

KING LEAR AND IT



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The University observed the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's birth with the Shakespeare Quadri-Centennial Festival of Art held here in October. The following article was presented at the festival by Dr. Calvin G. Thayer, professor of English at the University, an authority on the Elizabethan period of literature and author of a recent book on Ben Jonson.

HOW MIGHT a receptive audience in the year 1606 have responded to an expert performance of *King Lear*; how might it have responded, that is, to Shakespeare's representation on the stage of matters relating directly to his age? In trying to answer this question, I am deliberately avoiding the philosophical and the metaphysical, except in so far as they appear as the basis for other arguments and other ideas. In short, I shall not talk about the play that we see, that we hear, that we read, about the play to which most of us are likely to respond so powerfully; but about the play that was seen and heard by a hypothetical single spectator at the Globe Theater. Who was that single spectator so morosely posited by the playwright?

Hamlet tells Polonius that the players are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time." That is a very

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specific statement indeed, and while one knows that Shakespeare's characters are not Shakespeare, everything said about acting and the theater in *Hamlet* seems to correspond so closely to Shakespeare's actual practice as a playwright that there is little doubt that Hamlet's views on the theater and on acting are also Shakespeare's views. The purpose of playing, Hamlet tells the players, "is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." This is also a remarkably specific statement of an immediately didactic and instructive conception of the theater. "Now this overdone," Hamlet continues, "or come tardily off, though it make the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure (judgment) of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others." The collected pennies of the unskillful helped Shakespeare make a rather good living, and writing something for everyone, he gave them very successful and much-appreciated entertainment. As we know, he produced shows that were both good and popular. He was a master entertainer, and he remains the master. But was the audience with which he was really concerned, the audience for whom he really wrote, for whom he prepared his most carefully considered poetry, a hypothetical audience of one, the skillful spectator whose judgment, in all allowance of the players (*his* players, one might add,

since he was a part owner in the theatrical company for which he acted and wrote) "must o'erweigh a whole theatre of others," the audience for whom the players are "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time?" We must remember these words of Hamlet when we read the statements of Professor Bentley and others (I mention Bentley because his book is the most recent) that we must look with skepticism on Shakespeare studies that indulge in super-refined analysis of metaphorical and symbolic language on the grounds that Shakespearean drama is for the theater, not the study, for the ear, not the eye. When Shakespeare wrote for the theater, he had a highly sophisticated, deeply perceptive audience in mind, and he knew that those who were neither sophisticated nor perceptive would nevertheless follow the play. When he wrote for the ear, he clearly expected that ear to be a very sensitive one. This is one reason, I think, why almost all modern critics of Shakespeare have little or nothing to say about the fact that Shakespeare's company was occasionally in trouble with the authorities over matters presented in Shakespeare's plays. The problem was not always that ignorant louts found things in the plays that, in truth, were not there, but that highly intelligent spectators sometimes found things that *were* there. Let me give an example of the problem as it is revealed in the book of one of the most distinguished of modern scholars.

In 1942, Prof. Charles J. Sisson,

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By DR. C. G. THAYER

editor, scholar, critic, published an important article entitled "Shakespeare Quartos as Prompt Copies." The burden of Sisson's article was that, following the work of other scholars, he had found evidence that printed (i.e., published) texts were used as prompt-books by several acting companies of the age of Shakespeare—printed texts, that is, rather than the manuscripts and fair copies produced by scribes that we know were frequently in use. This discovery of Sisson's was, in my judgment, valuable, but not of fundamental importance. Of somewhat more significance was the evidence which led to Sisson's conclusions. In 1611, it appears, an acting company called Sir Richard Cholmeley's Players was called before the Star Chamber and accused of acting a seditious play called *St. Christopher* in the house of Sir John York in the Christmas season of 1609. Sir John and his wife Lady Julia were accused, along with the players, of sedition, since the play was said to be "of Catholic purport." In its defense, the company argued that it was in the habit of using printed quartos as prompt copies; that is to say, when it wished to act a particular play, it did what we might call the eminently reasonable thing: it went to a bookseller and bought copies of the play. A printed text was one that had passed the censors, and if it had passed the censors, clearly enough it could hardly be a seditious play—unless, of course, the censor had been careless. And if the censor had been careless, that could

hardly constitute grounds for prosecuting the acting company.

Now, this same company, in the same season, acted *Pericles* and *King Lear*, the former at least partly Shakespeare's work and the latter, of course, his entirely. It also happens that Cholmeley's players were, so far as I know, a unique acting company: they were Roman Catholic recusants, and they acted mainly in great Catholic houses in the north of England. To me it seems very significant that *King Lear* was acted by a recusant company, since such a company, acting in Roman Catholic houses, for Roman Catholic audiences, is likely to have performed plays of absorbing interest to Roman Catholics.

Why should *King Lear* have been of interest to a company like Sir Richard Cholmeley's Players? In 1603, Dr. Samuel Harsnett, chaplain to the Bishop of London, had published a book called *A Discovery of Egregious Popish Impostures*, dealing in brilliantly satirical and inordinately brutal terms with a series of exorcisms conducted by a Jesuit priest, William Weston, in 1585, with the aid of another priest, Robert Dibdale. The editor and critic Kenneth Muir has discovered no fewer than 67 passages (all of them very brief) in *King Lear* which were taken directly from Harsnett's book. Almost all of them involve black magic, devil worship and the names of friends, and occur in the speeches of Edgar during the time he is disguised as a madman.

The Jesuit Dibdale was executed as a traitor, the usual charge against Jesuits by Elizabeth's government. In Catholic circles he was regarded as a martyr. His role in the exorcisms, satirically conceived and burlesqued by Harsnett, corresponds to the role of Edgar in the play, tragically conceived by Shakespeare. It has recently been shown that he may have been a boyhood friend of William Shakespeare's in Stratford, in Warwickshire, a county described in official documents as having been a hotbed of Papist sedition, full of the "manifold enormities of the ecclesiastical state," to use one of the more delightful phrases in an official report. The Shakespeare and Hathaway families appear to have been Catholic, openly or in profound sympathy.

Now, for the purposes of the present discussion, let us try to recon-

struct the hypothetical one-man audience that Shakespeare had Hamlet adduce for the benefit of his players—he remains hypothetical but extremely possible. Let us assume that he is a young Catholic nobleman, reasonably intelligent, profoundly interested in the theatre, well-versed in the recent history of his own country. Let us assume, in short, that this hypothetical audience was someone like Shakespeare's supposed friend and patron of record, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. It perhaps overstates the case to say that he was intelligent, but in Shakespeare's day even intelligent men, swayed by religious passion, were capable of behaving unintelligently. A decade earlier, Shakespeare had dedicated "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece" to the Catholic earl. To posit a Southampton as the one-man audience is of course quite unnecessary to support the following points, but it is rather fun. What did *that* audience, what did the audiences who watched Cholmeley's Players, see and hear in Shakespeare's overwhelming tragedy?

I should repeat that when our special audience has made his assessment of the play, the unskillful ones in the theater will have made theirs; and while it will be different from his, it will have been deeply felt, perhaps meaningful, and quite possibly intelligent. In trying to determine what the judicious spectator will have seen from a particular point of view, we may also consider in passing what he might have seen from a less particular point of view. Not all the problems of the age of Shakespeare, including those represented in *King Lear*, were confined to particular groups.

At the outset, *any* audience will see a play in which an old king, deposed, heartbroken and insane, rages against order, kingship and authority ("a dog's obeyed in office"), and anyone looking for subversive material might have felt that he had discovered quite enough in some of Lear's mad speeches. But our hypothetical audience—let's call it X—might have seen more. X will see a play in which an old man, fourscore and upward, as he says, through incredible arrogance and pride, is guilty of insane folly that leads to his rejection and dispossession.

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An unskilled audience is capable of making a deeply felt, meaningful, intelligent assessment of the tragedy

sion by his two treacherous daughters, is driven through anguish into insanity, during the course of which he achieves a new wisdom, is reunited with his one faithful daughter whom he had earlier banished but dies heartbroken after she is murdered in prison. Our spectator will see a play in which another old man is also unable to determine the loyalty or treachery of his two sons, makes the wrong judgment, attempts to help the old king, is cruelly blinded as a result, is reunited with his faithful son and dies in an excess of joy. "His heart . . . burst smilingly." The story of Lear was familiar, having been told already in historical works, poems and a play. Our spectator, and almost everyone else in the theater, would have seen a representation of the dangers of a divided kingdom, a theme that had been dinned into the public ear from pulpit and stage for more than 40 years—a curious fact, by the way, when one recalls the once-popular notion that Elizabeth's realm was characterized by total harmony and unity. X saw a play in which Lear banishes his one true and virtuous daughter because he cannot understand what she means when she tells him she loves him according to her bond—no more, no less—while the other two, since they don't love him at all, are quite free to tell him that they love him more than all the world; a play in which Gloucester's

bastard son Edmund convinces him that his legitimate and loyal son Edgar is disloyal and plotting his father's death, with the result that Edgar must go into hiding, disguised as a madman, leaving Edmund free to betray his father to Lear's unfaithful daughter Regan and her husband the Duke of Cornwall; a play in which Lear's faithful daughter Cordelia, married without dowry to the King of France, returns to her father's rescue with a French army, is defeated and captured with her father and murdered at Edmund's orders. In short, X saw a very unpleasant play and of course a very great one, although its greatness does not reveal itself through a summary. But consider what he heard, packed around the bare bones of a plot that could mean almost anything.

At the outset of the play, a fundamental tenet of the Elizabethan world-view is violated with such insistence that it is doubtful that anyone could have missed it, and no modern critic has. Gloucester tells Kent that his legitimate son Edgar is no dearer in his account than is his bastard son Edmund; "his mother was fair, there was good sport at his making and the whoreson must be acknowledged"—all this in Edmund's presence. Lear hears the great bond of nature described by Cordelia, does not understand it, disowns her and divides his kingdom between the false daughters Goneril and Regan. In both cases the violation of domestic and political order constitutes the temporal correspondence to a violation of natural and cosmic order, a point widely and easily recognized by modern critics, by X, and even Y and Z. But unlike some modern critics, X I believe did not think that he was seeing a play about order, and order violated, *in vacuo*. He wasn't much concerned about philosophical patterns in Shakespearean tragedy, although he no doubt knew they were there; but he *was* concerned with the context in which they occurred. What was it, exactly, X must have asked, that Gloucester and Lear had actually banished? Edgar disguises himself as a madman and wanders about the countryside in the company of Lear and, later, of his father, the blinded Gloucester, not revealing his identity, leading Lear to reason in madness and

Gloucester to vision in blindness, and, most important, saving Gloucester from despair and damnation, leading him to understand, in his agony, that the ripeness is all, that we must endure our going hence even as our coming hither. And while Edgar is performing these essential ministrations, the ministry of reasonable madness, one might say, he is made by the playwright to quote extensively from the Dibdale passages in Harsnett. It may be that Shakespeare did not intend Y or Z, or even the censor, to see Edgar as enacting a role tragically analogous to that of the disguised and hunted priest of Elizabethan England, but I should be surprised if he did not intend X to see him that way. And what about Cordelia? France tells her, after her rejection by Lear, that she is "most rich, being poor; most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, depis'd!" She is an "unpriz'd precious maid." Later, hearing of her father's plight, she shakes "The holy water from her heavenly eyes," and her tears resemble "pearls from diamonds dropped." She returns from France with an army to rescue Lear from his plight. To the best of my knowledge, Shakespeare is the only playwright in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who presents sympathetically a foreign invasion of England, and each time he does it (In *Lear* and *Cymbeline*), the army has a distinctly religious significance. Kent describes an army secretly come to England, disguised as servants in the houses of Albany and Cornwall, servants, however, who "are to France the spies and speculations intelligent of our state." "From France," he continues, "there comes a power into this scatter'd (disunified) kingdom; who already, wise in our negligence, have secret feet in some of our best ports, and are at point to show their open banner." The disguised English Jesuit priests, returning to England to minister to the spiritual needs of English Catholics, came mainly from the seminaries in Italy and France and were indeed a "secret power." Cordelia is not only the true daughter of England, not only the representative of Nature's truest bond, but the spiritual principle rejected and banished, perforce to France, when Henry VIII broke with the Papacy over the question of his divorce from Katherine of Aragon in order to marry

Anne Boleyn, mother of Queen Elizabeth. Observe: Lear is fourscore and upwards, as he says. Henry first became interested in Anne in the middle 1520's; *Lear* was written in 1606; fourscore and upwards. More important, to make the point for X and for us: the loyal and true Kent, banished by Lear because he came to Cordelia's defense, now serving Lear in disguise, specifies his age, unusual in Shakespeare and remarkably circumstantial here: he tells us that he is 48. Not 50 or around 50, but 48. Elizabeth succeeded to the throne in 1558, 48 years before the writing of the play. Perhaps X will by now have identified Kent with the Catholic aristocracy who were thriving under Mary Tudor (1553-1558) but were suspect (sometimes for good reason) under Elizabeth. Most members of the old Catholic aristocracy were loyal to England and to Elizabeth, but in government they were being replaced by the new men of the Tudor bureaucracy, and a few of them in very high places—Norfolk, Northumberland, Westmoreland—took an active part in treasonable activities.

X will therefore, I think, have identified Lear and Gloucester with England itself, Kent with the old Catholic aristocracy, Cordelia with the purely spiritual side of the Church, Edgar with the disguised Jesuits of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. What would he have made of the Duke of Albany, Goneril's husband, uncritical at first, more and more dubious about his wife's activities as the play progresses, loyal to Lear late in the play and apparently the king-to-be at the end, inviting Kent and Edgar to share his rule? Albany was one of the hereditary titles of the House of Stuart. In *Gorboduc*, in 1561, those opportunistic Tudor courtiers Sackville and Norton had depicted Fergus, Duke of Albany, as the self-seeking northern duke who would exploit the helplessness of a divided England for his own political gain and attempt to make himself king. At that time, Mary Stuart, James's mother, had only recently returned to Scotland from France, and already there were stirrings, suggestions with a strong legal foundation, that as a direct descendant of Margaret Tudor and Henry VII she was the

M. William Shak-speare:

HIS True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King L E A R and his three Daughters.

*With the vnfortunate life of Edgar, sonne
and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his
fullen and assumed humor of
T O M of Bedlam :*

*As it was played before the Kings Maiestie at Whitehall vpon
S. Stephans night in Christmas Hollidayes.*

By his Maiesties seruants playing vsually at the Gloabe
on the Bancke-side.



L O N D O N,
Printed for Nathaniel Butter, and are to be sold at his shop in Pauls
Church-yard at the signe of the Pide Bull neere
S^t. Austins Gate. 1608.

The facsimile above represents the title-page of the Harvard copy of the First Quarto of King Lear. It is printed with permission of Harvard University.

rightful ruler of England, rather than Elizabeth, whom the Catholics of course regarded as a bastard as well as a heretic, the illegitimate daughter of Henry VIII, since they did not accept the legality, certainly dubious, of his divorce from Katherine. Now, in *Lear*, another Albany appears, this

time as a hero. X would hardly have been unaware of the fact that in 1606 only the most bitterly disaffected Catholics had failed to realize that in matters of toleration James was far, far ahead of the vast majority of his Protestant subjects. X would almost

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*Some think it unbecoming
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certainly have identified Albany as James Stuart, just as he might earlier have identified young Fortinbras as the same figure.

But X is not through yet. Aware of the fact that he was seeing a vividly topical play, he could hardly have overlooked what we sometimes call its larger implications. And here we must digress for a moment. It has sometimes been thought unlikely that such a sublime poet as William Shakespeare should have concerned himself with what we often call "mere topicalities," as though, for some reason, it is unbecoming for the poet to take an active and acute interest in the problems of his own time, even though we know perfectly well that in the English history plays he did just that, even though we know that he was forced to change the name of Oldcastle to Falstaff and still elicited a bitter reply in a play from the rival company, the Admiral's Men, even though we know that Queen Elizabeth quite specifically saw herself represented as Richard II. But the way we ignore facts is less appalling than the way we simply refuse to think. No one accused Arthur Koestler of being trivial when he wrote *Darkness at Noon*; no one accused George Orwell of being trivial when he wrote *Animal Farm* and *1984*; no one accused Günter Grass of being trivial when he wrote *The Tin Drum*; and of course Boris Pasternak

is one of the authentic heroes of our century. The "mere topicalities" with which William Shakespeare concerned himself so profoundly were, in fact, the history of his age. When he had Hamlet describe the players as "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time," he was not saying that they were talking journalists, but that they were the historians of the age. The affairs of the time with which Shakespeare concerned himself were matters of fundamental importance for the history of England. Until recently, we have known much less about England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries than we should have known, partly because of neo-Tudor and Whig bias in the work of major nineteenth-century historians. But we can no longer plead ignorance as an excuse since the publication of basic studies by such scholars as Garrett Mattingly, Monsignor Hughes and Paul Murray Kendall. While it may be still desirable, it is no longer necessary to go for basic information to Calendars of State Papers, treasury rolls, pipe rolls, the volumes of documents published by various historical societies and manuscript collections. Much remains to be found, here and elsewhere, but much has also been brought into the common light of day. For our hypothetical X, of course, it didn't need to be brought out: it was perfectly clear.

Now, our digression over, let us return to X and his response to *King Lear*. We have seen how he would probably have responded to Lear, Gloucester, Edgar, Albany and Cordelia. What about Edmund, Gloucester's bastard son, the betrayer of his father, of his brother and of Lear and Cordelia? In view of the fact that Edmund betrays his father and then assumes the title of Duke of Gloucester himself, X will probably have associated him with the new men of the Tudor era, the new men who replaced much of the old aristocracy in the upper reaches of government. But he will have made other associations as well, partly because he will have been more naturally aware of matters for which modern critics and scholars will have had to do some diggings. Possibly X will have remembered the Vice of the morality plays and will have seen Edmund, with his penchant for tempta-

tion and destruction, as a highly sophisticated version of the earlier character of simple allegory—simple as opposed to the complex allegories consistently found in Shakespeare and Spenser. He will certainly have seen him as a Machiavelli, that popular horror of the Elizabethan stage, the pleasure and power-seeking individual who achieves his goals through the suffering and the destruction of those who stand in his way. And perhaps X will have seen some shadows of the new science in Edmund's make-up, as he considers Edmund's inductive, rationalistic, materialistic approach to experience. It is possible, however, that X will not have seen this; it is possible that here *we* have the advantage, that in this case our historical perspective is a positive help. In any case, although the stage Machiavelli scarcely does justice to the subtleties and brilliance of the historical Machiavelli's ferocious concentration, in *The Prince*, on man as a political animal, and a wicked one at that, sweeps aside some fundamental assumptions about man and is clearly related to the coming inductive approach to physical phenomena. In this respect, Edmund the politician, Edmund the betrayer, Edmund the opportunist, Edmund the bastard (in every sense of the word) is, every inch of him, a man of his time—a man of Shakespeare's Age.

But remember that he is to be seen in another context as well—not necessarily a larger context, but a different one. Edmund is illegitimate—literally, outside the order of law. He detests the law of custom and of nations and makes his brother's legitimacy an actual vice. Here we must remember again what X already knew, that the Shakespearean theater is a symbolic theater whose fundamental mode is allegory. Legitimate and illegitimate are most pregnant words in this play, legitimate signifying the great order of nature as Shakespeare and his age conceived it, illegitimate signifying its opposite. Edmund is illegitimate in everything, and his words and actions ultimately symbolize the most violent betrayal of every level of order that Shakespeare thought relevant and important. That Edmund represents the great violation of the order of nature is a fact that neither X nor any mod-

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ern critics has overlooked. But I think that what X saw and what many modern critics have overlooked is that Shakespeare conceived the great order of nature in terms of a moral, social and spiritual order that was rapidly disappearing in his own time, but that he hoped could be at least partly restored under James Stuart. When Gloucester says that "We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves," he is responding to the banishment of Cordelia and to the revelation of the supposed disloyalty of Edgar. But think of the ruinous disorders, machinations, hollowness, treachery that Shakespeare and his time had witnessed in their own immediate experience, including perhaps that astounding horror of horrors, the Gunpowder Plot of November, 1605, that was to figure so importantly, if briefly, a year or two later in *Macbeth*. Gloucester's words constitute the *leit-motif* for a dying age, as do Lear's in his agony and madness.

When all is over, Albany will rule, we are led to believe, aided by Edgar. And here there is the faintest trace of optimism, strange as that quality may seem at the end of such a play as this. But not much optimism. If the agony is ended, the great convulsions of the tragic world of *King Lear* have been the death-struggle of a deeply flawed but noble age, but Shakespeare knows that that age will never return. When Albany asks Kent to share the rule with him, Kent's reply, in this context, is heartbreaking: "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; My master calls me, I must not say no." "The oldest hath borne most," says Edgar, "we that are young Shall never see so much, nor live so long."

The tragic world of *King Lear* as seen by our friend X is the world of sixteenth-century England, but through the glory of the playwright's art we can and we do make it our world also, and as we consider the struggles and the convulsions of our world, we may well reflect that Shakespeare was "universal" in a way that he possibly did not intend.

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