's sisters. Plainly, Edmund understands that his father and Lear had both been beloved and envies them for it, thus being led himself to exclaim, on seeing the bodies of the sisters: "Yet Edmund was belov'd! The one the other poison'd for my sake, and after slew herself." Quite a tribute to love from one who before had abused it as he wished!

Less obscure than Edmund's reason for delaying is the advantage Shakespeare gains in the play by it. Once we realize all that is at stake in the delay, we wonder nervously whether the forces of good will be in time to prevent the death of Cordelia and Lear. The partly fatal effect of the delay forces us to admit the role of accident in human affairs, for to frustrate an evil already ordered, a good desire must be activated in time, otherwise it is almost useless. Minutes, seconds can make all the difference between success and failure, and, as they go ticking by, human lives hang in the balance. Neither god nor nature can intervene to save these good people: it all depends on human action and hence to some extent on chance, as does the efficacy of justice generally. This at least accounts for both the reader's dramatic experience in these passages and the meaning they take on within Shakespeare's reflections on justice as a whole.

Standing back, now, we can say that this play about justice tries in fact to demonstrate that it has a natural base in our social nature, and that, even when we perceive the delicate ways in which self-interest tends to intermingle with our love of others, this attachment is still real. It is a concern for others that lies at the bottom of justice—a wish to see them properly treated, and an abhorrence at their being mistreated. This concern normally and naturally shows itself in both paternal and filial love, friendship, admiration and sexual love, and broadens out from them to a general concern for all men of the kind the best men, like Shakespeare himself, have always felt. The good feel a special kinship for each other, and it is in the spirit of this fellowship of the good that Albany finally addresses Kent and Edgar as "friends of my soul" and relinquishes to them his own claim to the throne.

It can therefore be said that Shakespeare emphatically disagrees with Lear's conclusions—and Kent's—at the end of the play. The examples of love he sets before us are far more impressive than the examples of wickedness, and even at the end, when all seems bleak, Lear's heroism, the devotion of Kent, Gloucester and Edgar, Albany's self-abnegation stand out more luminously than the acts of the wicked and help to counteract the sufferings of their victims. In short, we are only capable of discerning and judging wickedness because of our prior understanding and love of justice and the good. The wicked may triumph,

and the good perish, but the separate character of each is set in the nature of things. Injustice derives from an inability to love others, and this insufficiency of the social element in us constitutes a distortion or defect of our nature.

What is the connection between this social foundation of justice and the idea of natural kingship? Assuming that men are naturally inclined toward justice, are they also equipped with a natural power capable of bringing justice about? Just as the family must be subject to some parental authority, so groups of men, living in society, must obey some authority that will protect them militarily from external attackers and from their own criminals as well. They need a system of justice, wisely wrought and wisely guided at the helm. In the best case, this justice would be implemented by natural leaders of outstanding virtue and wisdom who love justice and can be entrusted with such responsibility. The idea of the natural king is an extension of the idea of natural justice. Shakespeare is under no illusions as to the difficulty of finding such a king. Lear begins by being a very good but hardly a perfect king. He does not understand his daughters. He is imprudently attracted by the claim of natural merit in choosing his successors. He flies into a rage at both Cordelia and Kent. Nevertheless, his love of virtue and his devotion to the common good are joined to a majesty of body and soul that stamps the presence of royal authority in him, winning the respect, admiration and loyal service of men like Kent and Gloucester. Under the impact of his daughters' ingratitude and the storm, he becomes juster and wiser still—more aware of the plight of the poor, the abuse to which systems of justice are prone, and the limitations of political life generally. In the final scene he seems to join together the perfections of king, father and man all at once: then he is *King Lear* in the fullest sense.

King Lear and *The Tempest* both borrow the theme of the wise and just king from Plato and Aristotle but deal with it from different points of view. Unlike Prospero, Lear is not a student of the liberal arts, not directly or naturally a philosopher, and he does not have an Ariel to obtain the effects he seeks to have on political life. Spiritedness is not something that comes naturally to Prospero, and his physical prowess is nothing like Lear's. Lear is a political man from the outset, forced to reflect and philosophize in his madness, whereas Prospero is a philosopher turned king by the necessity of having to return Miranda to society. The absolutely perfect king—even more unlikely than either Prospero or Lear taken separately—would unite the essential natures of the political and the philosophical man.

A word must be said, finally, about the role of philosophy in *King Lear*. In no play of Shakespeare is more explicit attention given to the origin and import of philosophy (remembering that the term is neither used about nor by Prospero in *The Tempest*), but in such a way as to conceal or minimize that very fact. Moreover, in no Shakespearean play is a course of philosophizing followed more relentlessly than in Lear's passage from belief in the justice of the gods to the conventionalism of the natural philosophers, yet almost invisibly. This must

tell us something about Shakespeare's understanding of philosophy and its relation to his poetry. Philosophy occupies for Shakespeare the kind of place that it occupies for Plato and Aristotle. It is the most important of all human activities, the source of our natural understanding of nature and right, the guide of life in all respects, and the basis for a poetry that teaches as well as entertains in the highest sense of the term. But, while undoubtedly the peak and greatest glory of human nature, it must remain hidden from public view because it can easily do harm and be harmed.

What could have led Shakespeare to this conclusion? Clearly, philosophy can do harm by undermining the necessary opinions of society that philosophy necessarily questions—which must be the reason why Lear takes Edgar (as Tom) aside to ask him a question Shakespeare conceals from us. Making philosophy public can also bring harm to the philosopher (and his writings), as it did to Socrates. But it can also lead to the institutionalization and hence the ossification and dogmatization of philosophy itself, and therewith to its political abuse—as it had during the Middle Ages. It must be for reasons such as these that Shakespeare, unlike Plato and Aristotle, conceals philosophy and disguises his own philosophizing so skillfully in all his plays, only rarely permitting a direct glimpse of it. How ironic but consistent, then, that he should conceal Lear's philosophizing within the ravings of a madman! The play shows the depth of Shakespeare's philosophical penetration into the problem of justice, and the way in which he resolved it in favor of natural right and against conventionalism. This teaching, in its philosophical form, is for the studious and reflective few, while the dramatic impact of the play on the stage allows the poet to influence the public at large in behalf of the good.