

**Is Ripeness all ? Shakespeare's
Tragic Vision in "King Lear"**

by

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The animating principle of Shakespearean tragedy is recognition that man is open to radical change, for better or for worse, and that, even at his deepest levels, he is unstable. What should interest a modern audience is the line of inter-communication which makes Shakespeare's tragic vision comprehensible to us now, rather than the tracing of historical connections back to the Elizabethans. "Vision" implies "sight" - not ordinary sight but "insight", mystical or prophetic, a revelation, abnormally obtained, or a mental conception of a profound meaning or scheme of things involving the true nature of Man. Philosophers talk of "human nature" as though it possessed something fundamental, but usually fail to define it except in general terms as a constant, while writers of tragedy seek a model of human greatness, expressed in a "hero" with whom the audience is expected to sympathise, a "high - mimetic" counterpart of the type of individual whom they have been educated to admire, or possibly condemn. On the stage they are permitted to see their ideal in action, that is, «dramatised», and watch how he behaves under stress from various forces, human or divine, political or fateful.

Through the ideal revealing itself in action, Shakespeare poses questions. How does Fate work ? Does it rule the world ? Does it work according to Gospel ethic, summed up in the **Beatitudes**, which claim that the poor in spirit, the meek and the merciful are blessed ? Or is it rooted in obedience to "natural law," especially as summed up in the Ten Commandments ? Is it totally indifferent to Man ? Does no comprehensible ethic exist ? Do only human strength, political acumen, consistent atheism and acceptance of blind Fate as arbiter of all earthly action have value ? Is Man's tragedy the irony of the Universe ? Is it all seeming and being ? Do we seem to be alive but are really dead ? Is death and what lies beyond an improvement on life ? Is "read-

iness" or "ripeness" all, or just all that we can ever know ?

Of the four major tragedies, **Hamlet** and **Othello** place the human perspective foremost. **Macbeth** emphasises the dramatic, which gives confidence in Man's ability to live and make the most of what Fate puts in his path, **Lear** climbs to the ideal, the divine or philosophical. However, **Hamlet**, **Othello** and **Lear** all dramatise themselves, turn into occasional play-actors, while **Macbeth** perceives the whole world as no more than a stage. As Shakespeare presents it, his tragic vision scorns divinity and is extinguished by his human enemies in the summit of conflict. **Hamlet**, again, muses over the "divinity that shapes our ends" but, as Kierkegaard perceived, never gets close to it - his concerns are solely with human nature and its vagaries and with the mystery of this world, a play-within-a-play . **Othello** is hardly concerned at all with the abstract. His enemies, like **Hamlet's** and **Macbeth's**, are human - and in fact his worst enemy is himself. His one ideal is his own honour, his weakness, the **hamartia**, that he believes what **Iago** tells him. He is a man of action first to last, unable to contemplate "visions", who loves honour more than he does his wife .

Lear touches all perspectives, but mostly concerns itself with the divine, which etymologically relates to God, but for Shakespeare usually means power from world-ruling Fate, though he is never certain where the divine is to be found . The focal point of this tragedy is Act IV, scene vi, when we encounter **Edgar** leading his father, the blinded Gloucester, to "Dover Cliff". The cliff-edge symbolizes the edge of life, the outer limit of existence before death, but Gloucester is not actually standing on the edge of the abyss and only thinks that he is because he cannot see. In **Lear**, human, dramatic and divine perspectives merge and Shakespeare makes this particular scene the play's dramatic centre, though the philosophical focus is conveyed in III, vi, 102 - 5, when **Edgar** refers to solitary suffering :

Who alone suffers most i' the mind,
Leaving free things and happy shows behind;
But then the mind much sufferance doth o'er-skip'

When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.¹
He continues the same theme in IV, i ' 25-8, when he says in an aside
O gods! Who is't can say, « I am at the worst » ?
I am worse than e'er I was ...
And worse I may be yet; the worst is not
So long as we can say "This is the worst".

realising that there is no known limit of human suffering which cannot be endured, and in V,ii,9-11 utters the summation of human wisdom as stated in the play :

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;
Ripeness is all.

Suffering of the kind portrayed in *Lear* was outside the experience of Shakespeare's audience, the members of which, with some high-born exceptions, were during their lives never subjected to more than petty injuries, appropriate to petty actions and politically insignificant careers. Concentration-camps and ideologically - inspired atrocities committed on a large scale were then still four centuries in the future. Personal experience, therefore, was not likely to yield the Elizabethan theatre-goer more than a glimpse of part of the tragic vision. He accepted *Lear* as "great" because he was a king, a classical stereotype, but soon discovered that in this particular instance the king is irritable, petulant and lacking in judgement, and because he is senile, his physical and mental powers are diminished to such an extent as to make him unable to fulfil his traditional role as decision-maker and leader of men. It is much later, when *Lear* is stripped of his born greatness and the visible trappings of kingship, that the spectator recognises that *Lear* is "every inch a king". Even as he is cast down to the lowest depths of human degradation, to become a tragic figure in the classical sense, he achieves true greatness by his intense suffering. The psychological perspective in the play brings the audience to understand *Lear* as a man and, in particular, as an old man, in his eighties - "a very foolish fond old man,/Fourscore and

upward" as he tells Cordelia in the reconciliation scene (IV,vii, 60-1).

Edgar's conclusion that "ripeness" is apparently the only aim available in life is open to interpretation on several levels. Ripeness means maturity, and so to be mature a man must suffer; because of this moral philosophy, known as Stoicism, he must learn to bear hardship. Qualities like fidelity, sacrifice, love, devotion to duty are, in the sight of the Stoic, moral truths and on that account worth-while. Without them the phenomenon of human existence has no value, Stoicism provided Man with a reason for existence in the midst of a cloud of unreason and grotesquerie and thus made it possible for him to put up with the load of life. Hamlet asked : "Who would fardels (burdens) bear ?" and in **Lear** Shakespeare provided an answer - namely, a man, because it is in his nature. The ethics of **Lear** are those of the Stoic.

Other tragic heroes adopt related positions. Macbeth, wondering if honour were pointless, sacrificed it for material gain, and gained nothing. Othello, a real Stoic, sacrificed all for honour, and gained nothing. Hamlet eventually finds the Stoic posture satisfactory, and his words prefigure those of Edgar :

If it be now, 'tis not
to come; if it be not to come, it will be
now; if it be not now, yet it will come :

(**Hamlet**, V,ii,218 - 20)

In **Lear**, however, Shakespeare makes his tragic hero accept both honour and not-honour, because they both exist; some people are guided by the moral law, others are not. Man has to endure both kinds of people, saints and sinners, and when he has clear vision of things as they really are, and not just as he would like them to be, he is "ripe" . To understand life, he must attain knowledge of all this, and the only way to do it is by experience, that is to say, suffering or endurance of a physical or mental burden. Lear's tragedy is caused by insufficient knowledge - he has not ripened enough, or rather, he is over-ripe. A second meaning of "ripeness" is a state of mellowing.

like a fruit just before it drops off the tree, like Lear in his old age.² Can "a very foolish fond old man" still be capable of achieving "ripeness", even when he has lost his sanity? Shakespeare seems to think so. When Albany tells Lear and his companions that order shall be restored and justice dispensed :

During the life of this old Majesty,
To him our absolute power : You, (Edgar and Kent)
to your rights,
With boot and such addition as your honours
Have more than merited . All friends shall taste
The wages of their virtue, and all foes
The cup of their deservings

Lear responds immediately with a brief final speech denying human - and divine - justice. At the end of it, he dies, so unobtrusively that Edgar thinks he has only fainted and tries to arouse him. The death of this hero is quite different from those of Hamlet, Othello or Macbeth, who play their roles to the very end. Lear slips away, his earthly sojourn over. Kent speaks his epitaph : "The wonder is he hath endur'd so long" (V,iii, 315 - 6).

The personages (types rather than characters) in the play together make up an idealised cross-section of humanity - good, bad and a mixture of both . Lear starts off by showing that he is unable to tell the self-seeking and calculated untruthfulness of Goneril and Regan from the naive honesty of Cordelia.³ In the same manner Othello, the gullible soldier, was deceived by "honest" Iago, but whereas Othello was inclined to jealousy and worshipped an abstract "honour" more than he loved his wife, Lear is an old man, long past his best . Goneril and Regan emphasise this - Goneril talks of her father's "poor judgement" in dismissing Cordelia and refers to "the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them" ; Regan agrees that "Tis the infirmity of his

age" but adds that "he hath ever but slenderly known himself". Her sister concurs with "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash". Evidently Lear's judgement has always been affected adversely by his temper - his senility has merely made it worse .

Later, Lear banishes Kent, an old and faithful servant, because he stood up for Cordelia and spoke the truth too plainly. Both daughter and loyal retainer are rejected by the king, whose age has so affected his strength as to make him unable to control his own actions completely. Because the audience is made to realise in the very first scene that what Lear does is not entirely his fault, patience and sympathy are preserved for him from the start, and the conclusion that the old despot deserved what he got can never be drawn, though it must be admitted that Goneril and Regan did have provocation and that their father's behaviour, as described by Goneril in I, iii and iv, had become hard to endure. Endurance is not their strong point, but Shakespeare gives his audience no chance to build up sympathy for them :

I would breed from hence occasions, and I shall,
That I may speak : I'll write straight to my sister
To hold my very course

says Goneril at the end of end of I, iii and in I, iv she tells Lear to his face what she thinks he has done to the court because he cannot control his hundred knights and squires :

... epicurism and lust
Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a grac'd palace

(241 - 3 .)

Her solution, to reduce the number of retainers and get rid of the younger men, is harsh but practical, and Lear's reaction is to abuse her in the lowest terms, calling her "degenerate bastard" and "detested kite" - terminology which suggests a lack of control. He is less immediate in his response to Regan when she supports Goneril's policy towards him in

II, iv, concentrating his insults on the latter -

thou art a boil .
A plague-sore, embossed carbuncle,
In my corrupted blood

(221 - 3 ,)

but later launches into a vague threat, pathetic in its very impotence:

... you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall - I will do such things -
What they are yet I know not, - but they shall be
The terrors of the earth .

(276 - 80)

Lear's chaotic speech, so different from the formal rhetoric of his initial addresses, reflects his mental disorder or his frustrated rage, and finally childlike wonder as he comes to realise his fate. This is a gradual process, on which the commentator is the Fool, first introduced at the beginning of Act I, scene v. He is the only one who tells the King the truth about himself, after Kent's banishment, and makes the audience less critical of Lear's absurd behaviour by evoking laughter. He is base while Lear is noble; he is full of common-sense while Lear is foolish - the Fool is no fool, while the King is. In the storm scene in Act III, the Fool seems the closest to sanity of the four personages who take part; he is assuredly the only member of the quartet still in the position which he normally occupies, and even he is a paradox, wise when one expects him to be "foolish" or "clownish". His death is the last straw for Lear, after that of Cordelia, and his last coherent thoughts find agonized words, "Thou'lt come no more". Then Lear dies imagining that he is seeing Cordelia's lips move - surely somebody whom he loves has been preserved after all ? Hope is with him to the end, in spite of the horrors; the human spirit is not to be crushed, even though the hope is fantasy, for in the real world, Cordelia, like the Fool, is hanged and dead, acts without conceivable meaning.

Judged realistically, the skeleton of the plot is inclined to absurdity, though the figures who move through it are too much "drenched in flesh and blood" to permit Lear to be considered simply as myth or as an allegory about the seeming thanklessness of children and their desertion of their parents. The quarrelling is reflected in civil war, and the conflict is illuminated by the storm scenes, which shatter the peace of the universe. However, the difficulty of seeing the play at any one level or in any one context makes it appear very large in conception - "too huge for the stage", in Bradley's words.⁴ It also deals with kingship and the way in which power tends to corrupt. As the drama proceeds, Lear gradually realises the terrible mistake he has made and undergoes a change, firstly by admitting that he had been wrong in expelling the one daughter who did love him without hoping for private profit. In this stage of change he is still a proud monarch, who thinks only of himself, and it is not until the storm scenes, when he finds himself in the same plight as the poor wretches on the blasted heath, that Lear recognises the common humanity which he shares with them.

Finally, he loses his reason as his world is destroyed, and a fresh Lear emerges. This Lear knows that a king is really only a man after all. He talks about justice and authority, and when he meets Cordelia again he is resurrected, a completely new human being. He has shed the trappings of kingship which prevented him from attaining his full stature as a mature man and made him reject love and humility. Now at last he has found his soul - charity, clear vision, sins forgiven, in a world of lust, cruelty and greed, with extremes of wealth and poverty. What a man needs in such a world is not material but spiritual props, that is to say, the traditional idea of Heaven.⁵ Lear finds this traditional Heaven, but here on earth :

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage :
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness : so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news : and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies : and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th'moon

(V.iii,9-19)

though it is ephemeral and only in his imagination in any case, like his final joy when he thinks that Cordelia is not dead after all .

The two most obvious conclusions to be drawn about the *Lear* universe are either that suffering produces goodness or that life is cruel and unreliable, with nothing to recommend it.⁶ All the principal characters talk about the powers which rule the world, asking themselves whether these are interested, disinterested, or actively hostile to Man's aspirations to good. The wicked characters, Goneril, Regan, Edmund, say little about ruling powers or supernatural control of men's actions; the good characters all talk about the "Gods" who are kind and just, and the play reveals that evil IS quickly punished and that everyone gets a mixture of harsh and merciful treatment, or sometimes simply harsh, according to his or her just deserts - there does appear to be some connection, however vaguely stated, between what these people do, or have done, and what happens to them.⁷ Nowhere in the play is "Fate" actually mentioned, nor is there any sense of a divine plan or ordered universe where everyone has a place.

The high point or climax of *Lear*, unlike those of the other tragedies, is not easy to detect. It may come in III, vi, 105-110, a passage, previously noted, in which Edgar offers a short soliloquy after Kent, Gloucester and

the Fool have carried the sleeping Lear away, enjoining men to share burdens because this is the only way to make them lighter. But dramatically this is a "low" point and encourages the critic to seek alternatives. The summit of Lear's emotional performance seems to be reached in the opening lines of III, ii, when he defies the elements.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks ! rage ! blow -
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeple, drown'd the rocks!

and dares the thunder to

Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world !

but this is a rhetorical and not a dramatic climax. Closer to the heart of the matter is Lear's realisation, shown in III, iv, 28 - 36, that others suffer as well as he, those

Poor naked wretches, whereso' er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these ? Oh ! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the Heavens more just .

Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that the meaning of life may only be revealed through charity (i.e. love, as defined by St. Paul in the *Epistle to the Corinthians*), love of neighbour, the antithesis of pride and pomp . Later, Edgar is made to say,

Do poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes
(58 - 9).

and in the last Act he tells Edmund, "Let's exchange charity" (iii,165), which means, in this instance, let's exchange forgiveness, an exchange which, it must be said, is dependent on a blood equality between the two. Thus, although the ending of the play is utterly miserable, with no material hope visible or conceivable, the sense of a justice somehow connected with charity in these two definitions makes the final scene less intolerable.

It may be, however, that although this last was Shakespeare's view capable of being imaginatively reconstructed as an historical inheritance handed down by way of Graeco-Roman and late mediaeval European traditions, it cannot be ours. Christian influence demanded that fiction should uphold principles of moral judgement and just reward or punishment.⁸ On the stage, at any rate, a man ought to get what he deserves. The great Christian tragedy was that of Man's Fall - he had perfection bestowed upon him, but threw it away by trying to deceive God and ever since has been trying to get it back. The world was to be seen as a stage, on which is being played out a great drama of Good versus Evil, often with unexpected results but tending to moral goodness. This was the mediaeval inheritance and, on the whole, Elizabethan playwrights (and Victorian critics) accepted it. But after the frightening first three-quarters of the twentieth century and our greater knowledge of human biological functions, it is difficult for a modern audience to swallow Bradley whole.

Lear certainly gets nearer than the other tragedies to the general nastiness of human existence, largely because it is less specific and more of a myth. Throughout the play the central idea of endurance, patience and sufferance is stressed, so that abstract qualities like justice may be considered according as they are exemplified in the relations of one character with another. Is it just to treat a man like a beast? Why

should a bastard not be treated as a legitimate son ? Why should guiltless people be mistreated ? In this atmosphere death is not something to be feared, as the mediaeval man feared it, but to be welcomed as a relief from pointlessness and black unfathomable boredom - what the Italian poet Leopardi later called "noia" - Shakespeare's "ripeness is all" urged men to endure the flat, stale, unprofitable and the savagely cruel .

Is this the limit of the poet's tragic vision ? Is there learning in suffering ? Has a man missed something when he lives a soft life ? If so, what has he missed ? Is it worth having ? John Stuart Mill posed the problem in terms of a graphic image asking whether it was better to be Socrates dis-satisfied or a pig satisfied ?⁹ Over 2300 years earlier Sophocles in *Antigone* stated the Stoic view - "For mortals there is no escape from the Misery that is in store for them". Mill decided that the nature of the individual determined the answer, and that Socrates and a pig had different natures. The views of Sophocles, Shakespeare and Mill are here similar, and the modern Existentialists¹⁰ tend to recommend a Stoic position . They see men as existing out of place in extreme situations, all displaced persons, unsheltered and exposed, like Lear on the blasted heath, and compelled to strive against the enticement of comfortable solutions. Man's Essence is nothing but his Existence - Being (which requires the predicate IS), can only be approached if it is related to a concrete "being" and only Man can ask questions because he is an exceptionally privileged being, capable of relating himself to other beings. The inroad into the totality of Being is therefore through Man and only through Man . If he wills it, Man may withdraw from his own Being by suicide and self-sacrifice - animals are part of their own Being and cannot withdraw but Man can be concerned since he must bear the burden of his own Being though he is unable to break out without self-destruction . His advantage over

the brute lies ironically in his capacity to make his own quietus, a rational decision to escape.¹¹

Man's Essence is to be comprehended from his Being in the world - for him Existence is prior since he is IN the world, that is to say, he is thrown right into the world and feels the brute fact of his own being. In spite of the unintelligibility of Being he has freedom to will his own finiteness, to project his own death and thus attain ultimate nothingness. This is positive experience which makes an individual aware of Being itself, i.e. that there is something and not nothing, and this is the wonder which transcends all wonders. Greek thinkers, on the other hand, held that out of nothing nothing comes. The Greeks understood Being only in relation to the cosmos, the ultimate totality, and had no place for Man's contingent existence; the Christian tradition of ontology is similar, transplanted as it is in the doctrine of the Creation.¹²

Lear's attitude is conventional - when he asks Cordelia to speak of the extent of her love for him, the answer is beyond his capacity to grasp :

Cor. Nothing my lord .

Lear. Nothing ?

Cor. Nothing .

Lear. Nothing will come of nothing : speak again.

(I, i, 86-9)

Macbeth is sure that he understands that nothing IS and what it means for him, for he describes life as "signifying nothing" (V,v,28) and chooses, though reluctantly (and ironically, since he has only the illusion of choice left to him), to fight to the death, that is, exchanging one form of nothing for another. Macbeth, therefore, has answered one

of Hamlet's questions, what Hamlet called the question - "To be or not to be ?" Ripeness IS all, and a man in fact is lucky if circumstances provide him with the ripest moment for shuffling off this mortal coil . Of the four heroes, only Macbeth departs at the right, or "ripe", time - Hamlet might have been a good king "had he been put on", Othello "was great of heart" and might have served the state further, Lear might have retired in his dotage and died respected in his bed, but Macbeth had reached his absolute limit¹³ - the "brave Macbeth" and "Bellona's bridegroom" of Act I is "the dead butcher" of the final speech of the play. Like Macbeth, "his fiend-like Queen" chose her own moment to die, "by self and violent hands" . Macbeth is what Kierkegaard described as an "aesthetic" hero, but Lear's failure is closer to life as the modern existentialist perceives it - "nothing" is endowed with a creative significance, for from possible nothingness all Being as such emerges.¹⁴

NOTES

- 1 — All quotations and textual references to **King Lear** relate to the Arden edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London 1972) .
- 2 — **Romeo & Jul**, II, ii, 121; **Ant. & Cleo**, II, vii, 103 (to develop into something) . Ripe/-ness, as used by Shakespeare elsewhere, e.g. **Hen VII**, IV, ii, 51 : **Two Gentlemen of Verona**, II, iv, 70 (maturity of judgement); **Hen V**, I, ii, 121 (quite prepared for action) : **Jul Caes**, IV, iii, 215 (arrived at a fitting stage for some particular purpose) . Cf. **OED**, vol. VIII (rev. edn. 1970) .
- 3 — Lear's attitude to his children is paralleled by Gloucester's attitude to his. Both Lear and Gloucester receive kindness from the child

whom they have wronged and abuse from the child they favoured. A second parallel between Lear's madness and Gloucester's blindness is likewise obvious - physical loss of sight enables Gloucester to learn about Edmund's perfidy, just as Lear, driven mad, gains a clear vision of humanity. Like Othello, both Lear and Gloucester learn the truth too late. (Cf. also n. 7, *infra*).

4 — A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1932 edn.) 247.

5 — cf. G. L. Bickersteth, *The Golden World of 'king Lear'* (London 1947) noted by Muir, *ed.cit.*, *introd.*, 1

6 — 19th-century assessments of *Lear*, like Bradley's, argue that it takes a poetic imagination to appreciate the mass and variety of intense experience contained in the play. Edward Dowden, an Irish Victorian whose 1875 study of Shakespeare is still valuable, said that Shakespeare sees men "walking in a vain shadow; groping in the mist; committing extravagant mistakes, wandering from light into darkness, stumbling back again from darkness into light, spending his strength in barren and impotent rages; man in his weakness, his unreason, his affliction, his anguish, his poverty and meanness, his everlasting greatness and majesty" (*Shakspeare: his Mind and Art*).

7 — Deception is another strongly-defined pattern in *Lear* (and in the other tragedies and "dark comedies" where "seeming and being" puzzle the protagonists. Lear's daughters deceive him, Edmund deceives Edgar and Gloucester, Goneril and Regan mistrust each other and Edmund deceives both of them. Goneril deceives her husband, Albany, and her steward, Oswald, is disloyal to her. Cornwall's seemingly faithful servant turns on his master and

slays him as he is about to put out Gloucester's eye. The blinded Gloucester is deceived into thinking that he is on the edge of Dover cliff, and Lear deceives himself into believing that Cordelia is still alive during the final moments of his own life. The contrast between professed or false love and true affection is made by Cordelia, Kent, Edgar and the Fool, who denote a pattern of fidelity. False love, with gain as its object, is seen in Goneril and Regan for Lear, Burgundy for Cordelia, true or disinterested love in Cordelia for Lear, France for Cordelia .

- 8 — Graeco-Roman notions of tragedy were not primarily associated with crime and punishment; for the Greeks, man was fated to commit certain acts and did so because he could not help himself and inevitably received his divine punishment. The Romans viewed the matter more simply; man received what Fate had in store for him, had good or bad luck, and nothing he might do could possibly change it. Fortune's wheel might spin favourably for an evil man, and bring disaster on a good man. But this was not "tragedy" in our (modern) sense of the word but instead just an appalling piece of ill-luck - dramatic art requires the relationship of cause and effect here, otherwise the result is crude satire.
- 9 — in *Utilitarianism* (1861).
- 10 — " La première démarche de l'existentialisme est de mettre tout homme en possession de ce qu'il est et de reposer sur lui la responsabilité totale de son existence" (Sartre) .
- 11 — In *Lear*, the symbol used to denote the savagery in man is that of the beast, and for a century critics have been pointing the significance of this feral symbolism in *Lear*, *Othello*, *Timon of Athens*

and elsewhere. Cf. Muir, ed. cit. introd. liv and Wolfgang H. Clemen, **The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery** (London, 1953), 148-50

- 21 — Modern existentialists (e.g. Heidegger) talk of the "abyss" (**Abgrund**), for freedom is itself bottomless, and reject both Greek and Christian ontological traditions. But one must really start with Pascal, for whom man's thought was becoming non-individual, Kierkegaard, who complained that Hegel's system made thinking impersonal, and Husserl, a scion of the Lutheran Church, who distinguished between ethical arguments and action, demanding in the cause of Truth not merely reflection but also suffering .
- 31 — **Macbeth** is the only one of Shakespeare's tragedies wherein the hero achieves a balance between the physical and the mental. Hamlet's reason fails and he brings himself to act only through his emotions - a blind leap in the dark. Othello is no thinker and through his own pig-headedness and gullibility allows himself to be led astray . Lear is physically too weak to translate his passions into violent action. Macbeth is not led astray by voices, suspicions or the pressure of traditions, nor is he in any sense weak. He moves towards the proper balance desirable in a man. Because he is at the peak of his bodily and intellectual powers he requires no ceremonial or other props, and, as he gradually advances along his ordained path, he ceases to regard external influences. From the very beginning he is ready to accept full responsibility for his own actions, wants to know the answers from the witches, notes the literal meanings of words and questions every step (I,iii,70;87; 109). He finally believes what he is told only when he is in possession of confirmation and is reluctant to come to conclusions prematurely; his letter to Lady Macbeth (I,v) imparts the literal truth. It is true that his strategy becomes narrower and more

and more limited to violence, but his logic accompanies him all the way to the very end, until there is nothing left for him but to fight his last fight in the heroic manner.

- 14 — Heidegger held that everything *Is*, but without having consciousness of Being, thus allowing Maritain to refer to "the existentialism of St. Thomas", which is confusing when one considers Sartre's atheistical position. Heidegger, however, believed that language was the whole of Being - words are tools for Man, who is the only being who knows his own Being and can question it.