

A STUDY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

—KING LEAR AS A “BITTER FOOL”—

AKIKO KIMURA

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of *King Lear* is the degradation and fall of the established values of the human world. At the beginning of the play Lear is a great and powerful king, with his court and with a retinue of a hundred men. Once having given away his crown, though, he is conspired against by his bad daughters and loses his wits. His bad daughters, having become adulteresses, come to hate each other because of their love for Edmund; one of them becomes a poisoner of her own sister, and even plans to murder her husband. Lear's good daughter dies hanged in the prison. Gloucester has his eyes gouged out as a result of his own son's treachery. Kent is banished by one angry rash gesture of Lear. All bonds, all laws, whether divine, natural or human, are broken. In *King Lear* the Renaissance order of established values disintegrates altogether; the social order, ranging from the kingdom to the family, crumbles into dust.

As the play proceeds, there exist no longer kings and subjects, fathers and children, husbands and wives, but only four beggars wandering

about on the heath, exposed to violent winds and rain. These “ruined pieces of nature,” who are deprived of their titles, social position and even faith in eternal values, remind me of the two tramps waiting for Godot, who does not come at all, and of the two half-paralysed men, Hamm and Clov, who are the last human beings in the world of *Endgame*. In this essay I wish to analyse the similarities of *King Lear* to Beckett’s plays and consider the contemporary aspects of Shakespeare.

CHAPTER I LEAR IN ILLUSION

In *King Lear* the decline of all order occurs gradually, step by step. Lear deals out his kingdom and gives away his power. However, he wants to remain a king; his head is filled with the illusion that he is still “every inch a king.” He thinks that a king can not cease to be a king, and that a child can not be unfaithful to a father. He believes in the ideas of pure majesty, kingship, love and fidelity.

In Shakespeare’s historical plays kings are sometimes deprived of their sacredness by a thrust of a traitor’s dagger or by a tearing off of the crown from a living king’s head. In *King Lear* it is the Fool who deprives Lear of his sacredness. The Fool, standing outside the high circle of Lear and looking on, does not follow any conventional ideology. He rejects all appearances of justice, law, and moral order. He sees the brute force, cruelty and lust underlying beautiful appearances. He has no illusions and does not seek consolation in the existence of a natural or supernatural order, one which punishes evil and rewards good. Lear, insisting on his own fictitious majesty, seems ridiculous to him;

When thou clovest thy crown i’ the middle, and gavest
away both parts, thou borest thy ass on thy back
o’er the dirt: thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown,
When thou gavest thy golden one away
Fools had ne’er less grace in a year;
For wise men are grown foppish,
They know not how their wits to wear,
Their manners are so apish.

(I. iv, 175–184)

The Fool’s philosophy is based on the assumption that every one is a

fool, and that the greatest fool is he who does not know he is a fool, Lear, himself.

Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away;
that thou wast born with.

Kent: This is not altogether fool, my lord.

Fool: No, faith, lords and great men will not
let me; if I had a monopoly out, they would have
part on't: and ladies too, they will not let me
have all fool to myself; they'll be snatching.

The Fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational. Even the feudal order seems to him to be absurd; he describes it only in terms of the absurd. For him the world stands upside down:

When usurers tell their gold i' the fields;
And bawds and whores do churches build;
Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion:
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
That going shall be used with feet.

(III. iv, 89-94)

Hence, the Fool of *King Lear* fulfils the part of a clown, which Leszek Kolakowski defines as follows:

The Clown is he who, although moving in high society, is not part of it, and tells unpleasant things to everybody in it; he, who disputes everything regarded as evident. The Clown must stand aside and observe good society from outside, in order to discover the non-evidence of evidence, the non-finality of its finality. At the same time he must move in good society in order to get to know its sacred cows, and have occasion to tell the unpleasant things The philosophy of Clowns is the philosophy that in every epoch shows up as doubtful what has been regarded as most certain; it reveals contradictions inherent in what seems to have been proved by visual experience; it holds up to ridicule what seems obvious common sense, and discovers truth in the absurd.¹

The Fool castigates satirically the absurdity of men living uncon-

¹ L. Kolakowski, "The Priest and the Clown—Reflections on the Theological Heritage in Modern Thinking," quoted in Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Methuen, London, 1964, p. 135.

scious of ultimate reality. This attitude belongs to the satirical, parodystic aspect of the Theatre of the Absurd—its social criticism, its pillorying of an inauthentic, petty society. The Fool expresses the feelings of the deadness and mechanical senselessness of half-unconscious lives, the feeling of “human beings secreting inhumanity,” which Camus describes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

In certain hours of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their senseless pantomime, makes stupid everything around them. A man speaking on the telephone behind a glass partition—one cannot hear him but observes his trivial gesturing. One asks oneself, why is he alive? This malaise in front of man’s own inhumanity, this incalculable letdown when faced with the image of what we are, this “nausea”, as a contemporary writer calls it, also is the Absurd.¹

It is this experience that Ionesco expresses in plays like *The Bald Prima Donna* and *The Chairs*, and Beckett, in plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. For instance, Vladimir and Estragon wonder why on earth in the Bible only one apostle out of four refers to the two thieves, how one of them is rescued and the other, condemned, and why every one believes in what that one apostle says. Estragon suggests the solution; “People are bloody ignorant apes.”²

The fall of established values is stubbornly carried through by the Fool. He reduces illusions such as titles and social positions to the very end, to nothingness. When everything that distinguishes a man—his titles, his social position, even his name—is lost, a man can be nothing but a man. The banished Kent comes back to the king in disguise:

Lear: How now! what art thou?

Kent: A man, sir.

(I. iv, 10-11)

A king is a man; a blind man is a man; a madman is a man; a foolish old man is a man. A man is a nobody, one who suffers, who tries to give his suffering a meaning or nobility, who revolts or accepts his suf-

¹ Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, quoted in Martin Esslin’s *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1962, p. 291.

² Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Faber & Faber, London, 1955, Act I.

fering, and who must die. When a man, deprived of external accessories, becomes naked, that is, when he becomes a "shealded peascod," every one is just a man, just able to throw a shadow:

Lear: Doth any here know me?—Why, this is not Lear:
Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus?
...
Who is it that can tell me who I am?—
Fool: Lear's shadow.

(I. iv, 246-251)

This idea of a naked man is also apparent in *Macbeth*. Macbeth tries to persuade the hired murderer to assault Banquo:

First Murderer: We are men, my liege.
Macbeth: Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men;
As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
Shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves are clept
All by name of the dogs: the valued file
Distinguishes the swift, the slow, the subtle,
The houskeeper, the hunter, every one
According to the gift which bounteous nature
Hath in him closed, whereby he does receive
Particular addition, from the bill
That writes them all alike: and so of men

(III, ii, 92-101)

Despite Macbeth's words, the ironical fact is that, whatever "Particular addition"—a brave soldier or a king—he receives, he cannot be but a man, just as hounds, greyhounds, mongrels or spaniels, when deprived of illusory titles, are, after all, just dogs.

The idea of a naked man is consistently present in Beckett's works. All the persons of Beckett's plays are stripped of all external illusory appearances; they are not distinguished by social position, nor by titles; the only certain thing is that they are men, naked men. Coming to help Pozzo get up, Estragon answers him with the words of Kent:

Pozzo: . . . Who are you?
Estragon: A man.¹

¹ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act II.

Sticking to the idea that a king is naturally endowed with nobility and superiority, Lear is unaware that titles and social position are mere illusions, and that a man, stripped of those accessories, is nothing. He insists to his two bad daughters that he should have a retinue of one hundred men:

O, reason not the need: our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life's as cheap as beast's: . . .
(II. iv, 268-271)

Lear has not yet learned that in reality a man is indeed as naked and "cheap" as a beast.

In the Lear universe nature also takes part in reducing man to nothing. Nature does not care whether he is a king or a beggar. The stormy night pities neither wise men nor fools: "The impetuous blasts" catch Lear in their fury, and "make nothing of him." The four exiled wanderers—Lear, Gloucester, Edgar and the Fool—pulled down to final degradation, wander through the cold endless night, a night which, in the Fool's words, "will turn us all the fools and madmen." This stormy night symbolizes the process of realizing reality. Exposed to the raging storm, Lear generally becomes aware of the relentless reality that, now that he has abandoned the crown, he can be nothing but a "dolted old man;" "here I stand, your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man (III. ii, 19-20)." His crown usurped by Bolingbroke, Richard II reaches the same realization:

. . . What can we bequeath,
Save our deposed bodies to the ground?
Our lands, our lives, and all are Bolingbroke's,
And nothing can we call our own but death,
And that small model of the barren earth
Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.

. . . throw away respect,
Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty;
For you have but mistook me all this while:
I live with bread like you, feel want,

Taste grief, need friends:—subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?
(*Richard II.* III, ii, 149-177)

Wandering about in the waste bare-headed, Lear encounters the naked figure of Edgar, who is in the disguise of Mad Tom:

Lear: Is man no more than this? Consider
him well. Thou owest the worm no silk,
the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat
no perfume
Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated
man is no more but such a poor, bare
forked animal as thou art: . . .
(III. iv, 107-113)

Lear here faces the fact of man as a “shealded peascod,” a man deprived of every portion of the nobility of human beings; Lear has come to the realization that a man, whether a king or a nobleman, is not Hamlet’s paragon of animals,” but just a “poor, bare forked animal,” that is, “a thing itself.” In fact, Lear himself has become merely a “shealded peascod,” as the Fool puts it, or a suffering forked animal. The bare figure of Edgar aggravates Lear’s madness. He tries to tear off his own clothes, as the stage direction informs us, as if his clothes were the last illusions remaining to him.

From now on the Lear universe shows the very human situation in which Shakespeare’s or Beckett’s, “shealded peascods” find themselves. Lear, Edgar, Gloucester, and, especially, the Fool become precursor of Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, or Hamm and Clove in *Endgame*. Both Shakespeare’s and Beckett’s characters are driven to the limits of suffering. Both dramatists, eliminating everything external, represent the human situation and the problems of existence in skeleton form.

CHAPTER II LEAR AS “A SHEALDED PEASCOD”

Lear, Gloucester and Edgar, uprooted from their social positions, reach the rock-bottom of suffering; Lear goes mad, Gloucester has his

eyes gouged out, and Edgar must pretend to be Mad Tom. However, although we have compassion for them, we do not feel pity, nor are we appalled at the mystery and terror of existence as is Hamlet. On the contrary, we even find ridiculous elements in *King Lear*.

Regarded as a character, Lear is too foolish, naive and ridiculous to be regained as a tragic hero. He holds a contest of flattering among his daughters, seeking to determine which of them will best counterfeit her love for him, and divides his kingdom in accordance with the outcome. He does not understand anything below the surface; Goneril's and Regan's hypocrisy is manifest except to Lear. Treated in a cold manner by Goneril, he throws away his dignity to such an extent that he asks on his knees, Regan to protect him:

Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
(kneeling)
Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg
That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed and food.
(II. iv, 156-158)

Lear's descent from being a great, proud king to being a naked beggar who asks for clothing, housing and food is comical rather than pitiful. Together with the Fool, we feel sorry that "such a king should play bo-peep, / And go the fools among (I. iv, 193-194)." Once rejected by Regan, too, he curses her in a very childish way,

You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty,
You fen-suck'd fogs, drawn by the powerful sun,
To fall and blast her pride!
(II. iv, 168-171)

Lear still believes in the fallacy that, as he is naturally a king, it is possible for him to regain his power as a king:

. . . Thou shalt find
That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off for ever: thou shalt, I warrant thee.
(I. iv, 331-333)

It is, however, ridiculous to formulate revenge on one's own children,

however undeservedly one is treated:

Lear: 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

(II. iv, 282-285)

The Fool is right when he says, “thou hast pared thy wit o’ both sides, and left nothing i’ the middle (I. iv, 204-206).” As the Fool says, Lear seems to have become old before he has become wise. Gloucester and Edgar are not fit to be regarded as tragic heroes, either; Gloucester is too naive and credulous; Edgar lacks manliness.

Therefore, although *King Lear* deals with the problems, conflicts and themes of tragedy—human fate, the meaning of existence, freedom and inevitability, the discrepancy between the absolute and the fragile human order—the whole Lear universe turns out to be absurd. This absurd quality contemporary critics such as Jan Kott and Martin Esslin name “grotesque”; it is also one of the characteristics of Beckett’s and Ionesco’s plays. In *King Lear* the grotesque is most plainly demonstrated in Gloucester’s attempted suicide. Gloucester has reached the depths of human misery; so has Edgar, who is bound to feign Mad Tom in order to save his father. Gloucester’s suicidal leap is tragic. However, the pantomime performed by them on the stage is grotesque, for the blind Gloucester has climbed a non-existent precipice and “fallen over” onto flat boards on an empty stage. The situation of Gloucester and Edgar is tragic, but it has been shown in a grotesque, absurd pantomime. As the madman, Edgar, leads the blindman, Gloucester, to the cliff of Dover, so the madman, Lucky, leads the blindman, Pozzo, in *Waiting for Godot*. Like Gloucester and Edgar, Pozzo and Lucky are enmeshed in tremendous anguish, but their attitudes are described as absurd and grotesque. They go on traveling without any destination; it is a sand-filled bag that Lucky carries with labour, while the fat Pozzo, fallen over the sand bag, cannot get up.

Jan Kott says of the relationship between tragedy and the grotesque:

Both the tragic and the grotesque visions of the world are composed as it were

of the same elements. In a tragic and grotesque world, situations are imposed, compulsory and inescapable. Freedom of choice and decision are part of this compulsory situation, in which both the tragic hero and the grotesque actor must always lose their struggle against the absolute. The downfall of the tragic hero is a confirmation and recognition of the absolute; whereas the downfall of the grotesque actor means mockery of the absolute and its desecration. The absolute is transformed into a blind mechanism, a kind of automaton. Mockery is directed not only at the tormentor, but also at the victim, who believed in the tormentor's justice, raising him to the level of the absolute. The victim has invented his tormentor by recognizing himself as victim.¹

So, in *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon often complains, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" The two tramps strenuously face the flow of time by waiting for Godot; that is, they thus face being itself. If they can find a meaning in the act of waiting, it can be concluded that they can find a meaning in life, that is, in existence. However, the essential features of their waiting are the uncertainty of their appointment with Godot, Godot's unreliability and irrationality, and their repeated disappointment of their hopes connected with Godot. Accordingly, the act of waiting for Godot is shown to be basically nonsensical. The most grotesque and absurd quality of *Waiting for Godot* is that the two tramps are trying to give their existence a meaning, that is, to justify their suffering, by waiting for a Godot who does not come.

In *King Lear* the same kind of absurdity and grotesqueness can be seen, particularly when the characters appeal to gods who do not exist in reality. The gods are invoked throughout by all the characters, both good and bad by Lear, Gloucester, Kent, Albany, even by Edmund:

Lear: By Jupiter, I swear, no.

Kent: By Juno, I swear, ay.

(II. iv, 22-23)

At first the gods are called by Greek names. Later, they are only called gods, supposedly great and terrifying judges high above, who will surely intervene sooner or later:

Albany: If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,

¹ Kott, p. 105.

It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.

(IV. ii, 46-50)

However, the fact is that the gods do *not* intervene; they are silent. Lear, desperately believing in the existence and justice of the absolute, calls to the gods:

All the stored vengences of heaven fall
On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,
You taking air, with lameness!

(II. iv, 164-166)

Despite Lear's entreaty, however, the gods, indifferent to his anguish, never help him to execute his revenge on his bad daughters.

Gradually the tone of the play becomes more and more ironic. The sight of a ruined man invoking the gods gets ever more ridiculous. The action becomes more and more cruel, but at the same time assumes a more and more clownish quality:

Gloucester: By the kind gods, 'tis most ignobly done
To pluck me by the beard.

(III. vii, 35-36)

Gloucester's prayers before his suicide attempt sound most ridiculous. The blind Gloucester kneels and prays:

O you mighty gods!
This world I do renounce, and, in your sights,
Shake patiently my great affliction off:
If I could bear it longer, and not fall
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
My snuff and loathed part of nature should
Burn itself out

(IV. vi, 34-40)

Gloucester's prayer and suicide can have a meaning only if the gods exist. His suicide would then become a protest against undeserved suffering and the world's injustice. Even if the gods are cruel, they must take this suicide into consideration. However, as the gods and their moral order in the world do not exist at all, Gloucester's suffering turns

out to be absurd, and his praying, to be futile crying into the empty sky. Jan Kott calls this situation “a somersault on an empty stage.”¹

This terrible hollowness of heaven, that is, the absence of righteous gods, also appears in *Endgame*. Hamm, Nagg and Clov begin to pray together:

- Nagg: (clasping his hands, closing his eyes, in a gabble.)
Our Father which art—
Hamm: Silence! In silence! Where are your manners? (Pause.)
Off we go. (Attitudes of prayer. Silence. Abandoning his attitude, discouraged.) Well?
Clov: (abandoning his attitude.) What a hope! And you?
Hamm: Sweet damn all! (To Nagg.) And you?
Nagg: Wait! (Pause. Abandoning his attitude.) Nothing doing!
Hamm: The bastard! He doesn't exist!
Clov: Not yet.²

Gloucester makes his suicide attempt, but he fails to shake the world. Consequently, he cannot resist his undeserved suffering, nor escape from his suffering into death. Nothing has changed. Edgar's comment is ironical:

... had he been where he thought,
By this had thought been past.
(IV. vi, 44-45)

Thus in Shakespeare's plays, existence is often described as an intimidating situation. Hamlet wishes that “this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew (I. ii, 129-130),” but he is unable to cross over into the “undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveller returns (III. i, 79-80).” Similarly, Gloucester is anxious to cut himself off from existence, which is absurd and harsh, but he cannot. In such a situation, men can neither protest against nor alter existence. The only attitude left for them is to accept existence. It is a surrender:

... Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither,

¹ Kott, p. 121.

² Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, Faber & Faber, London, 1958, p. 38.

Ripeness is all.

(V. ii, 9-11)

Hamm expresses the same idea in *Endgame*: “you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that.”¹

Vladimir and Estragon also try in every act to commit suicide in order to escape from the terrible, intimidating situation of existence, but all in vain:

Estragon: Why don't we hang ourselves?
Vladimir: With what?
Estragon: You haven't got a bit of rope?
Vladimir: No.
Estragon: Then we can't.
Vladimir: Let's go.
Estragon: Wait, there's my belt.
Vladimir: It's too short.
Estragon: You could hang on to my legs.
Vladimir: And who'd hang on to mine.
Estragon: True.
Vladimir: Show all the same.
It might do at a pinch. But is it strong enough?
Estragon: We'll soon see. Here.
(They each take an end of the cord and pull.
It breaks. They almost fall.)
Vladimir: Not worth a curse.²

Like Shakespeare's suffering characters, Vladimir and Estragon are put on stage as skeleton figures of human beings, “shealded peascods,” deprived of every illusory external accessory. They do not trust any established order of values, such as social status, love, beauty or truth. They are fully aware that everything is uncertain and meaningless because of the constant flow of time; they know the paradox that everything is changeable, whereas nothing changes. Their last hope is pinned on waiting for Godot, but they are bound to be repeatedly disappointed by the futility of Godot's promise. They understand that suicide is the only solution for their predicament, and that suicide is preferable to

¹ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 37.

² Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act II.

living and to waiting for Godot. However, they cannot succeed in their attempts at suicide; “Hand in hand from the top of the Eiffel Tower, among the first. We were respectable in those days. Now it’s too late. They wouldn’t even let us up.”¹ Existence is imposed on them. The only attitude they can take is to wait for something, despite their repeated disappointments. Pozzo explains this human condition as follows:

. . . one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf,
one day we were born, one day we shall die
They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams
an instant, then it’s night once more.²

Gloucester, too, has finally realized this human situation:

. . . henceforth I’ll bear
Affliction till it do cry out itself
‘Enough, enough,’ and die
(IV. vi, 74-76)

In this imposing situation of existence, nothing is certain; not even salvation is promised after a tormenting period of suffering. Clov in *Endgame* still adheres to some hope:

Clov: They said to me, Here’s the place, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now you’re not a brute beast, think upon these things and you’ll see how all becomes clear. And simple! They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds.

Hamm: Enough!

Clov: I say to myself—sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you. I say to myself—sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than if you want them to let you go—one day.³

Hamm understands better than Clov. He cross-examines Clov:

But what in God’s name do you imagine? That the earth will awake in Spring?

¹ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act I.

² *Ibid.*, Act II.

³ Beckett, *Endgame*, pp. 50-51.

That the rivers and seas will run with fish again? That there's manna in heaven still for imbeciles like you?¹

Like Clov, Lear sticks to his hopeful illusion of his fictitious majesty, even in his madness:

Lear: . . . come, come; I am a king!

My masters, know you that.

Gentleman: You are a royal one, and we obey you.

Lear: Then there's life in't. Nay, an you get it, you shall get it by running. Sa, sa, sa, sa.

(IV. vi, 203-207)

He gradually becomes aware that, after all, he is nothing but "a very foolish fond old man (V. i, 84)." At last he realizes the nature of reality, he expresses his realization in a comical way:

Lear: . . . they are not
men o' their words: they told me I was every
thing; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof.

(IV. vi, 106-108)

However, Lear still stubbornly believes in the absolute, in justice and in the reward of the gods for his suffering. Even when he and Cordelia are captured by Edmund's army, he is no longer driven into such tremendous anguish as before:

Lear: Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught thee?
He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,
And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes;
The good-years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
Ere they shall make us weep: we'll see 'em starve first.

(V. iii, 20-25)

This dialogue sounds very ironical; just as the gods no longer throw down manna for Clov, so they do not throw incense for Lear; contrary to Lear's expectation, their tormentors do not starve before Lear and Cordelia weep. Although Regan and Goneril commit adultery and die miserably, they die as the result of their violent love. It does not seem the punishment of gods; rather, it seems love that destroys them.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Cordelia's death makes the gods appealed to by Lear look even more ridiculous. Cordelia is hanged for no rational reason; if Albany had sent a messenger earlier, she could have been saved. Thus Lear's suffering has no meaning, but is absurdity itself.

The conception of the absurdity of human suffering is one of the most contemporary aspects of *King Lear*. Vladimir and Estragon reach the utmost in suffering, but as their situation is absurd, their suffering itself comes to be absurd also. Likewise, the exposition of *King Lear* shows the absurd world that is to be destroyed; Lear and Gloucester are childish and stupid, and even Cordelia is not perfect because she is perverse in confessing her love for Lear. Their downfall cannot be justified, for the fate which contract them is not endowed with any ultimate virtue; it is simply stronger than human beings, that is all. It is true that through the purgatory of his wandering in the heath at a stormy night, Lear's remarkable mental progress is marked not only in his realization of reality, but also in his learning patience, love and pity toward the poor:

Lear: Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'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? O, 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.

(III. iv, 28-36)

However, after his fall the Lear world is not healed again. No brave and young Fortinbras appears to ascend the throne of England; no noble Malcolm emerges to "give our tables meat, sleep to our nights." In the end of *King Lear*, no coronation takes place. Those who are left on stage are Edgar, Kent and Albany, all of whom are also "ruined pieces of nature." Lear asks himself why such bad human beings as Goneril and Regan exist; "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" The terrible thing is that there is indeed no cause;

chance alone manages everything.

Lear has come to understand the absurdity of human situation and human suffering at last, just as the blind Hamm comes to understand everything; that the absurd human situation is imposed from without, that it is inescapable, and arbitrary and that human beings are bound on the “wheel of fire” of Fortune:

Lear: No rescue? What, a prisoner? I am even
The natural fool of fortune.
(IV. vi, 194-195)

Through suffering, Gloucester too reaches this final perception of the reality of the human condition:

As flies to wanton boys; are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport
(IV. i, 38-39)

This is what the blind Pozzo tells Vladimir, when he has fallen over the sand bag, and cannot get up:

Pozzo: I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune
Vladimir: And when was that?
Pozzo: I don't know Don't question me! The blind have
no notion of time. The things of time are hidden
from them too.¹

Kent, too, often invokes Fortune, as when he says, “Fortune, good night: smile once more: turn thy wheel! (II. ii, 179).” However, Fortune turns her wheel in a way which is indifferent to the implorings of human beings. In *Waiting for Godot*, this idea is manifest in Lucky's Joycean confession, which is concerned with the precariousness of the absolute. Lucky talks of “a personal God” who has a divine indifference to human beings, one who loves men dearly for reasons unknown which only time can reveal, and who yet has deepened that, with some exception, all will be plunged into torments of fire, again for reasons now unknown which only time can tell. According to Lucky's confession, God, who does not communicate with human beings, bestows a great

¹ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act II.

deal of his love on some of us without rational reason, whereas he hates and torments others of us, also without rational reason. Kent laments after Lear's death:

If fortune brag of two she loved and hated,
One of them we behold.

(V. iii, 279-280)

Lear is indeed one of those whom Lucky's "personal God" hates and torments vehemently without rational reason.

In the Lear universe the judgement of the gods, the absolute, is not rational, nor is their bestowal of grace reliable; both fates depend upon mere chance. Lear repines desperately in his hallucination at the injustice of his bad daughters:

Corruption in the place!
False justicer, why has thou let her 'scape?

(III. vi, 58-59)

Men are laid open to irrational and mysterious chance, as Edgar laments:

World, world, o world!
But that thy strange mutations make us hate thee,
Life would not yield to age.

(IV. i, 10-12)

Therefore, the absolute itself is seen as absurd in *King Lear*.

According to Jan Kott, "in the final instance tragedy is an appraisal of human fate, a measure of the absolute. The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience."¹ The downfall of Macbeth, for instance, is a confirmation and recognition of the absolute. On the other hand, the downfall of Lear constitutes a mockery of the absolute and its desecration. The more Lear clings to his idea of the absolute, the more absurd and grotesque his suffering becomes. Therefore, it can be said that *King Lear* represents not tragedy but grotesqueness. Edmund laughs at men who try to justify their suffering in the name of the absolute, the supernatural:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are

¹ Kott, p. 105.

sick in fortune, . . . we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.

(I. ii, 130-137)

In *Endgame*, the characters are suffering in the last days of the world. Two men, one of them blind, watch with a numb and inactive horror as the universe freezes into immobility; nature is indifferent to the last human beings, and yet "something is taking its course"¹ all the time.

Hamm: Nature has forgotten us.

Clov: There's no more nature.

Hamm: No more nature! You exaggerate.

Clov: In the vicinity.

Hamm: But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth!
Our bloom! Our ideals!

Clov: Then she hasn't forgotten us.²

Thus, in Beckett's plays, characters are forced to endure the utmost in suffering, but their situation and their conception of the absolute, as in *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*, are absurd, and so their suffering itself turns out to be absurd. As their suffering does not constitute a reaffirmation of the absolute, but rather a mockery of the absolute, Beckett's plays can be defined as grotesque, not tragic.

Mutability, which is one of the favourite themes of Beckett, is also consistently present in Shakespeare. Lear laments his present misery, comparing it with his past prosperity:

I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
I would have made them skip: I am old now,
And these same crosses spoil me.

(V. iii, 276-278)

Similarly, in *Waiting for Godot*, Lucky once used to think very prettily and to do every sort of dance, but now the best he can do is make a

¹ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

meaningless Joycean confession and performs simple, awkward movements of his arms and legs. Among Shakespeare's plays, *The Tempest* seems to me to describe mutability with the strongest emphasis. With pageant which is to celebrate the marriage contract between Ferdinand and Miranda ends with Prospero's well-known lines:

. . . There our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep

As an artist Prospero is basically identified with the painter and engraver mentioned in *Endgame* for whom Hamm had a great fondness:

Hamm: I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter-and engraver
I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness!
(Pause.) He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes.¹

Lear is torn by the great decline from his prosperous past, whereas both Prospero and the painter in *Endgame* are already aware that everything is changing, that prosperity and beauty will soon fade into "thin air," leaving "not a rack behind," or will soon turn into ashes. Vladimir expresses the same idea: "In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone, in the midst of nothingness."²

Another contemporary aspect of Shakespeare is a degradation of language such as is characteristic of the plays of Beckett and Ionesco. In

¹ Beckett, *Edgame*, p. 32.

² Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act II.

King Lear we find many nonsensical and incommunicative conversations such as those Vladimir and Estragon carry on in *Waiting for Godot*. Lear's invocations of the gods are countered by the Fool's absurd jokes; Gloucester's prayers, by Edgar's clownish demonology:

Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness.—Pray, innocent, and beware of the foul fiend The foul fiend bites my back Pur! the cat is grey

(III. vi)

Meanwhile the Fool uses a paradoxical and absurd humour which exposes the absurdity of apparent reality and of the concert of the absolute:

Lear: O me, my heart, my rising heart! but, down!
Fool: Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels
When she put 'em i' the paste alive; she knapped
'em o' the coxcombs with a stick, and cried 'Down,
wantons, down!' 'T was her brother that, in pure kindness
to his horse, buttered his hay.

(II. iv, 122-128)

Moreover, both Shakespeare and Beckett reveal the reality behind the words by showing the contradiction between the characters' actions and their verbal expression. "Let's go," say the two tramps at the end of each act of *Waiting for Godot*, but the stage direction informs us that "they don't move." The same pattern of the contradiction of language and action can be found in *Hamlet*. After Hamlet abuses Gertrude for her immorality, he repeats "good night" four times, but, actually, going on criticizing her, he does not go out until his fifth "good night." Thus, on both Shakespeare's and Beckett's stage, language is put into a contrapuntal relationship with action, thus disclosing the facts behind the language, already.

As I have already shown, *King Lear* has much in common with Beckett's works; human beings are subjected to inescapable, terrible suffering, but as the human situation is described as absurd, their suffering consequently turns out to be nonsense. In the Lear universe, as Gloucester says in Act IV, "man may rot even here;" when Kent asks mad Lear to let him kiss his hands, Lear's answer is "Let me wipe it first; it smells

of mortality (IV. vi, 136).” In *Endgame*, too, the living man is already rotting:

Hamm: You stink already. The whole place stinks of corpses.
Clov: The whole universe.¹

Similarly, both dramatists represent life as an imposed, tormenting prison for men. Clov in *Endgame* lifts the lid of the dustbin in order to find out what is happening to Nagg. “He’s crying,” he reports. Hamm replies, “Then he’s living.” The only sign of man’s living is his cry, his suffering. This is what Lear expresses in his madness:

Lear: . . . we came crying hither:
Thou know’st, the first time that we smell the air,
We wawl and cry
Gloucester: Alack, alack the day!
Lear: When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.
(IV. vi, 182-187)

When Lear has passed away, Kent says:

Vex not his ghost: O, let him pass! he hates him much
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.
(V. iii, 312-314)

Both in *King Lear* and in Beckett’s plays death means an escape from the hard human situation of life, although no salvation after death is promised.

At the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon tries to take off his pinching shoes. Likewise, Lear tries to pull off his boots in his madness. These pinching shoes or boots may be regarded as a symbol of a last, illusory accessory for them, or as a symbol of life, which is as terrible as the pinching shoes. Like Beckett, Shakespeare in *King Lear* represents this absurd human situation in skeleton form, by the help of the characters’ nonsensical conversations and their grotesque pantomime. Therefore, when we confront the Lear universe, we feel the mockery of the mysterious absolute and of the human situation rather than the

¹ Beckett, *Endgame*, p. 33.

terror of it; this mockery is the same as that which we feel in facing Beckett's universe.

CONCLUSION

The greatest difference between Shakespeare's treatment of the human situation and Beckett's lies in the point that, faced with the ultimate realities, Shakespeare's characters cannot but escape into madness, into real madness as in the case of Lear, or into feigned madness in the case of Edgar and Hamlet, whereas Beckett's persons endure unflinchingly their confrontation with the realities, never seeking any illusory escape. Actually, before their plays begin, Vladimir and Estragon, Hamm and Clov, have already gone through the stormy night "which turn us all the fools and madmen." Their experiences before the plays begin are shown in Beckett's mime play, *Act Without Words*. In this mime, we find a man flung onto the stage of life, at first obeying the call of a number of impulses, having his attention drawn to the pursuit of illusory objects by whistles from the wings, but finding real peace only when he has learned his lesson and rejects any of the material satisfactions dangled before him. In the end he sinks into complete immobility. The pursuit of objectives that recede as they are attained—inevitably so through the action of time, which changes us in the process of reaching what we want—can find release only in the recognition of nothingness, which is only reality. Vladimir, Estragon and Hamm are already aware that the ultimate realities of the human situation are nothingness and absurdity. From this viewpoint, it can be said that Beckett's plays represent the attitudes of men who are entangled in the precarious and absurd human situation, whereas *King Lear* represents the process of men's recognition of such realities as the precariousness and the absurdity of the human situation.

When Lear becomes aware of the realities, he is driven into terrible anguish and goes mad. However, as I have explained, Lear cannot be a tragic hero, but remains a fool himself. Hence, he is a "bitter fool," as the Fool rightly calls him. On the contrary, knowing the absurdity

of the human situation, Beckett's persons never make a fuss, even if they confront new, nonsensical and uncertain aspects of human condition; rather, they bravely face the realities. They, too, are fools, for in their absurd situation, they repeat absurd actions and show absurd attitudes toward existence. Therefore, we may call Beckett's characters "sweet fools." In *King Lear* it is only the Fool who, standing aside from society, expresses his intuition of being in such a way as to be a "sweet fool."

Thus, both Shakespeare and Beckett deal with such sad, tragic problems as human fate and the meaninglessness of existence. However, their plays are not all sad or grotesque. There is love, remembered happiness, an odd courtesy, a particular precision and deliberation which show that man may remain undemoralised even if defeated; both dramatists are rich in poetry, and there is even a hint of salvation. There is humour, bitter and comforting at the same time.

Why, though, did Shakespeare make Lear a "bitter fool," while Beckett represents "sweet fools"? I think one of the factors is the difference of their social backgrounds. Since two terrible world wars, mankind has confronted a universe deprived of what was once its center and its living purpose, a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, one which has therefore become disjointed, purposeless, absurd. We ourselves have gone through the stormy night of *King Lear*. This contemporary social background gave birth to a new type of play, the Theatre of the Absurd, to which Beckett and Ionesco belong. By means of a new way of expressions, the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd expose the absurdity of inauthentic ways of life, revealing a deeper layer of absurdity—the absurdity of the human condition itself in a world where the decline of religious belief has deprived man of certainty. As the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd are fully aware of this absurd human condition, they do not need to present the suffering involved in man's dawning recognition of realities; rather, they try to present their intuitive comprehension of the human situation and of existence.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, lived in the most blooming period in

the history of England. He knew disillusion in his brain, but had not experienced in his pulses, nor was he threatened by the utter fall of established values such as modern man has undergone because of the two great world wars. His mockery of absurdity of the feudal world is often revealed as Falstaff scoffs at it in *Henry IV*. In reality, however, in the Elizabethan age a very strong feudal order was established and preserved; Shakespeare himself believed in its importance, as in *Troilus and Cressida*, trusted in love, truth, beauty. Therefore, although Shakespeare intuited the same aspects of human life as the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd, in the social backgrounds of his time it was impossible, even for Shakespeare, to think of a human situation which was entirely deprived of what was considered to be the centre and the living purpose at the Elizabethan age, faith.

In one sense, then, the Theatre of the Absurd is not altogether new; more than three hundred years ago Shakespeare dealt with the ultimate realities of the absurd human situation, the central problems of the Theatre of the Absurd. In this regard, the Theatre of the Absurd has actually its own tradition. Shakespeare was aware of the absurdity and the nothingness of the human situation in the midst of "Merry England." When I consider these contemporary aspects of Shakespeare, I cannot but feel dizzy with the myriad-mindedness and the unmeasurable depth of Shakespeare's understanding of life.

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