

# Lear's Discovery

*Hisatake Jimbo*

## INTRODUCTION

*King Lear* is essentially a play of the search for self. It is the search for the true self of Lear and of humanity, the quest for Lear's identity in the personal dimension and the quest for the human reality in the universal dimension. "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (I. iv. 238)<sup>1</sup> — this is the question Lear is continually asking: "Is man no more than this?" (III. iv. 105) — this is a part of the discovery he acquires. The personal and the universal dimensions are inseparable and constitute an organic whole in the play. Lear is a public figure, the king, and also a private man, the father of three daughters. His tragedy is not only one of kinship but also one of kingship. Thus "Who am I?" and "What is man?" are two sides of the same coin. *King Lear* is an enquiry into human existence; the play presents a cruel and irrational world which must be understood, and Lear is concerned with the process of understanding the absurd condition and situation of human beings.

The main part of this paper is a discussion on Lear's search for self and his discovery. However, in discussing the theme of discovery, I will have to make a continual reference to the view of the world presented in the play. That is because the discovery of Lear is deeply connected with the world-view presented.

### I. WHICH OF YOU SHALL WE SAY DOTH LOVE US MOST ?

The whole tragedy of Lear springs from this strange and irrational

love-test. It may be possible to justify Shakespeare's use of this action as a merely folk-tale element in the play. Still the audience will recognize the absurdity of the situation. No one can deny that "Lear's staging of the 'love-contest' seems too ridiculous, too transparently wrong, even if Lear were in his dotage."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it is illuminating to think that "Lear is seeking some reassurance of identity"<sup>3</sup> as a father. He is trying to reassure himself of the love of his daughters. At this stage, Lear does not know what love means. His concept of love is immature, selfish, and materialistic. He is easily flattered by the pretended answers of Goneril and Regan. In comparison, Cordelia is true and honest in her reply of love. Nevertheless, Lear gets angry at Cordelia's answer: "I love your Majesty/According to my bond; no more no less" (I. i. 92-3). Lear discovers that Cordelia's answer does not measure up to his expectation and satisfaction. Technically speaking, this is the initial discovery of Lear. All other discoveries that follow are counter-discoveries. Anyway, we see no adequate reasons for his fury. Lear banishes his joy in his wrath: "Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her" (I. i. 129). How can we interpret this violent outburst of Lear? His anger is absurd. It is wrath and fury, in Camus' phrase "les fureurs du corps,"<sup>4</sup> that bring about his tragedy. A jet of passion is let loose and Lear condemns Cordelia to brutal exile. Cordelia may be a bit rigid, obstinate, insistent, and tactless in her manner of expression, but her attitude can be fully justified. One of the most convincing explanations of her actions is as follows: "The apparently proud isolation of Cordelia in the first scene is only one aspect of 'the proper love of myself'"<sup>5</sup> and "proper love of the self is a pre-requisite for proper love of one's neighbour."<sup>6</sup> Lear cannot see this aspect of love and so he loses his most precious jewel. He is also deaf to the desperate protestations of Kent, who speaks plainly against Lear's injustice to Cordelia:

Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak  
 When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound

When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state ;  
 And, in thy best consideration, check  
 This hideous rashness : answer my life my judgment,  
 Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least ;  
 Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds  
 Reverb no hollowness.

(I. i. 147-54)

Lear's choler doubles at these words, so he banishes his faithful Earl of Kent. Irrational rage devours the whole body of the king. His judgment is out of joint. Thus Lear creates an absurd situation, from which he can never escape. It is worth noting here that Kent's banishment is an immediate parallel event to Cordelia's banishment. One is the breach of king-subject relationship and the other is the breach of family relationship. The personal dimension and the political, public dimension are fused together and Lear's passion is the cause both of his domestic tragedy and of the destruction of his kingdom.

Another fatal mistake he commits is the division of the kingdom. Once the crown, authority in the kingdom, is split into two, it is too foolish and vain to assert, "Only we shall retain/The name and all th' addition to a king" (I. i. 135-6). Lear lives in illusion, while reality is cruel. Regan and Goneril usurp his power and swiftly go into action: "We must do something, and i' th' heat" (I. i. 307). They begin to reveal their monstrous characters and their hideous cruelty. In this way Lear's mistakes in understanding bring about his tragedy. Heilman is right when he says that "Lear, then, invites tragedy by three errors: he mistakes the nature of kingship; he establishes a wrong method for evaluating love; and he misinterprets the value of certain statements about love." Lear is blind to reality; he does not know the horror of mis-used political power and authority; he is too self-centered to know the true love of Cordelia and Kent; and, the worst of all, he loses himself in his monstrous rage. Thus the very first scene of the play is the fundamental basis of this tragedy.

## II. DOST THOU CALL ME FOOL ? BOY ?

The Fool in *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's masterpieces. He is not a mere fool, he is a clairvoyante. Here lies the fundamental paradox: The Fool is a sage. He is a wise fool. The Fool's talk seems nonsense on the surface, but it is to the point and uncovers truth. His role is evidently that of a tutor who educates Lear in his grim humour. Or his role may be as a chorus, as a commentator by means of his songs and antics. This point is made clear by G. W. Knight: "From the first signs of Goneril's cruelty, the Fool is used as a chorus, pointing us to the absurdity of the situation. He is indeed an admirable chorus, increasing our pain by his emphasis on a humour which yet will not serve to merge the incompatible in a unity of laughter."<sup>8</sup> The Fool is the consciousness of the irrational world and so has strong affinity with the bitter fool Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida*. They both regard the world as the stage of fools and are free from any illusions. The Fool replies to Lear's question:

*Lear.* Dost thou call me fool, boy?

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

(I. iv. 154-6)

This answer is much more poignant and cruel than that of Oswald. Lear asks angrily, "Who am I, sir?" (I. iv. 83); and his reply is "My Lady's father" (I. iv. 84). Oswald's retort is milder. Lear has to go through the merciless education of the Fool. The Fool's language is a kind of reversal of reason and of logic. Nevertheless, he flashes upon truth after truth. He has his own mode of recognition. When the world is irrational and illogical, only clowning is possible.

Lear is not aware of his mistakes in identity in the opening scene; he never doubts his judgment. Nevertheless, he is forced to be conscious of the incident through the Fool's nagging. Shakespeare is

extremely clever in presenting this situation. A good example is his use of the word 'nothing.' The Fool intentionally concludes his first song (I. iv. 124-33) with nonsense :

*Kent.* This is nothing, Fool.

*Fool.* Then 'tis the breath of an unfee'd lawyer ;  
 you gave me nothing for 't. Can you make no use of  
 nothing, Nuncle ?

*Lear.* Why, no, boy ; nothing can be made out of nothing.

(I. iv. 134-9)

The word 'nothing' is an echo of Cordelia's "Nothing, my lord" (I. i. 87). We can realize at this stage that Lear's demand, "Nothing will come of nothing: speak again" (I. i. 90), showed that "he, rather than Cordelia, was the beggar for love on that occasion."<sup>9</sup> Lear does not yet know this explicitly, though it is in his subconscious. It is through the Fool that this subconscious gradually come into consciousness. The Fool has no hesitation in replying to Lear's question about his identity :

*Lear.* Does any here know me ? This is not Lear :

Does Lear walk thus ? speak thus ? Where are his eyes ?

Either his notion weakens, his discernings

Are lethargied — Ha ! waking ? 'tis not so.

Who is it that can tell me who I am ?

*Fool.* Lear's shadow.

(I. iv. 234-9)

Lear's abdication has left him no more than the shadow of his former self. The natural bond between father and daughter is cracked. The king-subject relationship is upturned. Here is the reversal of the true family relationship and of the normal king-subject relationship. The Fool continues in the ruthless manner : "now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now ; I am a Fool, thou art nothing" (I. iv. 200-2). The Fool peels the onion named Lear to the last, until what is left is 'nothing.' This shows the utter loss of Lear's identity.

Jorgensen's remark on these lines support this point: "Without 'the figure,' a word connoting rank, stature, trappings, Lear is nothing. And it should be noted that a zero is complete absence of identity."<sup>10</sup>

Goneril checks her father as a babe and reduces his retainers. She has a growing sense of conscious power and intends to make 'an obedient father' of Lear. Lear discovers that Goneril is unkind and cruel to him. Lear also begins to discover his fault, although confusedly, cursing his seeming-filial daughter Goneril:

O most small fault,  
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!  
Which, like an engine, wrench'd my frame of nature  
From the fix'd place, drew from my heart all love,  
And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear!  
Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in,  
And thy dear judgment out!

(I. iv. 275-81)

This is Lear's first mention of Cordelia after her banishment. He seems to be conscious of his folly; we can even discern a sign of repentance in "I did her wrong, ..." (I. v. 24). Nevertheless, this discovery is still a passing one. Though he is aware of his error, he refuses to admit it. Lear's cursing proceeds from passion, which is the driving force of action in the play. *King Lear* is rightly to be called the tragedy of wrathful rage. Enraged by Goneril's unkindness, Lear leaves her and goes to his other seeming-filial daughter Regan, only to be betrayed again.

### III. LET'S SEE : COME ; IF IT BE NOTHING, I SHALL NOT NEED SPECTACLES.

The underplot of Gloucester is introduced in the opening dialogue and thereafter develops parallel with the main plot. Gloucester is also

fatal in his lack of insight; we can easily see that “he is tragically slow in seeing what is implied in the situations in which he finds himself.”<sup>11</sup> He is foolishly trapped by Edmund’s forged letter and denounces the innocent Edgar. Once the legitimate Edgar is banished, the bastard Edmund is on his way to power. The unseeing Gloucester assures the bastard of his land and thus makes him his heir. These are his fatal mistakes and the causes of his tragedy. What he needs, as Lear does, is insight. Gloucester’s line which is used as the heading of this chapter is paradoxical in the sense that “Spectacles are a symbol of what he does need.”<sup>12</sup> Gloucester is as hasty and thoughtless as Lear in his judgment:

... the bond crack’d ’twixt son  
and father. This villain of mine comes under  
the prediction; there’s son against father: the  
King falls from bias of nature; there’s father  
against child. We have seen the best of our  
time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and  
all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our  
graves. Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall  
lose thee nothing: do it carefully.

(I. ii. 113-21)

The theme of the reversal of the family relationship is inherent in this speech of Gloucester. In this way the Gloucester plot is an immediate comment on Lear plot.

Here I will make a brief observation on the theme of Nature in the play, for it is deeply connected with the theme of the family relationship. It is also linked with the view of the world presented in *King Lear* and ultimately what Lear discovers as the last reality. In fact, the Nature theme in *King Lear* is so deep and vast that one is overwhelmed and cannot say what it really means. Nature is Edmund’s goddess, and at the same time Lear invokes her in cursing Goneril. There is surely an essential difference between Edmund’s

Nature and Lear's Nature. Danby's definition of the two conflicting views of Nature is helpful: "The Benignant Nature of Lear"<sup>13</sup> and "The Malignant Nature of Edmund."<sup>14</sup> The former is the traditional Nature of Bacon and Hooker, one which is closely tied with Reason and God. The other is the revolutionary Nature of Hobbes, one which prefigures the Darwinian theory of the Survival of the Fittest; this Nature is Appetite, Lust and Self-Interest. These two contrasting views of Nature come into conflict, and the play reveals the sway of Edmund's Nature over Lear's Nature. Gloucester's banishment of Edgar is one aspects of this process. The 'natural' bastard Edmund destroys the still more 'natural' relationship between the father and his legitimate son. Thus through the conflict between two views of Nature, there develops anarchy and disintegration in the two families and in society.

#### IV. THE KING WOULD SPEAK WITH CORNWALL: THE DEAR FATHER WOULD WITH HIS DAUGHTER SPEAK, COMMANDS, TENDS SERVICE.

Lear makes his journey to Regan and finds her and Cornwall gone to Gloucester's castle. Kent arrives at the castle before him and quarrels with Oswald. As a result, Kent is put into the stocks by Cornwall and his wife. Lear reaches the castle with the Fool and his reduced retainers. When he faces Kent in the stocks, he cannot believe this situation and inquires:

*Lear.* What's he that hath so much thy place mistook

To set thee here?

*Kent,*

It is both he and she,

Your son and daughter.

*Lear.* No.

*Kent.* Yes.

*Lear.* No, I say.

*Kent.* I say, yea.



*Lear.* No, no; they would not.

(II. iv. 12-9)

Shakespeare's use of simple words is marvellous. Who could write such effective, forceful lines? Every single words really counts and tells what is happening in Lear's mind. Although he senses his daughter's schemings, Lear suppresses his fears and suspicions and tries to act as a king and a dear father; the "two notions of himself that he most desperately clings"<sup>15</sup> to. He calls on Regan and Cornwall for their kind entertainment. However, he is shocked to find Goneril enter upon the scene. Thereupon he prays:

O Heavens,  
If you do love old men, if your sweet sway  
Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,  
Make it your cause; send down and take my part!

(II. iv. 191-4)

But the Gods do not intervene. Reality is cruel; his daughters have no mercy for him. Lear is utterly disillusioned and bursts out with the "O! reason not the need" speech (II. iv. 266-88). This outburst of Lear marks "a turning point of the play; a salient moment in the development of Lear's character."<sup>16</sup> Lear cannot debase himself to reason with his daughters and so gives them up. A king, uncrowned, has no power, and their dear father is not at all dear to Goneril and Regan. The old king now senses the absurdity of the situation he is in. He cannot stand this havoc and again prays; "You, Heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!..." (II. iv. 273). His heart is strained and cracked, but he cannot let himself weep.

No, I'll not weep:  
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart  
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws  
Or ere I'll weep. O Fool! I shall go mad.

(II. iv. 285-8)

Lear really does go mad. Moreover, at the same moment the storm of madness wells up in him, the actual storm is also heard in the distance. Destruction is approaching. Madness is thus even a kind of relief for the old king. Note the persuasive comment of G. B. Harrison on this point: "To a man suffering from intolerable strain and anguish, Nature grants four degrees of relief: words, tears, madness, death. Lear has early exhausted the relief of words; Cordelia angers him and she is cursed; Goneril hurts him and she is cursed with superlative imprecations. He will not allow himself to weep; the next state must be madness, unless his throbbing heart snaps first."<sup>17</sup>

Goneril and Regan are shrewd realists; they look at things practically and realistically, and they see too rationally their immediate concerns. They are incarnations of self-interests. Lear was blind to their identities, but now he is to learn their basic natures in his storm of madness. Appearance and reality are quite different. His awakening into truth, his deep discovery, is to be violent and merciless. Only madness saves him from death — the last inevitable cruelty of Nature. Thus the theme of madness is the core of the play. Lear's search for self and his discovery are most convincingly developed in the presentation of his madness.

An important fact to notice here is the absence of Albany in this scene. It foreshadows the coming breach between him and Goneril. Actually she will not need him in her scheming; rather, he will become an embarrassing obstacle to her.

#### V. HERE I STAND, YOUR SLAVE, A POOR, INFIRM, WEAK, AND DESPIS'D OLD MAN.

The first scene of the Act III is a prelude to the following violent scenes. Kent asks a question; "Who's there, besides foul weather?" (III. i. 1). A Gentleman answers: "One minded like the weather, most unquietly" (III. i. 2). This reply introduces into the play the idea that the spiritual disorder and its external projection are related in the

storm. In fact, in *King Lear*, the idea of storm has a double meaning: Lear's inner storm and the actual, external storm. It unifies the private and the public, the individual and the universal, in its agony. The storm symbolizes universal anarchy and disintegration. Thus there is a fundamental unity between the external and the internal commotion. It is one of the great scenes of Shakespeare, though many have questioned its actability.

Lear defies the storm, "Contending with the fretful elements" (III. i. 4), only to be beaten in the end. Again the Fool has a sane view: "here's a/night pities neither wise men nor Fools" (III. ii. 12-3). The king, in his defiance, momentarily discovers himself as "A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man" (III. ii. 20). This is an important step in the development of Lear's search for self and his discovery. The Fool tries to outjest his master, but Lear fretfully replies in the stoic manner: "No, I will be the pattern of all patience (III. ii. 37). Another aspect which is notable is his sense of sin: "I am a man/More sinn'd against than sinning" (III. ii. 59-60). This is also an obvious step forward in the progress of his self-discovery. Lear's internal storm overwhelms the scene and he is on the verge of breaking. There is natural convulsion in both his mind and the physical world. Through the suffering of this tempestuous situation, the old king discovers truth after truth: "this tempest in my mind/Doth from my senses take all feeling else/Save what beats there — filial ingratitude!" (III. iv. 12-4). The violent forces of the elements are in full rage. Lear desperately endures and again condemns his daughters: "In such a night/To shut me out? Pour on; I will endure./In such a night as this? O Regan, Goneril!" (III. iv. 17-9). Compare the repetitious use of the phrase "in such a night" with that in *The Merchant of Venice*. In Belmont, when Lorenzo and Jessica are united in romantic love, he says blissfully: "The moon shines bright. In such a night as this, ..." (V. i. 1-23). The tragic world is far away from their paradisiac and idyllic world. What a sharp contrast is here! The tempestuous night in *King Lear* is a Purgatory, where all men suffer and are reduced to nothing. In this

Purgatory, Lear climbs up to his self-knowledge, the discovery of his self. He discovers that he shares common humanity and destiny with the poor, the base and the forsaken :

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? 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)

He sympathizes with the plight and agony of common humanity. This sympathy is not acquired easily, but through his flesh. His sufferings have made him aware of those of others. We must allow that this soliloquy is "one of those passages which make one worship Shakespeare."<sup>18</sup> In a sense, Lear's search for self culminates here. His identification with the poor is his ultimate self-discovery. However, the tragic wheel is in full circle and Lear has become one of its cogs. The play cannot stop yet.

## VI. FIRST LET ME TALK WITH THIS PHILOSOPHER.

The Fool goes into the hovel and then runs right back out, crying "Come not in here, Nuncle; here's a spirit" (III. iv. 39). Edgar disguised as a madman comes out of the hovel. Now we have a trio of madmen; Lear in his lunacy, Edgar in his pretended madness, and the Fool, foolish by profession. The Fool is astonished to find that the poor Tom speaks his language and remarks: "This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen" (III. iv. 79). There is, paradoxically, inherent sanity in the mad scene; what Heilman calls "Reason in

Madness.”<sup>19</sup> When the world is in madness, truth is often perceived through madmen. They have purer eyes than anyone in the play. It is by the reversal of reason and logic that they come near to truth. Looking at poor naked Tom, Lear identifies himself with unaccommodated man. He sees into the heart of things—the naked mode of human existence:

Is man no more than this? Consider  
him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the  
beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no per-  
fume. Ha! here's three on 's are sophisticated;  
thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man  
is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal  
as thou art.

(III. iv. 105–11)

This is Lear's parallel discovery to that of “Poor naked wretches” speech.

Exasperated by the cruel act of Goneril and Regan, Gloucester hastens to seek the old king in the storm. The entry of Gloucester brings together the mainplot and the underplot, the parallel stories of two families. Gloucester is now on the side of the king and defies Cornwall. He finds Lear accompanied by madmen. Gloucester offers his help, but Lear does not have ears to listen. He is less in need of raiment, food, and bed than of the meaning of his life and existence; his quest continues, “First let me talk with this philosopher” (III. iv. 158). It is significant that the mad king addresses poor Tom as ‘philosopher’ three times in a short period. Edgar is taking over the role of the Fool as a tutor of Lear. Many have agreed that *King Lear* is a “philosophical drama”<sup>20</sup> and that the insanity theme is the core of the philosophy of the play. The analysis of this aspect by the Polish critic Jan Kott is radical but to the point. He says, “Madness is in *King Lear* a philosophy, a conscious crossing over to the position of the Clown.”<sup>21</sup> Edgar, in this sense, is a philosopher like Hamlet, in his

feigned madness.

In the hovel the three madmen are involved with the trial of Goneril and Regan. This mock trial scene, a play within the play, is a concrete dramatization of the justice theme. Granville-Barker's notes on this scene are illuminating: "The lunatic mummery of the trial comes near to something we might call pure drama — as one speaks of pure mathematics or pure music — since it cannot be rendered into other terms than its own."<sup>22</sup> Lear begins the trial in this way:

It shall be done; I will arraign them straight.  
Come, sit thou here, most learned justicer;  
Thou, sapient sir, sit here.

(III. vi. 20-2)

The beggar is 'most learned,' and the Fool is 'sapient.' Insanity and true vision stand in the closest connection. Here is the reversal of accepted values or standards. Paradoxical truth permeates the scene. After some irrelevant lines of Tom and the Fool, the mad king begins the prosecution:

Arraign her first; 'tis Goneril. I here take  
my oath before this honourable assembly, she  
kick'd the poor King her father.

(III. vi. 47-9)

These lines remind us of the love-test of the opening scene, in which Lear was a false judge, and of the foolish basis of his tragedy. The lines are grimly comic and show none of the dignity of Lear the king. Lear's shattered mind senses the fundamental incongruity of his suffering: "Is there any cause in/nature that make these hard hearts?" (III. vi. 78-9). The external world is indifferent to Lear's agony. The universe is imbecile. There is left only a ridiculous situation. It is true when Knight asserts that "the core of the play is an absurdity, an indignity, an incongruity."<sup>23</sup>

Gloucester comes back to the hovel with the news that there is a

plot to kill the king. He asks Kent to take his master to Dover where Cordelia waits. This action of Gloucester is to be immediately revenged. It will bring him to exile, blindness, and death. Kent and the Fool lay the king in the litter and bear him off to Dover. The Fool disappears completely from the stage at this point. He is not needed any more, partly because his education of Lear is consummated and partly because Lear himself has become a fool; in other words, "Lear's Fool disappears from the play at the moment when his master, as a madman, can carry on the Fool's role."<sup>24</sup> Lear's last phrase in this mad trial scene is: "We'll go to supper i' th' /morning" (III. vi. 86-7). The Fool's comment on it, "And I'll go to bed at noon" (III. vi. 88), is his last speech in the play. There is a fundamental similarity of expression between these two speeches. Lear now speaks the language of the Fool.

## VII. ALL DARK AND COMFORTLESS.

We have already noticed the tension growing between Gloucester and the wicked trio of Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall. Gloucester has taken the side of the king. Edmund enkindles Cornwall's fury against his father-in-law and his scheming swiftly bears fruit. He declares that "The younger rises when the old doth fall" (III. iii. 27), and usurps his father's position cunningly. Cornwall makes him Earl of Gloucester. The bastard is ascending the steps of Power, and the crown is not far above.

Gloucester is caught on the charge of treason and brought before Cornwall and Regan, the most hideous couple of the play. This is another trial scene, but this time it is cruel and real. Gloucester is blinded by the vengeful Cornwall and Regan. The horrifying physical suffering of Gloucester is effectively revealed through the passionate cruelty of monstrous Cornwall and Regan. The bloodthirsty animals prey on the helpless victim; this violent action on the stage surely shocks the audience with its physical horror. Shakespeare did not

have any hesitation in presenting violent actions on the stage. In fact, his plays are full of slaughter, duels, suicide, and war. This blinding is meant to have a violent effect on the stage. Besides we know that “the sight of physical torment, to the uneducated, brings laughter.”<sup>25</sup> And “Shakespeare’s England delighted in watching both physical torment and the comic ravings of actual lunacy.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, Shakespeare did not treat violence and lunacy just as materials for mirth. He gave much deeper meanings to both physical torment and madness — that is, ‘inner agony’ in physical torment and ‘reason in madness.’ At any rate, Cornwall is ruthless, cruel, and brutal: “Upon these eyes of thine I’ll set my foot” (III. vii. 67). One of the servants cannot bear this extreme cruelty and tries to stop Gloucester’s blinding. He draws his sword against Cornwall, but he is stabbed to death from the back by Regan. Cornwall is also wounded fatally, but he gouges out the remaining eye of Gloucester :

*Corn.* Out, vile jelly!  
Where is thy lustre now?  
*Glou.* All dark and comfortless.

(III. vii. 82-4)

Here is no optimism. The world is irrational and infernal. Justice is merely an instrument of the powerful to oppress the weak. The punishment of Gloucester is monstrous; “all illusion is contemptuously thrust aside. ... and the mockery of justice is made explicit in Cornwall’s ruthless play upon the word ‘see’.”<sup>27</sup>

When Gloucester is informed that his dear son Edmund is his accuser, he bursts out: “O my follies! Then Edgar was abus’d” (III. vii. 90). The blind old man recognizes his folly and ‘sees’ the truth about Edgar. The birth of spiritual understanding is confirmed at the moment when Gloucester loses his sight. Here is the Sophoclean paradox: the blind see better. In *Oedipus Rex*, the blind seer Tiresias knows the cause of the plague; but King Oedipus, the shrewd solver of riddles, must seek it. Finally, when all truths are uncovered,



Oedipus blinds himself to see better. Those who 'see' with their own eyes, who are proud of their clear-sightedness, are betrayed by their sight. Lear and Gloucester were blind in a very real and tragic sense. Both of them are beginning to see better. Gloucester's insight grows after he is blinded. Nevertheless, the physical torment drives him to near madness. Thus we have at least four madmen in the play: the Fool, Edgar, Lear, and Gloucester. *King Lear* is rightly to be called the stage of fools: there are "Pas moins de quatre fous, l'un par métier, l'autre par volonté, les deux derniers par tourment: quatre corps désordonnés, quatre visages indicibles d'une même condition."<sup>28</sup> Though their madness do not belong to the same type, the truth is that madness is a mode of perception for them. It is through madness that they can have a possibility of communication with each other. Thus madness functions positively in the play.

### VIII. 'TIS THE TIMES' PLAGUE, WHEN MADMEN LEAD THE BLIND.

Regan savagely commands: "Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell/His way to Dover" (III. vii. 92-3). Gloucester is thus hurled out of his own castle like a dying dog. It is savagely grotesque that the host of the castle is kicked out into the dark and wild night by his guests. His subsequent grim pilgrimage to Dover is a pilgrimage of self-discovery. He now knows that "I stumbled when I saw" (IV. i. 19), and his gods do not help him:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods;  
They kill us for their sport.

(IV. i. 36-7)

The Gods are merely stronger than human beings. They are conceived of as blind forces. They are irrelevant and indifferent to men. At any rate, Gloucester learns much through his suffering. His discovery corresponds to that of Lear (III. iv. 28-36):

Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,  
 That slaves your ordinance, that will not see  
 Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly;  
 So distribution should undo excess,  
 And each man have enough.

(IV. i. 67-71)

Thus the self-discovery of Gloucester parallels that of Lear. Gloucester also has learned to sympathize with the poor and the weak. We do not know why he wants to end his life at Dover. Perhaps it is an irrational urge. The blind old man asks the beggar to lead him there. Edgar, the mad beggar, leads the blind Gloucester to Dover. "'Tis the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind" (IV. i. 46) — this is an ambiguous line. Its obvious meaning is that it is the times' plague when madmen like poor Tom lead the blind man like Gloucester. The alternative meaning may be that it is the times' plague when mad rulers lead blind people.

Let us look at these mad rulers for a while. Cornwall's wound is deadly; he dies soon after the blinding of Gloucester. Goneril and Albany's breach becomes explicit. She rebukes her husband's soft and merciful character. Albany is now fully aware of the hideous quality of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund:

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

(IV. ii. 49-50)

This is the vision of life Albany deduces from looking at his wife, Edmund, and Regan. Goneril is disgusted with her husband and tries to woo Edmund. Regan, now a widow, wants to keep the bastard as her lover. This triangular relationship of lust is bestial and ugly; it will ultimately destroy all of them. They will 'prey on' themselves.

## IX. THIS GREAT STAGE OF FOOLS.

The blind Gloucester reaches the country near Dover, led by Edgar. He is trying to end his life by leaping off a cliff into the sea. Edgar's plan is, though, to save his father. He persuades his blind father that they are on the verge of the precipice. Gloucester kneels in his last prayer and throws himself forward. In reality, he falls flat on the ground at his feet; he is talked into believing that he has fallen from the cliff and has been miraculously saved. This ludicrous scene shows the grim reality of humanity. The theme of illusion and reality is apparent in this action. John Lawlor argues this point in this way: "There is no single episode in Shakespeare which so conveys the helplessness of man, clinging to the illusion that the gods intervene in our affairs."<sup>29</sup> We can grasp the meaning of this scene by considering its form of presentment on the stage. Should it be realistic enough to horrify the audience again? In the Elizabethan theater, the scene could be acted realistically if necessary: "On the stage of the Globe, ... Gloucester's fall could be realistic enough if he dropped from the balcony above."<sup>30</sup> But the whole meaning of the fall would be lost if it were thus performed. Gloucester's fall should be ridiculous, grotesque, and absurd. The stage is for fools; "this entire scene is written for a very definite type of theatre, namely pantomime"<sup>31</sup> says Jan Kott, and "this pantomime only makes sense if enacted on a flat and level stage."<sup>32</sup> Gloucester's suicide attempt is mocked, for there are no absolutes in the play. Gloucester's situation is cruel and tragic, for "If there are no gods, suicide is impossible. There is only death. Suicide cannot alter human fate, but only accelerate it. It ceases to be a protest and becomes the acceptance of the world's greatest cruelty — death. It is a surrender."<sup>33</sup> Gloucester's suicide ends in failure and he is still lost in illusion; he thinks that "the clearest Gods ... have preserved" (IV. vi. 73-4) him. He is deceived; there are no gods in the play; and "the whole situation is grotesque. From the beginning to the end. It is

waiting for a Godot who does not come.”<sup>34</sup>

Now we come to the climax of Lear’s madness. It is the scene where Gloucester, after his failure to kill himself, meets the insane king, fantastically dressed with wild flowers. Lear now speaks the Fool’s language; his words seem nonsense, ridiculous, and absurd; but really they are full of deep truth. In fact, Lear reaches the last stage of his self-discovery in this mad scene. He recognizes that “they are not men o’ their words: they told/me I was everything; ’tis a lie, I am not ague-proof” (IV. vi. 106–8). The lunatic king interprets afresh the world around him in the Fool’s language, which reverses normal human standards. He clearly sees the fundamental human condition in the world, the imposed situation:

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:  
 Thou know’st the first time that we smell the air  
 We wawl and cry. ...  
 ...  
 When we are born, we cry that we are come  
 To this great stage of fools.

(IV. vi. 180–5)

Thus, Lear, in his lunacy, discovers deep truth. Here is another paradox: the insane see more clearly than the sane.

## X. THE RACK OF THIS TOUGH WORLD.

Lear is obsessed with the wrongs Goneril and Regan have committed and denounces them:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,  
 Though women all above:  
 But to the girdle do the Gods inherit,  
 Beneath is all the fiend’s: there’s hell, there’s darkness,  
 There is the sulphurous pit — burning, scalding,

Stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!  
 Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary,  
 To sweeten my imagination.

(IV. vi. 126-33)

Regan and Goneril are rational animals. They are rational enough to seek their self-interest, while they are lustful enough to become monstrous beasts. Lear's desire to sweeten his imagination will be fulfilled only by Cordelia.

His search for self is in its last stage when he wakes up from his mad sleep and finds his faithful Cordelia beside him. The old king is at last in the arms of a loving daughter. He cannot perceive this reality when he first wakes:

You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave;  
 Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound  
 Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
 Do scald like molten lead.

(IV. vii. 45-8)

Lear thinks he is still in purgatory or hell. He would rather end his life than be tortured on the cruel rack of this ruthless world. However, he discovers a different situation; here is a momentary heaven. He is humbled: "I am a very foolish fond old man" (IV. vii. 60), he says, and then he repeats, "I am old and foolish" (IV. vii. 84). Lear, although only momentarily, returns to full sanity:

*Lear.* I know you do not love me; for your sisters  
 Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:  
 You have some cause, they have not.

*Cor.* No cause, no cause.

(IV. vii. 73-5)

Lear finally discovers his initial mistakes and the love of Cordelia. This scene is full of beauty and compassion. It owes much of its

sublime quality to Cordelia. She seems “an image of Nature in action,”<sup>35</sup> one who “redeems nature from the general curse/Which twain have brought her to” (IV. vi. 207-8). Forgiveness purifies the natural relationship between father and daughter.

If the play had ended in this reconciliation scene, *King Lear* would be a tragicomedy—a tragedy with a happy ending—the type of play Shakespeare wrote in his later period. However, the play goes on and we have the last horrible event, Cordelia’s hanging. Cordelia’s forces are vanquished, and Edmund imprisons Lear and Cordelia. Lear does not care about this turning of his fortune any more; he is only extremely happy with his temporary saviour Cordelia:

Come, let’s away to prison;  
 We two alone will sing like birds i’ th’ 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.

(V. iii. 8-17)

However, even this pious and humble hope will be shattered. Before the final hideous scene, we are shown the self-destructive deaths of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund; they truly ‘preyed on’ themselves. Just after the triumph of the British army, Regan proclaims that she will marry Edmund, but instead she is poisoned to death by Goneril. Albany arrests Edmund for high treason, and the bastard is finally slain by Edgar. Goneril cannot escape death any more, and so she kills herself with a knife. The three wicked beings “Now marry in an instant” (V. iii. 229). Another death is then reported—that of Gloucester; his heart, “twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,/Burst smilingly”

(V. iii. 198-9).

Now we come to the culmination of the cruelty. The old Lear appears on the stage with Cordelia dead in his arms. It is as if Lear were "stricken Humanity holding murdered Nature in its arms."<sup>36</sup> His dream of a happy life in prison is cracked and dissolved into thin air.

Howl, howl, howl! O! you are men of stones:  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.

(V. iii. 257-9)

Edmund's death is only a "trifle here" (V. iii. 295). Lear's heart then has its final fatal attack. The blissful reunion with Cordelia was only transitory. Lear discovers that the world is truly cruel, irrational, and absurd.

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!

(V. iii. 305-8)

Here is no optimism. It is of course Cordelia who is referred to in 'my poor fool,' but we naturally remember the Fool. If we remember that "the Fool acts as a sort of divided personality externalized from the King,"<sup>37</sup> it is possible to think that Lear lost a part of himself when he lost the Fool. Finally he loses all — Cordelia and his own life.

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,  
Look there, look there!

(V. iii. 310-1)

Lear's cracked heart bursts on "the rack of this tough world" (V. iii. 314). He dies in utter despair. His death strikes us with awe. Bradley maintains that Lear dies in ecstasy and in the unbearable joy

that Cordelia yet lives.<sup>38</sup> Bradley's interpretation is not altogether impossible, but the play as a whole seems to offer no joy. Kent's comment, "All's cheerless, dark, and deadly" (V.iii.290), is probably the final tone of the deep tragedy of *King Lear*.

### CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to analyze the process of Lear's search for self and his discovery and to determine the vision of reality which the play ultimately shows. Lear's egocentric character is gradually destroyed, and he comes to admit his mistakes in judgment. In madness, he identifies himself with the base and the poor. Finally he discovers himself as a poor old man when he is reunited with Cordelia. However, even this humility becomes meaningless when the absurdity and cruelty of the world kills Cordelia and the hero. We have to face the harsh facts of human fate sooner or later. The situation imposed upon humanity is ruthless, dark, and heavy. No one can escape from it. The universe is hostile and alien to men. The last reality we can grasp in the play is the irrationality and absurdity of life itself. Kott summarises this fact: "All that remains at the end of this gigantic pantomime is the earth — empty and bleeding."<sup>39</sup> All human toils, frets and yearnings are brought to nothing. Thus *King Lear* is "a vast piece of unreason and grotesqueness,"<sup>40</sup> a play that "makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies."<sup>41</sup> The world has ceased to make sense. The conclusion is pessimistic, because Shakespeare's tragic vision itself gives no room for optimism in *King Lear*. What Lear discovers at the end is the horror of the human condition, the nonsensical life we live, and the nonsensical death we die.



**Notes :**

<sup>1</sup>All quotations of *King Lear* are taken from the Arden edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London, 1952).

<sup>2</sup>Paul A. Jorgensen, *Lear's Self-Discovery* (Berkeley, 1967), 94.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>4</sup>Albert Camus, *Le mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris 1942), 110.

<sup>5</sup>John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London, 1948), 132.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>7</sup>Robert B. Heilman, *This Great Stage* (Seattle, 1963), 164.

<sup>8</sup>G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London, 1949), 163.

<sup>9</sup>William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1953), 46.

<sup>10</sup>Jorgensen, 102.

<sup>11</sup>Heilman, 43.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>13</sup>Danby, 20.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>15</sup>Jorgensen, 105.

<sup>16</sup>Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare*, vol. II (London, 1963), 34.

<sup>17</sup>G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London, 1951), 170.

<sup>18</sup>A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904), 287.

<sup>19</sup>Heilman, 173-222.

<sup>20</sup>E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: A Survey* (London, 1925), 240.

<sup>21</sup>Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London, 1964), 135.

<sup>22</sup>Granville-Barker, 38.

<sup>23</sup>Knight, 168.

<sup>24</sup>Kenneth Muir, "Madness in *King Lear*," *Shakespearean Survey* 13 (London, 1960), 33.

<sup>25</sup>Knight, 169.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>John Lawlor, *The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare* (London, 1960), 158-9.

<sup>28</sup>Camus, 111.

<sup>29</sup>Lawlor, 160.

<sup>30</sup>Harrison, 177.

<sup>31</sup>Kott, 114.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>35</sup>Danby, 140.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>37</sup>Empson, 46.

<sup>38</sup>Bradley, 291.

<sup>39</sup>Kott, 118.

<sup>40</sup>Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare* (London, 1875), 259.

<sup>41</sup>Kott, 118.

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