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LEAR'S SHADOWS: SOME PROBLEMS
IN THE READING OF A LITERARY TEXT

An Inaugural Lecture

delivered at the University College of Swansea

on

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by

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The Department of English was established as an autonomous department in 1921 within a year of the founding of the College. The first professor of English, Professor W D Thomas, was appointed in 1921 and was professor until 1954, he was followed by Professor James Kinsley until 1961, when my predecessor Professor Cecil Price was appointed to a chair he held with great distinction until 1980.

Looking back at my illustrious predecessors feels rather like looking back to the giants before the flood. When I look at the giant tomes on my shelves of Professor Kinsley's Poems of John Dryden completed in 1958 when he was Professor here or the three volumes of Professor Price's Letters of R B Sheridan published in 1966 followed in 1973 by his definitive edition of the Dramatic Works of Sheridan and in the same year his Theatre in the Age of Garrick, I see also the flood of official papers on my desk's intray, of letters to be answered, forms to be filled in, reports to be noted and commented upon and marvel at those pre-diluvian giants who my imagination fondly imagines living in a world of scholarly serenity with hardly a fig-leaf of official note paper to encumber them.

I am sure Cecil Price would tell me it was not quite like that. That the pleasures of retrospection are not unlike the pleasures of Hope as Thomas Campbell describes them:

"'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view
And robes the mountain in its azure hue".

But if that thought is not entirely reassuring, it does at least lead me towards my critical theme tonight, which is concerned with the relationship of historical perspective to critical evaluation.

In the quarto edition of King Lear published in 1608, the old king, having renounced his kingdom and made himself dependent on his daughter Goneril finds her suddenly turn against him. Lear reacts in horror by questioning his own identity:

"Doth any here know me? why this is not Lear. Doth Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes? either his notion, weakness, or his discernings are lethargie, sleeping or waking; ha! sure tis not so, who is it that can tell me who I am? Lear's shadow? I would learn that, for by the markes of soveraintie, knowledge, and reason, I should be persuaded I had daughters." (1)

For twentieth century criticism until very recently Lear's search for his own identity is at the heart of the play. From Bradley's important essay on the play in 1904 (2) through Wilson Knight (3) and Granville Barker (4) to almost our own day commentators have argued that the play depicts a search for Lear's true self, that it records a spiritual journey of a man who - in Regan's words "hath ever but slenderly known himself". The play over this period is seen most often as what Dowden (5) in 1875 was the first to call a purifying ordeal (6), from which Lear emerges triumphantly in a state that Wilson Knight describes as "the awakening of Lear from the wheel of fire to a new consciousness of love" (7). Bradley describes the process as "The redemption of King Lear" (8).

And then in the 1960's the interpretation that had been the critical orthodoxy for more than fifty years began to lose conviction, began to crumble. Barbara Everett in 1960 writes an article called the "New King Lear" in Critical Quarterly (9) questioning what she regards as an over-optimistic "Christian" reading of the play. This is followed by a spate of new interpretations which far from seeing Lear's story as a progress towards redemption sees it as a journey into the heart of darkness. Jan Kott sees the story of Lear as a parody of the book of Job (10), Alexander Blok in Shakespeare in the Soviet Union, 1966 (11) sees the play in starkly pessimistic terms. William Elton challenges the Christian reading in his learned book King Lear and the Gods (12), Northrop Frye in Fools of Time (13) sees Shakespeare's play as an investigation into the possibility of an amoral universe. Morris Weitz in 1971 relates its theme to that of Camus's l'Etranger both of which he thinks reflect the meaninglessness of life (14). The Beckettian, existential Lear had arrived to replace the older Christian reading to such an extent that by 1973 Edward Quinn, summarizing critical responses to Lear could write of Weitz's article that "it represents a position that appears to be emerging as the dominant contemporary view of the play" (15). In the current Stratford production of Adrian Noble the influence of Beckett is pervasive. The play is interpreted as drama of the absurd, with Lear, Cordelia and the Fool associated together as a comic duo learning to acknowledge the absurdity of their human condition - the production opens for instance, with Cordelia and the Fool sitting together on Lear's throne. Echoes of Beckett abound, from the Fool's disappearance into a bran tub for his final exit with "and I'll go to bed at noon", to the scene between the blinded Gloucester and the mad Lear where the two ragged old men dangle their feet in a front-of-stage pool and converse like two tramps waiting for Godot.

Our view of King Lear within twenty years has undergone a radical change, indeed has changed so radically that from Wilson Knight's play about the triumph of hope in spiritual values it has come to be seen as a profoundly pessimistic play about the meaninglessness of the universe.

In my lecture tonight I want to examine some of the implications that such a transformation of response has for both the general reader of literary texts and in particular those academics, like myself, whose job it is to explain literary texts to others and who purport to judge the response of others - our students in particular - to literary texts. For the implications of such a radical change are, I believe, far reaching and indeed are the centre of the current controversy between those who hold to the more traditional ways of looking at literature as texts from which wisdom is to be drawn and those who have come to be described as "Structuralist" and "Post-Structuralist" critics (16) who see texts as stimuli to creative reading - a controversy that briefly last year brought English literary studies on to the front pages of the national newspapers. I hasten to reassure my audience that I shall avoid as much as possible any abstract discussion of the merits or otherwise of post-structuralist theory, though some abstraction will be needed. I shall stick as firmly as I can to my last, which is the discussion of particular literary texts. I shall centre my discussion on King Lear in the hope of clarifying some of the critical issues involved. I do not pretend to be able to tell you who King Lear is, but I shall try

to bring some light to bear on Lear's shadows - it is possible, of course, that this will merely intensify the area of darkness.

We are certainly here confronted with a critical dilemma. The play that Adrian Noble and Morris Weitz read is virtually the same play in terms of words on the page that Bradley and Dowden read. It hasn't, and presumably is not likely to, change much over the years. I say virtually because of two very distinct versions of the play; the Quarto and Folio differences however are not the reason for the critical disagreements. So the origin of the change must be in ourselves. The implications at first seem frightening. Does it mean (as the structuralist would argue) that King Lear really doesn't have a separate existence apart from its audiences, that it is simply the stimulus for an infinite number of readings (or viewings) that vary from generation to generation and from reader to reader according to the intellectual fortunes of the day? That there are as many Lears as readers and that Lear criticism is an infinite process of re-writing the Lear text or texts in our own images? A further irony is that this very passage I have read out is itself of doubtful standing. In the later Folio version of the passage it is the Fool who replies to Lear's question: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" with the words "Lear's Shadow". The world of Bradley's Edwardian certainties is becoming very shadowy indeed.

Are we forced then to accept any interpretation of King Lear however eccentric so long as it has an internal logic? Are we for instance to give credence to the interesting but implausible reading Freud gives the play, in which Cordelia is seen to represent Lear's death wish and be an incarnation of the Mother Goddess in her aspect as the bringer of death? (17) or is Tolstoy's notorious but coherent view, that King Lear is a poor play, much inferior to Shakespeare's source play, the anonymous Elizabethan play of the True Chronicle History of King Leir, as valid as anyone else's? (18). George Orwell cleverly objected to Tolstoy's reading that he was simply projecting into it his own private problems as a man who had tried unsuccessfully to achieve happiness by renouncing his power and wealth (19). But if all criticism involves the projection of the reader's ideas on to texts this objection can hardly stand and the fact that neither Freud's nor Tolstoy's interpretations have been found widely acceptable may only be because critical fashions have not happened to move in their direction.

The problem is further compounded by space as well as time. Just as the interpretation of Shakespeare varies in accordance with the prejudices of any particular epoch, so it varies from the standpoint of different contemporary cultures. I cannot illustrate this with King Lear, but Dr Mars of the department of Sociology and Anthropology kindly drew my attention to an article on an African interpretation of Hamlet in the journal Natural History 1966 (20) which illustrates my point. The article describes how the author, a field anthropologist, finds herself trying to recount the plot of Hamlet to a group of Tiv tribesmen. Totally against her intention she finds Claudius coming out as the hero of the play both because he has done the decent thing in marrying his brother's wife soon after his brother's death and because Hamlet's behaviour - including his belief in his uncle's guilt - can only be explained by his being driven mad by witchcraft. As everyone knows in that part of Africa, ghosts are always the result of evil spells and therefore no-one in their right mind would believe

them. We laugh at this interpretation: but are we sure that our interpretation of King Lear would not be equally silly to Shakespeare? And does it matter?

Perhaps at this point I can be allowed to anticipate my conclusion (if only to prevent anyone walking out in despair) by saying that I hope to show things are not quite as bad as they are beginning to sound. I think the days are past when we can confidently think in terms of a "correct" reading of a particular work of literature or to believe that it is possible to reach an objective view of a literary text. But I don't think it follows from this that one coherent response is necessarily as good as another. I think we rightly in English studies demand both that our students shall react independently and freshly to their texts, make up their own minds independently about them, and at the same time purport to judge the fitness of their responses. The rest of my lecture will be devoted to attempting an account of this paradox.

That literary texts are read in the image of the reader and of his age can well be illustrated by going back to earlier criticism of King Lear, and it is interesting to trace the way in which the image of King Lear has been altered to accommodate the predominant assumptions of succeeding generations, for our own transformation of Shakespeare's text is only the latest in a series of fundamental re-interpretations that go back as far as we can trace critical responses to the play (and in this King Lear is no different from other literary texts).

To much eighteenth century comment, for instance, the stress seems to be principally, not on Lear's progress to moral enlightenment (many of the commentators think him enlightened already at the beginning of the play) but on Lear's unmerited suffering. It is because of the unbearable nature of Lear's suffering at the end that Tate's tragicomic version of the play was preferred on stage throughout the century to Shakespeare's original, though it was of course Shakespeare's original they usually read. Instead of the main subject of the play being the consequences of King Lear's unreasonable anger or vanity, or some other sin, favoured by the Bradleyan reading (Bradley himself chooses anger) the 18th century reader tends to see the subject of the play centring on the sin of ingratitude, not in Lear of course, but in his daughters. Lewis Theobald, the earliest extensive commentator on the play asserts in an essay of 1715 in the Censor (Monday May 2nd), for instance, that the play has two practical morals "the first a caution against rash and unwary bounty; the second against the base Returns and Ingratitude of children to an aged parent. The Error of the first is to be painted in such colours as are adapted to compassion: the Baseness of the latter set out in such a light as is proper to Detestation" (21). Here Theobald distinguishes between error on Lear's part and sin on the part of his daughters. If Lear is to be blamed at all, it is because he is over-generous. To Lewis Theobald the King is not the man of "hideous rashness" Bradley selects from Kent's words, but "the good old King" (I use Theobald's words), wilfully humiliated by his daughters. The same stress on the theme of ingratitude is made in mid-century by Arthur Murphy in the Gray's Inn Journal, 1754 (22).

The contrast between 18th century and modern responses is particularly notable in relation to the opening of the play, for most

modern commentators concede that eventually Lear becomes a man more sinned against than sinning. Compare with the eighteenth century views, views like that of Professor Lily Campbell, who believes the play to be about the deadly sin of anger and sees Lear as a wicked man duly punished (23). The "redemptive" view needs at least an initial state of sin for redemption to be able to take place. To the 18th century, especially during the period of sentimental literature, Lear needed to be a good man from the start in order to be suitably pathetic. Garrick's Lear (using as his basis the sentimental Tate version) was a small frail old man and it was reported of one version in 1776 Garrick played it so feelingly that even Goneril and Regan burst into tears and "played through their whole parts with aching bosoms and streaming eyes" (24). Garrick's own comment on the part (in a letter to Edward Tighe, c1770) stresses that Lear's plight proceeds from his good qualities ... "an old man full of affection, generosity and passion ... meeting with what he thought an ungrateful return from his beloved Cordelia" (25). Here the "passion" that Bradley condemns is seen as part of Lear's exceptional capacity for love and affection (a view as we shall see echoed by Milton). Lewis Theobald too shares this view of Lear's affectionate nature and William Richardson in his Essays of 1784 sees Lear's main fault as one of "excessive affection" for his daughters. To accommodate the sympathetic view of Lear Cordelia's behaviour in the first scene comes under suspicion. To Garrick Cordelia's behaviour seems plausibly ungrateful in Lear's eyes. Coleridge, 50 years later, describes Cordelia's response to her father as "a faulty admixture of pride and sullenness" (27). To Bradley in 1904 on the other hand, Cordelia is an entirely saintly figure "a thing enskied and sainted" (28) and of course Lear the one to blame, to Wilson Knight "Cordelia's original fault of ill-judged sincerity one with her significance as a symbol of near perfection" (29).

It is not difficult to explain this 18th century emphasis on Lear as a victim of monstrous ill-nature, because English society in the 18th century still retained much of its respect for rank and authority, for social hierarchy, that is at the heart of this response. To the 18th century Lear had a right to expect politeness, obedience and affection from his daughters. In the 18th century the play is primarily social in the sense that its primary concern is seen to be the collapse of society round King Lear through the selfish and irresponsible behaviour of those who take over power. To the twentieth century this sense has become undermined by suspicion of authority, especially of fathers, and a belief in the innate superiority of democracy. Lear's hasty behaviour in act 1 is no longer seen in terms of royal and paternal dignity but in terms of unreasonable arrogance. The modern account of the play is therefore seen to centre on the personal integrity, or lack of it, in the King; the play is transformed from a play about social relationships to a play about the individual, the emphasis has changed from "King Lear" to "Lear". It is worth noting here that the title King Lear is unique among the Folio tragedies in remarking the kingship of the hero - and in this it bears a close relationship to the History plays, plays that have a more overtly socio-political theme. The 1608 Quarto indeed describes the play as "a true Chronicle History". This suggests perhaps the 18th century Lear is closer to the Jacobean Lear than are most modern readings.

The prospect of getting back to a Jacobean King Lear is an exciting one and suggests at first glance the possibility of coming (at least potentially) to a definitive view of what Shakespeare's audience would understand of the problems raised. Direct comment from the 17th century is very sparse - though not entirely absent - and it is not remotely possible to get a typical view in the way I have been talking about the 18th century response. The earliest critical reference to Lear comes from a date just after Shakespeare's death in a funeral elegy on the first actor of King Lear, Richard Burbage, who died in 1618. The anonymous author lists some of the more famous of Burbage's roles, one of which is his playing of "Kind Lear". This is a very interesting reference because while "kind" is not the adjective any modern critic would select as the most appropriate for Lear it accords reasonably well with the 18th century stress on Lear's affectionate nature. "Kind" is not an easy Jacobean word to assess because its meaning varies, but its basic sense is "natural" and it is always used with approval. We must assume Shakespeare approved of his friend and partner playing Lear as a kind man, with its implications concerning the unkindness, the unnaturalness, of Lear's elder daughters. The expression "the old kind King" is used by Kent in the Folio version of the play in act III sc. 1 in a passage that P K W Stone in his study of the two versions of the play, pronounces spurious (30). Whether Shakespeare's or not, however, it suggests that the reviser wanted to emphasize the same quality in Lear that Burbage emphasized, though the revisers might have been simply writing in Burbage's interpretation. Is there any other evidence that Shakespeare's contemporaries saw Lear in a kindly light? I think there is, though it is somewhat indirect. Both Spenser and Milton have something to say on Lear's behaviour in posing the love test for his daughters - the question that to most 20th century critics has seemed at the root of his sinfulness. Most 20th century critics until recently have thought of Lear's question as at best foolish and more often than not, sinful, a sign both of vanity, self-indulgence and pride: to Granville Barker for instance, writing in 1930, Lear is "this massive fortress of pride" (31). Neither Spenser nor Milton are commenting, of course, on Shakespeare's play, their comments come in their own accounts of what they thought of as the historical Lear. Lear, in the version both of the Faerie Queene II, 10, and in Milton's History of Britain is made to pose his question. To Spenser the inquiry is "sage":

and with speeches sage
Inquired which of them most did love her parentage.

Milton even more interestingly breaks off his report of his original in Geoffrey of Monmouth to give us the unsolicited comment: "a trial [of their love] that might have made him, had he known as wisely how to try, as he seem'd to know how much the trying behooved him" (32). Milton is saying here that the question was eminently sensible, but Lear's understanding of the reply defective. On the face of it it looks more likely that Shakespeare's view of the action would be closer to that of Burbage, Spenser and Milton than to Granville Barker or Bradley, who regard Lear here as selfish and irrational. I think there is some evidence that Shakespeare did side with his contemporaries on this question. If we further compare Shakespeare's handling of the love question with that of his principal source, the old play The True Chronicle History of King Leir, we are struck by a number of changes that Shakespeare has decided on. One interesting

change is in the words Shakespeare's Lear uses to ask his fatal question "which of you shall we say doth love us most?" The old play has less impressively "which of you three to me would prove most kind; which loves me most, and which at my request/Will soonest yield unto their father's hest". Shakespeare was perhaps bound to change that; but it seems more than coincidence that his own version should be so close in rhythm and sentiment to an account in the New Testament of a not unrelated occasion. In Luke 7.42 Christ reproves his disciples for carping over the woman who anoints his feet with ointment by telling the parable of the two debtors, ending with the question "Which of them, therefore, tell me, will love him most". I quote from the Geneva version of the Bible of 1562 which is the version Shakespeare is most likely to have used and been familiar with. Christ, at this point, like Shakespeare's Lear, is asking for an overt declaration of his adherents' love. The basic situation of the old play Shakespeare keeps intact: Lear decides to divide his kingdom and in addition decides to ask for a proof of his daughter's love. In the old play a rather different motivation is given to Lear in this request, Shakespeare does not explain Lear's motives, though his later remark that he "sought to set my rest/On her kind nursery" (1,i,123-4) might suggest a motive. The old play makes the question political: it is intended as a Machiavellian way of precipitating Cordelia's decision to marry the King of Brittany, a decision which the play nudges the audience to disapprove of. Shakespeare's change is in the direction of making Lear more sympathetic. This is certainly the case with his handling of the love question itself. In the old play the professions of both Goneril and Regan are absurdly exaggerated. Goneril for instance says:

Should you inioine me for to tye a milstone
About my neck and leap into the sea
At your command I willingly would do it:
Yea for to do you good, I would ascend
The highest Turret of all Brittany
And from the top leap headlong to the ground:
Nay, more, should you appoynt me for to marry
The meanest vassayle in the spacious world,
Without reply I would accomplish it. (33).

Certainly anyone who believed that kind of rubbish would need to be senile. But Shakespeare markedly changes his Goneril's words:

Sir I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued rich and rare;
No less than life, with Grace, health, beauty, honour;
As much as child e'er loved or father found. (I,i,55-9)

This is certainly much more plausible, although Bradley says "the hypocrisy ... is patent to us at a glance". (34) Bradley is right, this is highly suspect to us the modern audience, but would it be to Shakespeare's audience? Is Goneril either saying anything unusual here or saying it unusually, given Jacobean notions of decorum? Certainly not if we judge by the political writings of the day. Here, for instance is an example from a translation made in 1612 by Robert Sherwood of Jean Bede's Right & Prerogative of Kings:

"God will have us love (the King) more than our own blood, it sufficeth the King that we render unto him the service that children own to their most dear parents seeing that the honour due unto him is comprehended in the name of father and mother". (35)

Lear, of course, to emphasise the point, is both King and father to Goneril. I think it unlikely that with such views current King James (who the Quarto title page tells us was at a performance of Lear on 26th December 1606) would have thought there was anything at all odd in Goneril's decorous display of obeisance: both James himself and his predecessor Elizabeth expected such reverence, as do Shakespeare's kings habitually. That this is not merely Shakespeare changing the old play's crudeness into subtle hypocrisy, but a complete change in audience expectation is confirmed by Shakespeare's handling of Cordelia in this scene. Far from making Cordelia's response subtler, Shakespeare deliberately makes it cruder, more melodramatic. The old play has Cordelia say, rather decorously:

I cannot paint my duty forth in words,
I hope my deeds shall make report for me,
But looke what love the child doth owe the father
The same to you I bear, my gracious Lord. (36)

This is a rather unorthodox reply by Jacobean standards, but it is at least presented respectfully. Cordelia is careful to conform in her manner, if not in her matter. Shakespeare changes all this dramatically by having the unorthodoxy of Cordelia's reply reflected in her manner; notice in particular the contrast between the formal courtly decorousness of Lear and Cordelia's shocking abruptness. (I quote the Quarto version of 1608):

Lear: ... but now our joy
Although the last, not least in our dear love,
What can you say to win a third more opulent
Than your sisters.
Cordelia: Nothing my lord.
Lear: How, nothing can come of nothing, speak again.

The shock effect of this on a Jacobean audience is difficult, perhaps impossible for a modern audience to recognise; I shall have to violate modern decorum to illustrate my point by saying that Cordelia in modern terms would have to say something like "get lost" to her father to achieve a similar effect. Certainly the reviser of the Folio version of the play of 1623 (whether Shakespeare or not we can't be certain) thought it a moment to relish, for he has the audience dwell on it by having Cordelia repeat her "Nothing":

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.
Lear: Nothing?
Cordelia: Nothing.
Lear: Nothing will come of nothing.

The intention of the revision is clearly to intensify the dramatic moment even further, though the effect is in fact to weaken the impact I think. One further interesting point is that while Shakespeare has

replaced Cordelia's lines with the one word "nothing", he has not altogether forgotten them, for the sentiment of Cordelia's opening line "I cannot paint my duty forth in words" survives in the opening line of Goneril's speech "Sir I love you more that words can wield the matter", Cordelia's thoughts in the old play have been transferred to Shakespeare's Goneril.

What is the implication of this? I think it supports the evidence we get from the earlier commentators on Lear that Shakespeare is not wanting us to think in terms of Lear's blame in this opening scene but principally in terms of Lear as a great king being confronted with an unexpected breakdown of courtly procedures - the first example of many that abound in the play. This initial confrontation, in fact, introduces us to the central social theme of the play, the conflict between the old cultural assumptions of Lear that the state is an extended hierarchical family and the new individualistic responses of a protestant generation who've been taught to value inner truth more highly than social cohesion (the full social consequences of that view are subsequently illustrated in Goneril's and Regan's behaviour and in Edmund). This conflict of the generations was, of course, a central preoccupation of contemporary commentators and is at the basis of that crisis of aristocracy that Lawrence Stone has so eloquently mapped for the modern reader (37).

But to return to my critical theme. It is clear that not only from the variety of responses to King Lear over the ages but from the critical history of any text that has been commented on extensively, that the possibilities are infinite. There is no one reading of a literary work: each age sees in a work what its dominating ideas impose upon the text. The reasons for this are in the very nature of language itself, which is not a static, fixed medium of universal import, but a fluid, dynamic medium which gets its significance from its ability to mediate between internal and external states. In the case of King Lear it is not too difficult to trace a gradual shift from a collective view of the characters' behaviour, for instance, towards an increasingly "protestant" view, which sees the individual in isolation and judges the drama as the record of an individual's (Lear's) spiritual journey. This would seem to correspond in general to a similar shift over the generations, though of course within any one generation you can always find idiosyncratic responses (like Freud's in the Bradley era, for instance). Does this mean then that criticism can claim no objectivity at all and that it is merely a record of succeeding prejudice? I think we have to recognise that all critical judgments reflect the age and society they are made in, but I don't think that entirely accounts for the critical process.

One unspoken assumption in my comments on Lear up till now has been not merely that views on literary texts change over the centuries, but that we should prefer the views that must nearly approximate those of the author, that the closer you get to Shakespeare's own age the more valid they are likely to be. But we shall have to ask whether there is any justification for this preference. Is Shakespeare's view of King Lear, in so far as we can guess at it, likely to be inherently superior to anyone else's? The common sense assumption is surely that Shakespeare knew best what he was doing and this is the assumption on which modern editorial procedures are based. But common sense often proves to be common fallacy and there are two formidable objections to this assumption.

The first is the impossibility of being able to reconstruct with any confidence an author's viewpoint (even if we have an explicit account of these as we have, for instance, in Ben Jonson's preface to his own *Volpone*). In Shakespeare's case we have only the play in its two versions (neither probably very close to Shakespeare's original text) and any suppositions we can make about likely Jacobean audience reactions. Even if we do attempt such a reconstruction, the attempt is necessarily coloured by our own assumptions. The second objection is more theoretical and more radical: if reading a text inevitably involves the creative participation of the reader because of the very nature of language itself, not only is every reading different (so that there is no single Shakespearean reading but only Shakespearean readings) but there is no inherent superiority of any one reading over another so long as they are equally coherent (this would apply even if the coherence consisted in a coherent demonstration of incoherence). On these grounds any hypothetical Shakespearean reading might well be less coherent than, say, Jan Kott's, to a modern audience simply because its assumptions about human behaviour or speech, and so on, might be less acceptable or indeed comprehensible - as in the case of Goneril's decorous reply to Lear's question "which of you shall we say doth love us most?" On these grounds Roland Barthes is right to talk about the death of the author, because the authorial view has become irrelevant and his work merely the starting point of an infinite series of lectorial recreations (38).

Certainly the impediments to reconstructing the author's intention or subsequent viewpoint are formidable even if we waive for the moment these theoretical objections. Even if we can establish a Jacobean consensus on such a subject as Goneril's decorousness we still cannot know whether Shakespeare's audience would be typical enough to share in that consensus (there are good grounds for believing that the audiences of the private theatres at least were untypical) or whether Shakespeare himself may not have been challenging the consensus. Or again we may be misreading the historical evidence or misapplying it because of assumptions that we ourselves are not consciously aware of. Or again, it may be that the search for historical truth gives us an ambiguous answer.

The interpretation of Lear's anger in the opening scene of the play can illustrate this latter difficulty. Professor Lily Campbell argues with much reference to Elizabethan moral doctrine that because anger was one of the seven deadly sins Shakespeare in *King Lear* can be shown to be writing a play about the sin of anger, and she argues for a "redemptive" interpretation on the grounds that Lear has to be purified from his sinful state. There is no doubt that Professor Campbell is right: that the Elizabethans did believe anger to be a deadly sin. But while she acknowledges an equally typical Elizabethan view that was held in contradiction to this, that anger could not only be justified but could be a virtue, she fails to see its relevance to *King Lear*. This view turns out to be particularly relevant to the play, for it relates to Elizabethan and Jacobean views on kingship. James I had himself dealt with this matter in a book we can be sure Shakespeare had read called *Basilikon Doron*, 1599, a book on kingship presented to his eldest son Prince Henry (Shakespeare used the work in writing *Measure for Measure*) (39). James goes out of his way to point to the necessity of anger as an attribute of kingship advising his son: "And so where you find a notable injury spare not to give course to the torrents of your wrath" and he quotes Biblical authority

(Proverbs 20 and Ephesians 4,26: "be ye angry and sin not") (40). To James (and the play as I've said was played before King James in 1606) the ability to get angry at an affront was an essential kingly quality. Is Shakespeare then presenting in Lear's anger not the picture of a wicked king but the picture of a righteous king? It is well worth noting incidentally that the notion of righteous anger actually appears in the play, for Kent appeals to it when Cornwall accuses him of boorish behaviour (11,ii 70):

"Yes sir, but anger has a privilege".

Even criticism that purports to be historical is, it seems, subject to the same kind of subjective bias as any other.

Common sense, however, dictates that reading is not just imposing your own thoughts on a text: it obviously involves that but it stretches the bounds of credulity to argue that there is no objective basis at all for these personal responses. Here a distinction between proof and reasonable hypothesis needs to be made. Philosophically there is no proof that can be satisfactorily offered for the objectivity of critical responses, for any response is bound to be generated subjectively, but that doesn't in itself invalidate the hypothesis that some objective basis exists for such a response. We can say that there is no way of demonstrating conclusively what that basis might be, but we can still use the hypothesis as an assumption of our criticism. And it is surely a reasonable hypothesis that Shakespeare did express a coherent viewpoint in *King Lear* and that that coherence is potentially reconstructable by historical means. If we accept that, then it would seem reasonable to suppose that Shakespeare's viewpoint is that most likely to represent an optimum reading of the play, seeing that it was, after all, his play that originally started the favourable response in his audiences. The value of the play was given by Shakespeare in the first place and it is because that value persists to some extent through all the metamorphoses of interpretation that we read it at all. Some structuralist critics and others (41) deny that literary value exists objectively and argue that the reader imposes the value on the play in the process of reading it (42). Again it is impossible to prove this wrong, but it is unconvincing as a hypothesis, because it fails satisfactorily to explain why historically Shakespeare's plays are preferred over all others and why they are more successful in the generation of value for their readers than any others. It fails to explain convincingly why Tolstoy's view of Lear has failed to win acceptance. The structuralist hypothesis in fact bristles with implausibilities: it would have us believe not only that one play text is as good as another, that Peele or Greene or indeed anyone is as good as Shakespeare if the reader thinks so, but that Shakespeare's reputation both in his own day and since is a collective whim that has survived more than 350 years. The supposition, on the other hand, that the value of Shakespeare's plays is inherent in them convincingly accounts for the historical evidence.

The appeal to historical plausibility is in fact crucial to any critical assessment of a literary text, once we accept the importance of literary value to criticism, though it is not in itself sufficient for a convincing critical reading. The very appeal to historical criterion in critical judgment recognises the possibility of escaping from the confines of any particular reading but allows us to make

preferential judgments between one view and another. Historical criticism adds to the structuralist concept of an infinite number of individual readings the hypothesis of an ideal reading - the author's. This ideal reading can never be fully recovered but it can be sought and the closer we get to it the more likely we are to recover the literary value that is the basis of the critical interest. The weakness of the structuralist argument is that it denies the historical nature of literary texts while at the same time contradictorily insisting on the historical aspect of the language in which it is expressed.

The critical view I am advocating then is one that makes both the estimation of value central to criticism and stresses the historical nature of the literary text - two ideas that have often been regarded as opposed. But if, as I have argued, the only way of fully recovering value is through placing a work in its historical context (as anyone looking an Elizabethan word up in the Oxford English dictionary is tacitly acknowledging) value comes to depend on historical judgment. Yet the two things are not the same: we saw in my discussion of Lear's anger how historical investigation may fail to throw light on literary value. To judge which of the two Jacobean ideas of anger is relevant to King Lear we have to move from judgments about historical plausibility to judgments about the work's internal coherence, for literary value inheres in pattern and therefore in structural self-consistency. All historical judgments can do is present the framework within which the necessary linguistic choices can be made in the search for the coherence from which the literary value stems. Professor Campbell's view of Lear's anger is not wrong on historical grounds, but because it fails ultimately to satisfy the demands of artistic self-consistency in King Lear in assuming a "morality" reading for the play that cannot be sustained either historically or in terms of the play as a whole. It is this problem that I want to illustrate now in reference to Shakespeare's text. This need for self-consistency within a work can be illustrated by another Lear problem, the problem of the double plot. In the 18th century the double plot was regarded as a critical embarrassment: Theobald thought it one of the few weaknesses of the play (43) and Tate's re-writing attempts to integrate the two plots by creating a love affair between Cordelia and Edgar. It was August von Schlegel who first argued that the sub-plot gave the play a universality it would not otherwise have by suggesting parallels between Gloucester and Lear and this argument for parallelism came to be the accepted orthodoxy of the "morality" interpretation. The parallel re-enforced the moralistic interpretation of the opening scene because Gloucester - on his own admission - was guilty of a moral "fault". Edgar later makes a point of emphasising the relationship of crime and punishment to Edmund: "The dark and vicious place where thee he got/Cost him his eyes". (V,iii,172-3). According to the "morality reading" Gloucester's example points to a universal law that is also illustrated in Lear's case - that sin leads to punishment through suffering. The play itself certainly suggests parallels between the two plots but they do not bear out the equation between Lear and Gloucester of 20th century commentators. Gloucester for instance sees some relationship between his own problems with his sons and Lear's parental problems, but the parallel he sees associates Lear and Edgar as aggressors against Cordelia and himself as victim: "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".

Gloucester's querulousness is not to be taken as an authoritative comment and we know him to be deceived about Edgar. Edmund quickly brushes aside his father's words as superstitious nonsense. A more interesting parallel is later drawn by Edgar, (III,vi,105-7), though again it is not the parallel of the modern commentators:

"How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend, makes the King bow,
He childed as I fathered".

Edgar's speech only appears in the Quarto version of the play, which suggests that the Folio reviser (who was principally concerned with the acting of the play) thought it dramatically weak. Shakespeare's original inclusion of it in fact looks literary rather than dramatic and suggests he was directing us towards literary interpretation, coming as it does at the end of a scene and marked off from the rest of the scene by its rhyming lines, the form suggesting a choric function. But the parallel Edgar draws is so surprising that most commentators have missed it, Kenneth Muir for instance, in the Arden note, assumes the Bradleyan interpretation that Edgar is comparing himself to Cordelia here - but he isn't, he's comparing himself to Lear, for Edgar and Lear are the sufferers at the hands of cruel relations, a parent in his case, children in Lear's - "he childed as I fathered". The emphasis is on the 17th and 18th century suffering Lear as victim. Edgar is here contrasting Lear and Gloucester. The Bradleyan interpretation (adopted unquestioningly by several generations of critics) is a remarkable instance where an interpretative conviction has become so strong it over-rules the actual text: so Bradley writes:

"The Sub-plot simply repeats the theme of the main story ... Gloucester like Lear, is affectionate, unsuspecting, foolish and self-willed. He too wrongs deeply a child who loves him ..." (44)

and so on. For if we are meant to contrast Lear with Gloucester, while it accords very well with the 18th century view of the play, it virtually destroys the "morality" reading, just because the example of Gloucester so obviously fits the morality pattern. It also incidentally makes it much more difficult to sustain the parallelism of the contemporary "Beckettian" interpretation where, as in Noble's production, Lear and Gloucester are seen as Jacobean versions of Estragon and Vladimir. The opening scene of the play in particular makes excellent sense if Gloucester and Lear are seen as contrasting figures, for it points up the fact that while Gloucester's case is clearly a case of just retribution for sin Lear's is conspicuously not so and it makes sense of the obvious contrast in the opening scene of the treatment of Gloucester as a shifty private man and the forceful public image of the king - it points again to the title's emphasis on kingship - that the main plot, unlike the sub-plot, is not about private morality but social cohesion. Here then we can appeal to evidence within the play to reinforce historical probabilities, and further historical probability is added if we remember that parallelism of plotting in Jacobean drama more often involves contrast than similarity. Middleton's Changeling is perhaps the best known example. Historical evidence and internal structure come together, as they must do, to provide help towards our ideal reading.

I will take one more example of the way historical judgement and the search for self-consistency reinforce each other in criticism: the problem of Lear's retinue. The accusation Regan and Goneril make against Lear is that his retinue is riotous and causing an intolerable disturbance in their households. On the face of it Goneril's suggestion that Lear should reduce the number of his servants: "a little to disquaint your train" (1,iv,257) seems reasonable and his own imperious behaviour supports an initial impression that Goneril and Regan have some right on their side. I overheard a lady in the Stratford audience saying to her friend "it is so difficult to side with Lear, he is such a disagreeable old man". We are accordingly inclined to believe that Goneril can be trusted when she tells us "the best and soundest of his years hath been but rash" - as most modern critics have agreed-and this in turn helps us to see Lear as a sinful man, a man "who hath ever but slenderly known himself". The stage is set for the redemptive reading. But such a judgement is not only false to Shakespeare's textual self-consistency it is historically inconceivable. No Jacobean I believe could or would remotely credit Goneril and Regan's words.

Let us look at the historical evidence first. Lawrence Stone in his *Crisis of Aristocracy* deals at length with Jacobean attitudes to retinue and notes a marked change between 1550 and 1650 in attitudes between the old view of retinue as extended family and the now commercial view of retinue as servants paid to do specific jobs (45). The old view, expressed by such writers as Jervase Markham in his *Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Serving Men*, 1598, was that it was a duty for noblemen to have retainers, to feed them and train them in courtly manners and the more retainers the more dutiful (46). It was at once an obligation and an indication of status. Certainly people of the period took it seriously: the Earl of Rutland, Stone tells us, for instance, had about 200 men in his livery in 1612, while the Earl of Pembroke in 1598 boasted he could produce 800 serving men in defense of Queen Elizabeth. By these standards Lear's one hundred knights is very modest - and of course Lear has not ceased to be a nobleman by abdicating. George Orwell argues that Lear should not have sought to hang on to the trappings of power after he had given up the throne, supporting Goneril's accusation "Idle old man/That still would manage those authorities that he hath given away" (1,iii,17), but this viewpoint would be regarded as simply Machiavellian to many in a Jacobean audience. Lear's status would require him to be attended by a sizeable retinue and it would be socially irresponsible of him not to uphold his status. Goneril and Regan's attack on the retinue is in fact calculated as an attack on Lear's station and self-respect. It is well calculated as an effective way of humiliating the old man - indeed it stems directly from their expressed wish to find a means of humiliating him.

For when we turn back to the text itself we find that their charges against Lear are not borne out either in the text or the action. If we take the Quarto text only - the one most likely to be nearest Shakespeare's original - we find very few references to the retinue at all, as if Goneril and Regan hardly expect anyone to believe what they are saying. In the revised, Folio version, the charges become more insistent, though the evidence to support them equally lacking. When we actually see Lear's retinue on stage they are models of good behaviour with the possible exception of Kent's behaviour to Oswald, which can hardly be regarded seriously as

supporting evidence in view of Kent's role throughout the play. Indeed their function in the play is to illustrate the old-fashioned orderliness that the "Machiavellian" Goneril, Regan and Edmund are so intent on flouting. In 1, iv, for instance, one of Lear's Knights complains of the unruly behaviour of Goneril's servants in terms of the deepest respect for order and decorum (1,iv,60-63):

My lord, I know not what the matter is; but
to my judgement, your Highness is not entertain'd
with that ceremonious affection as you were wont.

The language in which the Knight speaks here, with its formal decorousness, is as important as what he is saying; he is the civilized courtier confronted with the uncouthness of the time-serving, unscrupulous Oswald. And whenever Lear's gentlemen appear in the play the same impression is given - as for instance in Act IV vi, where a gentleman assures the mad Lear: "You are a royal one, and we obey you". That Goneril and Regan's accusation of unruliness, when they themselves are the cause of unruliness in the play, has come to be accepted against all the evidence, is one of time's oddest whirligigs.

That the charge of riotousness against Lear's retinue is merely trumped up is finally made unmistakably clear at the end of Act II when Regan makes the absurd claim that Lear is plotting a coup d'etat (II,iv,307-9):

He is attended with a desperate train
And what they may incense him to, being apt
To have his ear abus'd, wisdom bids fear.

When we next see Lear, shortly after this, the "desperate train" turns out to be the Fool and Kent. No clearer indication could be wanted that Goneril and Regan have simply invented these absurd charges as an excuse for humiliating their father. Yet modern productions, including the current production at Stratford, almost invariably insist on giving Lear a "riotous train" in support of Lear's accusers. Here historical evidence and textual consistency combine, as they must, to bring us towards a critical reading that satisfies our sense of literary value.

I come back finally then, to the implication of these examples for my critical theme. Firstly it seems to me that it is essential to treat all literary works as historical documents and that one essential task of the critic is to saturate himself in the cultural milieu out of which the work he is reading was generated. This is a scholarly task that requires patience and stamina and is one strong argument for the pursuit of literary studies; for while the general reader cannot be expected to provide historical orientation for himself, the literary scholar, going over and over the largely unread and almost unreadable bulk of the writing of his chosen period, can and must provide that for him. Secondly the stress on the historical nature of literary texts helps us to understand the subjective nature of critical judgements, for we can see clearly over the generations how responses to literary texts reflect the prejudices of their readers and it would be naive and foolish to assume that somehow our generation had escaped from this general condition - those who think they have escaped are the more likely to be confined by their

prejudices. Current structuralist theory has done criticism the immense service of demonstrating that there is no possibility of arriving at an entirely "objective" view of the text, that all language requires the active participation of the reader or listener and that he and not the author generates the meaning that any text is given. But it does not follow from this (as much structuralist argument assumes) that there is no appeal to objectivity in literary discussion, (though the appeal can never be conclusive). There is no way of proving you and I are reading the same King Lear, but it seems both a reasonable and profitable hypothesis and it seems reasonable to assume that the Lear we are reading is related to the Lear Shakespeare wrote, such hypotheses can form the basis of a dialogue in which appeals to such evidence as historical probability and the self-consistency of a work can be made. The critic in fact is bound by two major constraints, he is limited by the assumption that he is bound to reveal the self-consistency of the work of art in front of him and this in turn assumes that the work of art has an existence independent of its receptors, and he must also assume, contradictorily, that what he can say of a work will be in terms of what contemporary prejudice will allow him to say. It is because criticism works between those two contradictory hypotheses that we can and do ask our students both to judge the literary work for themselves and at the same time judge the rightness of their responses.

- 1 Quotations from the Quarto are taken from the facsimile edition by Charles Praetorius, 1885 otherwise quotations are from the Arden Edition edited Muir, 1952.
- 2 A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, 1904 (Quotations are from 2nd edition 1926)
- 3 G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire, Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy, Oxford, 1930 (Quotations are from U.P. edition 1977)
- 4 H. Granville Barker, Prefaces to Shakespeare, vol 2 1930.
- 5 E. Dowden, Shakespeare, a Critical Study of his Mind and Art, 1875 (Quotations are from the 7th edition 1888)
- 6 Op. cit. p. 263.
- 7 Op. cit. p. 203.
- 8 Op. cit. p. 285.
- 9 Barbara Everett, "The New King Lear"; Critical Quarterly 11 (1960) pp. 325-337.
- 10 Jan Kott, "King Lear as Endgame": Shakespeare our Contemporary, trans. Boleslaw Taborski, 1964.
- 11 Alexander Blok, "Shakespeare's King Lear", Shakespeare in the Soviet Union, 1966.
- 12 William Elton, King Lear and the Gods, San Marino, 1966.

- 13 Northrop Frye, Fools of Time, Toronto, 1967.
- 14 Morris Weitz, "The Coinage of Man, King Lear and Camus' l'Etranger", Modern Language Review 66 (1971) pp. 31-39.
- 15 Ruoff, Quinn, Grennen: The Major Shakespearean Tragedies, a Critical Bibliography, 1973.
- 16 The distinction I am assuming here has been described by F. Lentricchia in After the New Criticism, 1980 p. 122 "If one way of describing the character of contemporary (prestructuralist) critical theory ... might be to point to its repeated affirmation of an absolute presence, a transcendental or ideal space which draws all contents homogeneously to itself ... then an antithetical way of describing the intention ... of recent continental philosophy (structuralism) would be to say that they (sic) have been concerned to denigrate absolute presence as a delusion". Post-Structuralism, in particular the work of Jacques Derrida in "deconstruction", has been noticeably insistent on the relativity of judgment: "Deconstruction is avowedly 'post-structuralist' in its refusal to accept the ideal of structure as in any sense given or objectively 'there' in a text". Christopher Norris, Deconstruction, Theory and Practice, 1982 p.3.
- 17 Sigmund Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets" Collected Papers IV edited Ernest Jones, 1925.
- 18 Leo Tolstoy, "Shakespeare and the Drama", 1906 in Recollections and Essays trans. A Maude, 1937.
- 19 George Orwell, "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool", Inside the Whale and Other Essays, Harmondsworth, 1962.
- 20 Laura Bohannon, "Shakespeare in the Bush", Natural History 75, 1966, pp. 28-33.
- 21 Lewis Theobald, The Censor April 25th 1715, May 2nd 1715, quotation is from essay of May 2nd.
- 22 Arthur Murphy, Gray's Inn Journal, 1754, Nos. 65, 66, 87.
- 23 Lily Campbell, Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, 1930.
- 24 Quoted in A. C. Sprague, Shakespearean Players and Performance, Harvard, 1953.
- 25 Letters of David Garrick, ed. D.M. Little and G.M. Karhl, 1963 II, 682-3.
- 26 William Richardson, Essays on Shakespeare's Dramatic Character, 1784.
- 27 S. T. Coleridge, Shakespearean Criticism ed. T. M. Raysor, 1960, I, 54.
- 28 Op. cit. p. 317.

- 29 Op. cit. p. 202.
- 30 P. K. W. Stone, The Textual History of King Lear, 1980.
- 31 Op. cit. p. 26.
- 32 Works of Milton N. Y., 1932, X, 18.
- 33 True Chronicle History ed. Bullough, Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, 1975, VII, 343, 11, 242-250.
- 34 Op. cit. p. 281.
- 35 Jean Bede, The Right and Prerogative of Kings (1611), translated, Robert Sherwood, 1612, pp. 20-21.
- 36 Bullough VII, p. 344 11. 277-280.
- 37 Lawrence Stone, Crisis of Aristocracy, 1558-1641, Oxford. 1965.
- 38 R. Barthes, "The Death of the Author" in Image-Music-Text. Essays selected and translated S. Heath, 1977.
- 39 For a discussion of the relationship between Basilikon Doron and Measure for Measure see J. W. Lever's introduction to the Arden edition of the play, 1965 pp. xlviii-1. also Ernest Schanzer The Problem Plays of Shakespeare, 1963, pp. 120-5.
- 40 James I and VI, Basilikon Doron, 1599 and 1603 edited for Scottish Text Society, 1944, p. 153 (The quotation is from the 2nd ed. of 1603).
- 41 See for instance Northrop Frye, "On Value Judgements" The Stubborn Structure, 1970.
- 42 Terry Hawkes Structuralism and Semiotics, 1977 p. 157 (summarising Barthes) "The Critic creates the finished work by his reading of it, and does not remain simply the inert consumer of a 'ready-made' product".
- 43 Op. cit. (Monday May 2nd). Theobald prefers Tate's ending on the grounds that "virtue ought to be rewarded and vice punished".
- 44 Op. cit. p. 262. See also p. 294 "(Gloster's) sufferings, again, like Lear's purify and enlighten him".
- 45 Op. cit. pp. 212ff.
- 46 (Jervase Markham?), A Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Serving Men, 1598 Sig. D4v. A gentleman should be "garded gallantly with a sort of seemly servants, always well appoynted as well to show his power, as to grace his person". The gentry are now too mean and money-conscious: "If they holde on ... their subtracts, I fear me, will be: Take nothing out of nothing and there remains nothing". (Sig. G.4v)



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