“And that’s true too”

“And that’s true too”:
New Essays on *King Lear*

Edited by

François Laroque, Pierre Iselin
and Sophie Alatorre

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General Introduction

François Laroque, Pierre Iselin
and Sophie Alatorre

"And that's true too" (5.2.10-13): Gloucester's famous last words about death and suicide have produced a great wealth of criticism, and have been assumed to condense the skeptical philosophy at work in a play teeming with all sorts of uncertainties. Like Burgundy, every reader or spectator can eventually confess: "I know no answer" (1.1.202). In the *Lear* world, meaning, truth, causation, motives, the origin and the end are as many essential questions which the play's text answers only in a partial and contradictory manner, making closure or a stable perspective improbable. The play's uncertain axiology and restless shifts of focus contribute to the indecisiveness, the uneasiness, but also the fascination the play has generated on scholars and spectators. It is no surprise, then, if the figure of Montaigne is so omnipresent in the intellectual background, the less so in these essays, written mostly by French scholars.

The purpose of this volume is indeed to try and enlarge the readership to the English-speaking world, so that these new essays on Shakespeare's tragedy may be discussed and become truly part of the ongoing critical debate about *King Lear*.

The thirteen contributions gathered in this book explore some of the gaps and chasms of Shakespeare's darkest tragedy, which arouses never-answered questions and eludes explanation. Several theoretically-informed approaches here tend to cast light on current questions of language, history, politics, theatre, genre, sexuality and gender.

The division into headings federates papers on neighbouring themes, which should not make us overlook the numerous interrelated echoes they present in the other chapters.

Robert Ellrodt opens this volume by reminding us of the richness and universality of *King Lear*, a play that insists on the double nature of man, both a monster and a compassionate human being. Of course, *King Lear* is first and foremost a history. But it is also a tragedy of intense rage, illusions and suffering, which has given way to Christian interpretations

based on the theme of "redemption," and has sometimes encouraged critics to emphasize the religious skepticism permeating the work as a whole. And while Ellrodt sums up the main arguments of this never-ending debate, it is clear that the text accepts all interpretations since it necessarily "evolves according to the beliefs or the mood, sometimes changeable, of the reader."

In the first part, entitled "Language and style," Ifig Cocoual examines Cordelia's initial words so as to deal with the ambiguities of the play's language against a theoretical Renaissance background. He shows how, in her critique of the hyperbolical rhetoric of her sisters, Lear's youngest daughter joins a long series of "ethically aware women speakers" in Shakespeare's oeuvre, from the French princesses in *Love's Labour's Lost* through Katherine in *Henry V* to Juliet, who rebels against the order of discourse ("What's in a name"?). In this tragedy of *inelocutio*, Cocoual claims that the fool may indeed be seen as the real authorial figure in the play—a play where preposterousness is given pride of place as Claire Guéron also argues in an article that focuses on the characters' verbal dilemmas. Guéron highlights the idea that no answer is right, least of all Cordelia's "nothing"—the most dangerous option of all. She thus pinpoints a general pattern in which communication is used to put people in metaphorical stocks, or to bind them to a metaphorical stake.

The second part of the book, "Myths, monsters and the grotesque," is interested in the question of early modern representations and of Shakespeare's uses of imagery and myths. Sophie Alatorre explores at length the play's rich mythical imagery, arguing that Shakespeare uses clichés only to engage in a subversive presentation of humanity and of human relationships. She analyses the way Fortune is perverted before tackling the themes of lack and nakedness graphically encapsulated in Gloucester's empty eye-sockets, and she eventually explains how Lear's older daughters contribute to upset the traditional gender roles. What if part of the play's subversive techniques originated in the playwright's particular attention to the beard, one of the obvious attributes of virility? These intriguing questions look ahead to Muriel Cunin's own concerns with the motif of the gaping female body which leads Gloucester to his fall. This is indeed evocative of all the obsessive fantasies about death, evil and female genitalia in early modern Europe. Cunin probes the gloomy Shakespearean world of "anatomy and atomisation" only to notice that Gloucester's blindness make introspection suddenly possible as though his removed eyes had rolled inwards to "[look] fearfully in the confined deep" (4.1.77). Thus, for Cunin, *King Lear* obliquely leads us into a big anatomy theatre. In the "Dismembered perspective of *King*

Lear," Pierre Iselin goes even further. Having examined how various critics, from Baudelaire to Bakhtin, place the "grotesque" within the context of the English Renaissance, he recalls the history of a word first used in the field of decorative arts in order to follow through the various forms and motifs of the grotesque in *King Lear*. In particular, he allows us to perceive how sexuality and cruelty debase man to the level of an animal, showing that the "grotesque mapping of the body" as well as the play's "prolific language of amalgam" both pave the way for the theatre of the Absurd.

In the third part, devoted to "Philosophy and satire," Mickael Popelard paraphrases Donne's "Meditation XVII." He assumes that "self-knowledge" is "a part of the main" and suggests that the question of Lear's *anagnorisis*, or "self-knowledge," should not be dissociated from that of knowledge as a whole. Contending that *King Lear* is no less concerned with truth and knowledge than a romance like *The Winter's Tale*, Popelard focuses on such notions as Epicureanism, cynicism or skepticism, to reach the conclusion that Lear, by the end of the play, probably gains more wisdom and lucidity than actual knowledge. David Levin also chooses to probe the philosophical and theological debates of Shakespeare's time, but by foregrounding the importance in the play of the concepts of nothingness and *ex nihilo* creation. To him, nothingness is not only a means of negative characterization, it also plays a central role in the movement of the plot as a flawed conception of nothingness blinds some characters to "the extraordinary power of the negative." Levin argues that the depiction of Lear's fall from grace leads to negative characterization. This is responsible for a complex relation to nothingness, a dramatic movement towards nothingness, and a rebirth through kenosis. If Jonathan Pollock's attention to nothingness and chaos echoes Levin's concerns, it is guided, this time, by the thread of atomism and Epicurean philosophy. Indeed, one cannot help remembering Goneril's biased description of Lear's so-called debauched court: "epicurism and lust / Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel" (1.4. 235-36). Pollock first shows that the negative connotation of the word "epicurism" is ancient, owing to the opprobrium in which Epicure and his followers were held by the Stoics and the early Fathers of the Church. He proves quite convincing when he shows how Shakespeare relied on Lucretius's ideas (probably through Montaigne's influence) and used them to flesh out the philosophical dimension of his tragedy. In turn, Pollock analyses Shakespeare's treatment of Nature, thunder, division, and notably demonstrates that if something (a cloud of atoms evaporating in the air?) really escapes through Cordelia's lips when she breathes her last, this may well be explained in terms of atomist thought.

The fourth part insists on such fundamental existential issues as "Exile and sexuality." Pascale Drouet explores the theme of banishment, dwelling on the connection between exile and tyranny. As she notes the absence of any legal procedure in the play, she studies the tragedy's verbal violence before defining its land of exile as "a sort of wasteland devoid of microcosmic and macrocosmic landmarks." For Drouet, banishment thus generates two types of problematic relationships: the inside/outside dialectics and the endurance/exhaustion polarity. As to Yan Brailowsky's article, it is not so much concerned with geographical exile as with filial rejection. Bastardy, Brailowsky shows, is much more than the product of desire. In *King Lear*, it is the source of a singular eloquence, if not the source of language itself or of what he calls a bastard language, at a time when English still had to be legitimized as a courtly language gradually replacing Latin, French and Italian. Indeed, the relationship between desire and bastardy is quite vast and exceeds the confines of the specific situation of Edmund, the sole known bastard character in the play. Relying on Lacan's well-known theme that "desire is the desire of the Other," Brailowsky eventually claims that Edmund, Gloucester and Lear are all desperately longing to know the figure of the Other, be it Edgar (for Edmund), Death (for Gloucester), or Lear himself (for King Lear). François Laroque also focuses on the theme of desire ("the small o object"), but he adopts a different perspective. Seeing the tragedy as a vast, tragic "vicious circle," he reveals the importance of the play's concentric circles—including "the mysterious circle of the *deus absconditus*," the wheel, the crown, Gloucester's orbits, or the "O" defined by Shakespeare himself as the "indistinguished space of woman's will" (4.6.266)—in order to unveil a rich network of analogies and correspondences which enable the playwright to render the detailed experience of the private as a more detached and global form of vision. Concluding his essay on the intriguing polysemic connotations of the verb "to turn" (used sixteen times in the play), Laroque finally draws us into the Shakespearean circles of hell so that we, spectators and readers alike, can find the tragedy's true meaning, a meaning inscribed in the letter "O," which stands both for the Globe and for women's "dark and vicious place" (5.3.170).

Richard Wilson's piece which closes the volume begins by adopting a historical perspective in order to put things back in their original context. From the day when Shakespeare became the head of the King's Men, Wilson tells us, he put himself in the double-bound position of performing freely to order, of praising without praise. Such double bind is what *King Lear* actually is about. So Lear's sardonic lament that "When we are born,

we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (4.6.183) sounds as a powerful phrase that serves to foreground the play's status as a theatrical piece. This is what Wilson keeps in mind when he evokes Shakespeare's hectic career as well as the playwright's own vision of his profession. Eventually, dealing with the play's affinities with the world of fairy tales and with *Cinderella* in particular, Wilson manages to convince us that, with *King Lear*, the Bard actually responded to the "bad business of speaking freely on command" with a Cinderella story that holds a mirror up to "The Wisest Fool." Editors speculate that the Fool presented the "looking glass" to King James for which Lear calls (5.3.260), reversing crown and coxcomb: "The one in motley here, / The other found out there" (1.4.127-28)…

INTROÏT

KING LEAR REVISITED[1]

ROBERT ELLRODT

King Lear *is a play which is rightly famous for its richness and universality but it is also a tragedy that insists on the double nature of man, both a monster and a compassionate human being. If* King Lear *is first and foremost a history, it is also a tragedy of intense rage, illusions and suffering, which has given way to Christian interpretations based on the theme of "redemption," and has sometimes encouraged critics to emphasize the religious skepticism permeating the work as a whole. This introduction to the play summarizes the main arguments of this never-ending debate and makes it clear that the text accepts all interpretations since it necessarily "evolves according to the beliefs or the mood, sometimes changeable, of the reader."*

A tragedy where the passions exceed the "top extremity" *King Lear* has been the object of extreme judgments.[2] Simone Weil went so far as to write: "The tragedies of Shakespeare are of the second order, except *Lear*. Those of Racine of the third order, except *Phèdre*." The author of *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (*Gravity and Grace*) thus revealed a marked preference for "the tragedy of immobility," Greek tragedy, and for a poetry defined as: "impossible suffering and joy, joy which, because of its purity, causes pain, suffering which, because of its purity, soothes" (Weill 1948, 171-72). It is truly between "these two extremes" that the heart breaks in *Lear*.[3] The Romantics, in England and in France, had recognized the pre-eminence of this work: according to Coleridge, it was "the most tremendous effort of Shakespeare as a poet" (Hawkes 1959, 186) and for

[1] Translated into English by Sermin Lynn Meskill (IUT, Paris XIII).

[2] (5.3.198a), Déprats and Venet 2002. The text is based on the folio of 1623 (F1) with interpolations from the quarto of 1608 (Q1), not incorporated in F1. Citations referring to these interpolated passages from Q1 are signalled by a lower-case "a" after the line number.

[3] Gloucester's heart, 5.3.196-98, and Lear's heart, 5.3. 312.

Keats, *the* example of that "intensity" which has the virtue of "making all disagreeable evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth".[4] In the eyes of Victor Hugo, *Lear* was an "unprecedented construction," comparable to a cathedral (Massin, 1969, 253). Nevertheless, Tolstoy persisted in denouncing its defects (Orwell would say why) and Emile Faguet denigrated "the horrible, bulky melodrama" performed at the Antoine Theatre: "When one has read or seen *King Lear*, one must read *Le Père Goriot*. Now *there* is something nuanced" (Orwell 1953. Faguet cited by Grivelet 1960, 268). After Olivier's performance in Paris in 1946, Gide wrote: "I have found this play just short of execrable: of all of the great tragedies of Shakespeare, the worst, and by a great deal. […] How it must have pleased Hugo! All his own huge failings were there on display […]" (Gide 1954, 30; Grivelet 1960, 268). Today, the dissonant voices have been silenced: everyone has agreed to recognize the richness and the universality of *Lear*.

Another important contrast has emerged: today, the greatness of the tragedy is as visible on the stage as it is in the reading. In 1681 Nahum Tate had written—and bowdlerized—the tragedy in order to give it an ending in keeping with "poetic justice": Lear regains his throne and Cordelia marries Edgar. This was the version of the text performed until 1838. The Romantics read and admired the original text, but, like Charles Lamb, were of the opinion that the play was impossible to stage. In the twentieth century some eminent critics still saw in *Lear* a drama "always threatening to go beyond the powers of any stage" (Edwards 1968, 128). The cinema would extend the stage, but, well before its advent, in France as in England, the authentic *Lear* triumphed in the theatre. Yet, it is only after 1950 that this tragedy, considered the darkest, appeared to offer our century the mirror where it most willingly recognized itself. This was also the moment when the prevailing interpretation emphasized the political crisis rather than the discords within a family, and, in place of the idea of the redemption of Lear, substituted a vision of the human condition influenced by Beckett's theatre.[5]

According to Umberto Eco one can never prove that a reading is true, but some readings turn out to be unacceptable (Eco 1990, 130). In the case of *Lear*, whether it be about the dominant theme or the general meaning of the play, the significance of certain episodes or the nature and

[4] Keats, *Letters*, December 21, 1817. See also the sonnet "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again."

[5] On this evolution, see Foakes 1993, 1-11.

evolution of the characters, contradictory readings are plentiful and one can show that each is false, or at least leaves out some part of the whole. Each character speaks in accordance with his or her vision of the world as well as his or her personal aims. Some critics assert that, since every statement is opposed by its contrary, this implies that the dramatist leaves us in uncertainty. This is to forget that the coexistence of contraries can express the complex and paradoxical nature of reality. One passage in the work gives us an idea of a reading that is at once singular and multiple. When Edgar informs his father that King Lear has lost and that he must flee, Gloucester says: "No further, sir; a man may rot even here" (5.2. 9). Edgar responds:

> […] Men must endure
> Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
> Ripeness is all. Come on!

Gloucester then acknowledges: "And that's true too" (5.2.10-13).

Under their apparent platitude, these words—the last Gloucester speaks on stage—provide the key to a larger interpretation. Whether he stays or flies, it is true that the suffering body of Gloucester will rot in the earth and that this is the only certain fate in a tragedy that makes no mention of an afterlife. But it is also true that to submit to fate without anticipating it (Gloucester like Hamlet was tempted to do so) can bring a man, at the moment of death, to a "ripeness" without hopelessness. Yves Bonnefoy even uncovers, despite an allusion to Providence, a "fatalistic" acquiescence to the unknown in the phrase of Hamlet's, "[T]he readiness is all" (5.2.192), while Lear, through the idea of "ripeness," preserves a faith in the essential values of human existence (Bonnefoy 1978, 14 and 22).

One thing however is certain: *Lear* clearly asserts the double nature of man. Yes, the shivering nakedness of "poor Tom" can incite the king, in the storm and in his madness, to see nothing in man but a "forked animal" (3.4.100-01) and lead Goucester to think "man a worm" (4.1.33). Yes, the cruelty that inhabits the "hard hearts" (3.6.37) generates the animal images strewn in abundance throughout the play. But to remember that man is a "monster"[6] if he is not open to feelings of compassion and reverence, if he breaks the "bonds" which assure the cohesion of the social body, is also to affirm the presence within him of a moral nature. Similarly, one should not see in the tragedy an opposition between two conceptions of nature:

[6] 4.2.49a and 41c. On familial and social relationships, see 1.1.94-102a and 2.2 353-54.

the one, Christian, which perceives natural law as the expression of the divine will, the other "naturalistic," inspired by the currents of scepticism and atheism which traversed the Renaissance (Danby 1949).[7] It is a question, rather, of the union of opposites even in nature. Nature is the source of selfish and violent impulses, in Lear as in Edmund, but also of the "unpublish'd virtues of the earth" (4.4.16) for the troubled mind and body. It posits an essential equilibrium in man, for madness opens "this great breach in […] abused nature" (4.7.15). It is this union of contraries that a "global" interpretation of the play needs to highlight. But it is necessary to examine another source of complexity first: the relationship between Lear and history.

Lear and History

King Lear is, in the first place, history. For Shakespeare's contemporaries the hero was no less real that the other kings mentioned in Holinshed's *Chronicles* where the dramatist had found inspiration for so many history plays. Lear had been called to rule over Brittany—by which is understood Great Britain—in the year 3105, in the time when Joas was king of Juda, eight centuries before Jesus Christ. Holinshed used Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1135), but Shakespeare also knew the versions available in *The Mirror of Magistrates* (1559) and in Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* (II.x). He would take more liberties with this material than the anonymous author of *The True Chronicle of King Leir*, a play performed in the 1590s and published in 1605. Shakespeare, in fact, thoroughly transformed the historical plot.[8] He retains the source of the crisis: an old king, Leir, means to divide his kingdom among his daughters during his lifetime, but he first expects from them a declaration of their love for him. The answer of the youngest and best loved, Cordeilla, disappoints and irritates him: she will be disinherited, but the king of Gaul falls in love with her and marries her. In Holinshed's version, Leir anticipates his succession but does not give up his rule immediately. As he grows older, the dukes who married the elder sisters become impatient: they wrest power from the old man and his ungrateful daughters leave him with only one manservant. Leir flees to Gaul and there finds Cordeilla and her royal husband. All three, at the head of an army, return

[7] This was criticized, notably by Rosenberg 1972, 75. A more elegant study of the dissolution of the order of Nature and the breaking down of its codes has been made by Venet 2002, 174-90.

[8] See the study of the sources in the Arden edition by Foakes. On the parallels with the *Brutus* of Layamon (or Lawamon), see Alamichel 1992, 162-75.

to (Great) Britain and put to rout the forces of the usurpers. Leir reigns for two years before his death; Cordeilla then reigns for five years, but, deposed and imprisoned by her two nephews, she commits suicide.

The first play to stage the history of Leir was rightly called a "chronicle," and not a tragedy, since the end is precisely the return to power of the legitimate king. The 1608 pirated edition of Shakespeare's *Lear* was still presented as a "chronicle" in 1608, said to be "true" to entice the reader (all "history" in the period claimed to be true), and even free to justify changes with no precedent in the other narratives: the defeat of the army led by Cordelia, followed by her murder, which would bring about Lear's death.

The author of the anonymous play had already tried to tighten up the plot: Leir gave up his power just after announcing the division of the kingdom. But, persecuted, he leaves for France. Shakespeare brings him only to Dover where the army that comes to save him lands. Perhaps this change was dictated by the king's madness, a pure invention, but of major importance. Another fundamental innovation: the intersection of two intrigues; the second, inspired by the king of Paphlagonia in Sidney's *Arcadia*, is of romance origin. The double intrigue serves a double purpose: reinforce the theme and open an historical perspective that goes beyond Lear's death. In the same manner that the king credits the flatteries of Goneril and Regan but banishes the sincere Cordelia, his counsellor Gloucester lets himself be deceived by his bastard son, Edmund, and blames his legitimate and loyal son. This blindness leads Lear to lose his reason and Gloucester to lose his eyes. While Lear, like Gloucester, becomes, according to Coleridge's phrase "*persona patiens*" in the play (Hawkes 1959, 198), Edgar by way of his successive disguises and Edmund, through his political and amorous intrigues (Goneril and Regan both fall in love with him), serve to propel the action until the duel that opposes them. The dying Edmund's belated repentance does not save Cordelia and, after Lear's death, Albany seems to summon Edgar to reign, or at least to "govern".[9]

Such a radical change to the historical sources can be found neither in Shakespeare's other plays based on the chronicles, nor in the Roman tragedies based on Plutarch. A past that was beginning to become legendary[10] allowed more room to manoeuvre and Shakespeare sought to

[9] See Note on 5.3.319.

[10] Lear belongs to the bloodline of the Trojan, Brutus, whose existence was placed into doubt by Polydore Virgil as early as 1534 in his *Anglica Historia*, but throughout the sixteenth century the chroniclers following Geoffroy of Monmouth,

create a feeling of distance. In this pre-Christian Great Britain only the pagan gods are invoked, sometimes under the name of the Greco-Roman divinities, since the Celtic mythology was less known; but these divinities personify the forces of nature—Apollo, the sun, Hecate, the night, Jupiter, the thunder god—and the invocation is often addressed to Nature herself or the Heavens. The absence of any allusion to cities, with the exception of Dover (in which we do not even enter at all), or to economic activities, the choice of empty landscapes, the heath, the cliffs or the fields, create the impression of a faraway world, of a forgotten era. When Lear marks on the map the borders of the conferred territories, contrary to the rebels in *1 Henry* IV (3.1.69-111), he gives no geographical detail, speaks in terms of forests and rivers, of plains and fields (1.1). We do not know where the capital of this king, the legendary founder of Leicester, is located. During the characters' travels from castle to castle, no landmark is given: the indeterminacy of space adds to the universality of the tragic.

However, it would be a mistake to imagine the world of *Lear* as a primitive world. A mistake made by directors who have sought the uncouthness and magnitude of a megalithic setting evocative of Stonehenge. Lear feels himself to be as different from the "barbarous Scythian (1.1.114)" as a Roman patrician. To the most antique past of Great Britain, Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, attributes feudal institutions and customs. This society, composed of lords, vassals, knights and servants, is founded on the bonds of personal allegiance. One is respectful of rank and forms of courtesy: this is manifested by the way the aristocratic characters address one another. The combat between Edmund and his accuser is organized according to a ritual, like the confrontation between Bolingbroke and Mowbray in *Richard II* (1.3). In the processions, from the solemn entry to the funeral march and the parades of warriors (5.1. 2, 3), or in the public speeches of Lear or Albany, all is order, rule, hierarchy: the tempest in the minds and in the elements, the chaos of passions and violence need to appear as the dissolution of this order, even if it is only a façade.

The author has given Gloucester and his sons Saxon rather than Celtic names. Is this intentional? It is one of the clues that give some consistency to a daring hypothesis. Between 959 and 975 a Saxon king named Edgar rid England of all the beasts of prey and reunified a kingdom divided into numerous territories and ravaged by civil conflicts. Giving Lear a successor bearing the name of Edgar may have been a symbolic choice

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and Camden, in the seventeenth century, never rejected the myth outright. See Burke 1969, 71 and 127.

and, at a time when the memory of this king was still alive, the spectators would have expected a return to order in his reign, typical at the end of Shakespearean tragedies.[11]

History, for Renaissance men, was a source of models for conduct in the world and the Elizabethan stage used theatrical illusion to collapse the past, present and future into one another. The fool is thus able to say to the audience: "This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time" (3.2.95). It is therefore not surprising that there were topical allusions in *King Lear*.[12] The play was performed in 1606 before James I. Lear justifies dividing the kingdom in order to prevent civil wars: the immediate effect is to make them almost certain (see 1.1.43-4 and 2.1.11). To show the dire consequences of this division would have pleased the sovereign who strove to induce Parliament to confirm by law his proclamation of a union between the kingdoms of England and Scotland (Halpern 1991, 219-20).[13] *Lear*, although not a true history, is very much a play shaped out of history.

The political and social topicality of the play is considered conservative by some, subversive by others. For the first group, there is in *King Lear* a confrontation between two types of society and two political philosophies. Lear and Kent, Gloucester and Edgar represent a feudal society, hierarchized, but still attached to moral values such as loyalty, devotion, generosity. The individual appetites aroused by the Machiavellianism of the Renaissance animate Edmund and Cornwall, Goneril and Regan as well as the steward Oswald. The Tudor politics of centralisation, in conjunction with nascent capitalism, had led to the decline of the aristocracy. Shakespeare's links with Southampton and Essex's circle renders this interpretation plausible. It did not prevent, on the contrary, attacks against the monopolies liberally granted by James I upon his courtiers.[14]

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[11] See the study by Flahiff in Colie ed., 1974 and Note on 5.3.319.

[12] The choice of subject may even have been inspired by a current event. In October, 1603, the eldest daughter of Sir Brian Annesley pretended that her aging father was mad in order to take control of his estate; his youngest daughter, named Cordell, was opposed to her sister's scheme and Sir Brian's will in her favour was attacked in July, 1604.

[13] In *Basilicon Doron* (1599), the Scottish king alluded to the evils resulting from the division of the kingdom after the death of Brutus. As King of England, James quickly assumed the title of King of Great Britain, but in 1606 the opposition of the English Parliament to the Union was strong.

[14] See, for example, 1.1.141a.

More recently, while presenting *King Lear* as "a play about power, property and inheritance" there has been perceived a subversion of the dominant ideology of the period (Dollimore 1984, 197). It has been emphasized that Lear treats his kingdom as his personal property and argued that the play's critique of absolutism is "economic rather than political" (Halpern 1991, 224). And finally, it has been noted that in Cordelia's attitude can be seen a conscious attack on the patriarchal order—whereas she fights to defend the "rights" of her father (4.5.28) and treats him with deference (4.7). From these various studies, inspired by "cultural materialism" in Great Britain, or "feminism" in the United States, one can nevertheless derive one general idea that "the true subject of *King Lear* is not the destruction of the ancient feudal order by new standards, but the disintegration of a superannuated order collapsing on account of its own contradictions" (Holderness, Potter and Turner 1988, 101). This vision corresponds to the predominance of a satiric vision of society at the turn of the century (Ellrodt 1960, chapters 1 and 2).

The criticism aimed against social injustice in *King Lear* has also given rise to varying interpretations. Some have first seen an echo of primitive Christian communism, awakened by the Lollards and the Anabaptists and spread during the seventeenth century by various sects before finding its epitome in the Levellers. Marxist-inspired criticism took up and developed this theme using the same sources, but placing the emphasis on the rejection of all hierarchy (Cohen, 1980, p. 106-118). The school of "cultural materialism" has argued that the call to pity aimed to "demystifiy" a humanist ideal of social justice the inefficacity of which is clear since charity contributes to maintaining existing structures of power (Dollimore 1984, 4 and 194). But, conversely, others have shown that the request made to the rich to give up the "excess" in their style of life and to "distribute" their "superflux" to the "wretches" out of compassion (4.1.65; 3.4.34-35) is a feature of the homiletic literature of the period, whether it be Anglican or Puritan: the civil and religious authorities based themselves on these principles to bring help to the most needy. Yet, neither the legitimacy of riches, nor the principle of hierarchy, nor the necessity of order in the body politic was ever called into question. The fact that paternalism remained the obligatory framework for social thought did not exclude an appreciation of the equal dignity of all men. Lear and Gloucester suddenly plunged into destitution are not touched by the revelation of new truths; they discover that they had "forgotten" in prosperity certain fundamental truths extolled in the same terms by a London minister, exhorting the faithful "not to be unmindflul of our brethren the poore members of Christ, seeing that […] even our excesse

would content their neede […] Ye I say that live in this excesse with superfluity, have some remorse to the poore in their misery" (Quoted by Kronenfeld 1992, 755-84). Therefore, there is nothing revolutionary in the call to pity and even the denunciation of injustice in *King Lear*. The theme was topical: the numbers of the poor and vagrant suddenly rose between 1580 and 1630. It is nevertheless remarkable that a dramatist called attention to the destitution and suffering of the poor in a tragedy dedicated in theory to the misfortunes of the great.[15] Kozintsev's film, offering an image of the misery of the populace, gives to the Shakespearean text (while magnifying the effect) a more faithful rendering than the cold nihilism of some contemporary stagings.

It has often been said that this tragedy represents the world upside down. It is true that the bonds of authority and deference between father and children are inverted, literally in the case of Goneril and Regan, symbolically in the scene of reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia. The same is true of the relations between king and subjects. But there exists a basic difference between the world of *Lear* and the world created by the carnival of fools and the "sottie." The sovereign and his loyal followers—Kent, Gloucester, Edgar—are brought low, but the poor and the weak are not momentarily raised: they remain submissive to the powerful of the world. The fool himself retains his privilege—to speak the truth—only in sharing his fate with the exiled monarch. The scene where Lear calls the fool and the madman to sit in judgement of Goneril is a parodic inversion of justice, but this same parody illuminates the powerlessness of these improvised makeshift judges. The inversion is not at all carnivalesque,[16] but comparable to Chapman's evocation of a universe which returns to chaos: "The world is quite inverted, Virtue overthrown / At Vice's feet […] / The rude and terrible age is turned again."[17]

Without denying the historical and political aspects of the play, we may at the same time claim that the focus in *King Lear* is concentrated, on

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[15] Margot Heinemann (1992, 78) underlines that "this is a note not heard in the earlier Histories." Nor in the previous tragedies.

[16] Which does not exclude some borrowings from the tradition noted by Laroque 1988, particularly 204 and 289-90.

[17] *The Conspiracy and Tragedy of Charles Duke of Byron*, 1608 (1.2.14-17). The political tragedy of Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, *Gorboduc* (1562) whose influence on *King Lear* is probable, also represents the abdication of the king in favour of his sons as a perversion of the course of Nature: "When fathers cease to know that they should rule/And children cease to know they should obey" (1.2.205-07).

the one hand, on the individual and his relations with those close to him, and, on the other, on the nature and the condition of humanity. In the plays written previously about the War of the Roses, England was represented as a collective body victim of her own struggles: "England hath long been mad and scarr'd herself" (*Richard III*, 5.5.23). Even in *Macbeth* the evil of tyranny affects the whole of Scotland, which is no longer "our mother, but our grave" (4.3.166). In *Lear*, it is the madness of the king that fascinates us. The battle where the fate of the kingdom is decided is waged off stage, for what moves us is the effect it has on Gloucester, Lear and Cordelia. In the "general mourning," the image of the dead Cordelia and Lear expiring is much more present than that of the "bloody State" (5.3.293-95).

Character interpretation and the dynamics of the action

Today, we no longer expect from Shakespeare's characters the kind of verisimilitude Emile Faguet praised in *Père Goriot*. But to reduce them to a function or to an emblematic meaning would be another mistake: they can only be convincing if their language rings true. The epoch still defined "character" in the Theophrastan sense as in the moral sense of Aristotle. The dramatist portrays certain character types, such as Kent, the honest servant who pathetically tries, just before his death, to make himself known to the king whom he has served in disguise (5.3.256-64). True to type is his spontaneous hatred of Oswald, himself the generic effeminate sycophant and one of the new breed of servants. The character can even become emblematic in a play where the influence of the Moralities was acknowledged and where the forces of good and evil confront each other through two groups of characters. However, only Cordelia lends herself to a symbolic interpretation. Exiled from the start, she does not reappear until the denouement. On stage she speaks few words, far fewer than her sisters. In those moments that are heaviest with meaning her discourse embeds itself in the simplest forms of negation and affirmation: "Nothing, my lord" (1.1.86), "And so I am, I am" (4.7.68). Her words resound without her voice ever being raised on this stage where others scream; Lear remembers that "Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle, and low" (5.3.247-48). Some see in her a symbol of divine grace when the king is told: "Thou hast a daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse" (4.6.202-03; cf. 4.4.23 and notes). Still, she is not an allegorical figure. Every human action calls forth a series of associations: it owes its underlying signification to the resonances that it awakes.

Psychological criticism, beginning with Coleridge, has at times emphasized a kind of inflexibility, of hardness even, in the attitude of the

heroine toward a loving father in the first act. But Cordelia needs to have the intransigency of the one who speaks the truth : "So young, my lord, and true (1.1.105); the truth that is rejected: "Thy truth then be thy dower" (1.1.108). She is the one who sees the lie, distinguishes reality from appearances: "I know you what you are" (1.1269). When she announces: "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides" (1.1.280)," she speaks as if she were Time itself, as in the prologue of *The Winter's Tale*.[18] Once the passions are let loose and the masks are ripped away, the perspective is a completely different one. Cordelia is at once the one who exerts control over the passions (4.3.14-15) and the source of compassionate love toward the humiliated king, this "child-changed father" (4.7.17). Oddly, while we neither hear her speak one word to the king whom she has married (1.1), nor speak of him, she becomes a mother image and a representation of life in her call to all the restorative virtues of nature (4.4.16). When Lear's eyes open up to reality and when he recognizes his daughter she, who represents truth, resorts to lying out of mercy for him. To this father, to this king, who reminds her that she has reasons not to love him, the one who was cursed and banished by him answers: "No cause, no cause" (4.7.73). Confronted with the shame of a public solicitation of love, the purity was in silence and denial; in the face of repentance and humility, the purity is in "forgetting" and "forgiving" (words spoken by Lear, 4.3.83) to assert the inalterability of love. But, after the battle is lost, Cordelia, again an image of the truth, does not, like the king, give herself up to the illusion of happiness together in the ageless time of a blissful captivity. She holds fast to a language of Stoicism, suggests a last confrontation with Goneril and Regan (5.3.7), but she knows that no victory is promised to love and truth in this world. She responds to the idyllic vision again with silence—the silence of lips forever dumb when she reappears, dead, in the arms of her father.

To humanize Goneril and Regan instead of making them monsters is today the aim of most directors. They have arguments that make sense—the impossibility of housing two bands of armed men in the same house under two leaders (2.2.411-17)—and some reasons to fear that Lear will seek to take back his power (1.4. 293-94): Shakespeare leaves his characters to justify their actions. Nevertheless, Cordelia's words at the close of the first scene are a clear warning addressed to the spectators. This is why we cannot trust Goneril's statements when she claims that Lear's knights engage in "rank and not-to-be-endured riots" (1.4.176; see also

[18] 4.1.1-2. Concerning the common origin *Veritas filia temporis*, see Panofsky 1962, 83.

1.4. 209-14; 1.4.231-34 and 50-68). Lear's word may certainly be equally suspicious (272-5), but the only knight whom the dramatist has placed on the stage must be representative, and his speech and his conduct (58-77) support Lear's description, not the accusations made by Goneril. The pact between the two sisters (1.1283-305) and the provocation planned to unleash the king's fury (1.3) reveal a conscious perfidy. In the interview at Gloucester's castle, the text barely justifies the effort of some actresses to appear more conciliatory than Lear: from the first his two daughters insist without mincing words on his "dotage" (2.2.320-25 and 372). Nevertheless, from their first false declarations of love the author seeks to differentiate them: Regan means to outdo her elder sister and already seems to disclose her sensuality when she measures all against those joys "the most precious square of sense possesses."[19] Goneril's rival for Edmund's love, she expresses an obsessive jealousy when she is eager to know if he has had access to "the forfended place" (5.1.11).[20] The torture of Gloucester stimulates her sadism: she wants the bonds to hurt him, pulls out the hairs in his beard, insists on gouging the second eye. It has been suggested that she sees her father in Gloucester: this does not make her less cruel. The love rivalry between the two sisters is a plot necessity to shed light on Albany and lead to the duel between the two brothers. But each one falls in love in her own way. The imperious Goneril seeks a "man" who corresponds better than her own husband to her ideal of brute force: she enlists him in her service (4.2.22-29). Regan, more feminine, burns with desire to give and give herself (5.3.69-73). Goneril takes the initiative from the first very dialogue with her sister (1.1.283-305), suggests to Edmund that he murder Albany (4.6.258-64). Regan dies poisoned by her; Goneril kills herself with a dagger (5.3). Cordelia's sisters do not evolve in the course of the play, but their "hard hearts" (3.6.37) are gradually revealed to the world.

Cornwall is also of a piece, not a stupid brute, but a depraved Renaissance nobleman under his noble appearance (3.5), adroit at corrupting Edmund (if that was necessary). His outraged amazement when a "peasant" dares speak back to him is that of an aristocrat (3.7.77-79). Albany, for one, needs to change as a result of the necessities of the action: he must be slow in discovering the true nature of his wife (1.4). Once informed and indignant, he remains master of himself (4.2.45c). It is understandable that Edmund should portray him as hesitant (5.1) and that

[19] 1.1.73. The "joys" procured by "the most precious square of sense" may allude to "the forfended place", the female sex (5.1.11): Regan seems to renounce the strongest pleasures of the sense in favour of love for her father.
[20] On this rivalry, see notes on 4.5.25 and 5.1.37.

Goneril does not find in him a perfect image of virility: each character speaks from his or her own point of view. In fact, Albany adroitly manoeuvres to isolate Edmund (5.3.77-79) and he is ready to confront him in single combat (5.3.86-88). Is his decision not to govern a weakness in his character? It is an indication of a certain philosophic detachment with regard to action, but it is also a dramatic necessity if Edgar is meant to reign.

Gloucester's fate is parallel to Lear's; their personalities, however, are very different. Without doubt they both represent the same lack of discernment, ironically emphasized when Gloucester boasts he does not need glasses (1.2.35). This credulous and superstitious father is from the start an Old Comedy *senex* who complacently recalls the good old days of yesteryear (1.1). As Ruth Nevo has observed, Lear sinned in his mind, Gloucester has sinned in the flesh, and therefore loses his sight whereas Lear loses his reason (Nevo 1972, 290). He reveals himself first, as opposed to Kent, anxious not to offend those in power; he remains silent during the banishment of Cordelia, gives way to Cornwall (2.2, 4), all the while endeavouring to help Lear "in secret" (3.3.4, 6), for he is a good man. "[T]ied to th'stake" (3.7.53), he acts with courage and dignity. But while the ordeal rouses a vehement indignation in Lear, the blind Gloucester is passive in despair: he seeks death, but only lest he should fall to quarrel with the "great opposeless wills of the gods" (4.6.35-40) and he allows himself to be persuaded that a miracle has saved him (4.6.55). Always ready to relapse into hopelessness (5.2), he submits to the will of others. The meeting at Dover with Lear becomes a symbolic confrontation when the old king, lucid in his madness, reveals the world as it is to an old man who stumbled when he saw (4.1.18-19); Gloucester, still passive, answers: "I see it feelingly" (4.6.147).

Edgar and Edmund make up another couple of opposites. The bastard is more captivating than the legitimate son: nature has been very generous to him and his first monologue shows that he knows it. At the beginning of the play when his father alludes to his illegitimate birth in his presence, calling his mother a whore, and states that he will exile this son again after having already kept him away for nine years, our sympathy is with him. When he invokes Nature, stands up again the injustice of custom with reference to illegitimate children (1.2.1-15), some of the spectators of the period would have been as affected by his arguments as we are today: Montaigne testifies to this.[21] Yet, his understandable bitterness cannot justify his scheme to destroy his brother Edgar, expose him to banishment

[21] See notes on 1.2.2-5 and 1.2.47-52.

and death, since, according to tradition in Elizabethan theatre (on this point quite removed from psychological verisimilitude), he proclaims his own vices and publicly recognizes the "nobility" of the one he deceives (1.2.137-38, 186). It was a rule written into the laws that the sins of the parents "contaminated" illegitimate children[22]: Edmund is subject to this convention here in the same way as Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Yet, in *King John*, as in real life, a bastard such as Faulconbridge (though, it is true, of royal blood) could play the role of the hero. Here, Shakespeare defers to convention because it serves his dramatic design, but he embellishes Edmund with certain qualities such as charm, courage and wit without making him less criminal. Cornwall spares him the sight of his father's torment (3.7.6-9), but he leaves in order to kill the blind man, supposedly in order "to dispatch / His 'nighted life," but actually because his pathetic condition "moves / All hearts" against his tormenters (4.5.12-15). It is for a similar reason (5.3.46-51) that he gives the order to assassinate Lear and Cordelia. Yet Shakespeare knows that this blackness of soul prevents neither bursts of chivalry, as in his farewell to Goneril (4.2.25), nor a certain strength of spirit. If Edmund accepts the challenge of the unknown, it is because the despised bastard, now so close to the throne, is anxious for his own glory. It is in order to conduct himself as a real knight that he grants the victor his pardon (5.3.165-66). Is the will to accomplish something good before dying (243) less believable? Is he really moved by Edgar's narrative (199)? One may doubt it; but when the bodies of the two dead queens are brought to the stage, there is a haughty, but nostalgic irony in his comment: "I was contracted to them both; all three / Now marry in an instant" (5.3.203-04). The feeling that "Edmond was belov'd" (214) makes his decision "some good […] to do, / Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.218-19) plausible. The return of the word "nature" is characteristic, recalling the initial invocation (1.2.1). All the evil he has done seems to have emerged out of his "given" nature": will he overcome these constraints in the final moment? One can imagine it, but it is never said, nor even suggested.

Edgar is contrasted with his brother Edmund as Cordelia is with her sisters, in a manner reminiscent of the Morality plays. Gloucester's legitimate son, as sententious as Albany is pious and moralising, has everything to make him unpopular today. Some directors have sought to make the two brothers similar. Others have ascribed to Edgar a disloyalty

[22] Sir John Fortescue, *De Laudibus Legum Angliae* (1546), cited by Zitner 1974, 26. When his daughters reveal themselves to be monstrous, Lear wishes to believe them illegitimate: see 1.4.222; and 2.2.305-06.

and ferocity in the duel that has no basis in the text.[23] Short of rewriting the play it is necessary to admit that Edgar is indeed, as Edmund himself says, "a brother noble, / Whose nature is so far from doing harms, / That he suspects none" (1.2.161-63). He becomes, as he presents himself (the Shakespearean hero has the right to define himself), a "man, made tame to Fortune's blows, / Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,/Am pregnant to good pity" (4.6.218-20). The fact that he waits to reveal his identity to his father—whom he helps and saves from suicide (4.6) and without doubt from a more painful death than at the hands of his enemies (5.2)—has been attributed to spite.[24] But neither his behaviour nor the pain that he expresses in his asides at the sight of the old blind man (4.1.10-28, 51), nor his speeches, betray such a state of mind. If he recalls that the adultery of Gloucester, in giving birth to a bastard, is the source of a chain of events that has led him to lose his eyes, it is only after the death of his father and in addressing the unnatural son (5.3.163-64). His ethics are those of his time and he takes up a Biblical argument (Wisdom, xi. 16). That he has chosen to disguise himself first as a mad beggar, that he speaks in a peasant dialect when he confronts Oswald, seems to place him in an initiatory course that leads him to identify with the most destitute, then with the lowly, before re-emerging as a knight and a defender of the right. But it is true that these metamorphoses are an artifice of the dramatist and are not convincing, except for the first change into "poor Tom."

The importance of Edgar, then, is not in his character, but in his multiple functions. Dramatic function, since the movement of the wheel of Fortune, the emblem of medieval tragedy nearly always present in Elizabethan tragedy, brings him low in elevating Edmund until he puts an end to the rise of the Bastard: "The wheel is come full circle" (5.3.165). Edgar is the one who knew to wait for "the mature time," the "time [that] shall serve" (4.6.269; 5.1.39). It is a choric function since the commentary calls attention to a constant feature of the action: the awakening of a hope or of an expectation which is immediately disappointed and the inexorable progress from worse to worst. Believing that he has nothing more to dread in his extreme destitution, Edgar learns, in seeing his father with his

[23] Particularly Peter Brook in his 1971 film, James Dunn in California (1960) and Jan Bull in Norway (1971).

[24] According to M. Rosenberg (1972, 247), Edgar, in waiting to reveal himself, "tortures his father" and commits more than the "fault" he acknowledges (5.3.184). To argue this is to forget that the continued use of the disguise is an element of the plot; in *As You Like It* do we criticize Rosalind for not revealing herself to her father before the end?

gouged eyes before him, that no one can say he is at the "worst" (4.1.2). Hardly has he pulled his father out of despair, than the mad king comes on stage, "thou side-piercing sight!" (4.6.85). And it is after his victory over Edmund, at the moment when the officer is about to give the counter command, that Lear appears, holding the dead Cordelia in his arms (5.3.232). The subtlety is in the intermingling of the main plot commented upon by Edgar, which leads to entropy[25] in a scene strewn with corpses, and a secondary plot, led by him, which has its point of departure in emptiness when the hero chooses to be "nothing" ("Edgar I nothing am" 2.2.182), but which provides an opportunity for renewal in bringing the criminal characters to their doom. Finally, symbolic function, for Edgar, under the appearance of a naked madman, "poor Tom," triggers Lear's madness in presenting him the image of a man reduced to "the thing itself" (3.4.99) and acts as the Fool in order to carry on with him the dialogue of lucid madness.

Folly and Lucidity: *Lear* and madness

In none of the sources of *Lear* does the king lose his reason. In the story of the king of Paphlagonia, the loyal son, the model for Edgar, does not feign insanity. The presence of the Fool next to Lear is also a major innovation. The meeting of the three forms of insanity in Act 3 is a representation of a cosmic and mental chaos without precedent in the English Renaissance theatre, nevertheless full of scenes of madness.[26]

The monarch who enters the stage majestically and announces his "darker purpose" (1.1.35) offers no sign of mental senility or insanity. He demonstrates selfishness and naïveté in wishing to unburden himself of his responsiblities all the while preserving "the name, and all th'addition to a king" (1.1.134). He shows a lack of judgement, not only with regard to his daughters, but also with regard to the consequences of dividing the kingdom. When the father betrayed in his love, the ruler publicly humiliated, utters curses, it is the result of the impatience of his character, made worse by his age. Goneril comments on this, but Regan notes : "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.292-93). To represent *Lear* as "a tragedy of wrath,"[27] is to simplify things. The tragic fault, *hamartia*, is above all the lack of knowledge: knowledge of oneself and knowledge of

[25] The word is Calderwood 1986, 15.
[26] See Ellrodt 1994, 191-98.
[27] Title of Chapter XIV, Campbell 1930.

others. As in the Aristotelian tragedy, the hero must be led to an *anagnorisis*, or recognition, through his trials.[28]

Is it necessary to explore the unconscious? When Lear says to Cordelia: "Now, our joy" (1.1.81), it is clear that he awaits her declaration of love with a more eager desire. Is it an incestuous desire that provokes the intensity of his response? Is her refusal to express herself felt as a refusal to give herself? It is true that Lear first gives his daughter a second chance to prove her love (93-94) and that his fury bursts when she declares that she must divide her love between her husband and her father. But it seems that this aged king wishes above all to find a mother in a second childhood (cf. 1.1.123-24 and note). The staging of the division of the kingdom reveals that Lear likes playing a part.[29] He lives in a world that he thinks he makes according to his own humour and he refuses to see what is unpleasant to him. Powerful, he pushes away from his purview those who contradict him, Cordelia, then Kent (1.1.122, 155). Powerless, he will go from Goneril to Regan, then will flee them both in the storm (2.4.299). The insistent reminder of reality is the role of the Fool.

We know that there is a "perpetually reversible relationship" between wisdom and madness (Foucault 1976, 46). In *King Lear*, the Fool is the voice of common sense and common wisdom. His language is indirect, embellished with images and riddles to better express the unpleasant truths without revealing the whip. But he alone sees the world upside down, as in the prophecy of Merlin (3.2), because he sees clearly. Rather than being a professional clown he is one of the "innocents" or simple-minded (called *naturals*) who became pupils of the king or a peer. Lear often calls him *boy*, he has preserved from childhood an absence of inhibition and a taste for riddles. Does he really seek to "entertain" Lear? He seems rather to pester him with critiques and reproaches: he denounces his unthinking acts and his vain expectations. The Fool's reason never wavers until he is frightened by the violence of the elements and by the appearance of the possessed (3.4.79).

The Fool accuses Lear of that which the king has begun to accuse himself of without wishing to admit it. The Fool, whom he loves, had pined away after the departure of Cordelia; he has noticed it, but he interrupts the knight who tells him: "No more of that" (1.4.69). Exasperated by Goneril, he begins to understand that the "most small fault" (1.4.234) of his favourite daughter had taken his own nature "out of joint", as Pascal would say about reason (*Pensées*, II.82). Yet at that very

[28] See Cave 1990, 159-60.
[29] He is one of the *player kings* discussed by Righter [Barton] 1967.