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THE UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT

KING LEAR AND CONTEMPORARY CRITICS

A THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is idle to conjecture as to which of the Four Great Tragedies is greatest. As one writer has put it, the reader is always inclined to judge as the greatest the one he has read most recently. However this may be, King Lear is traditionally placed among the best of Shakespeare's plays; and like any play of Shakespeare's it is a work of art eminently worthy of study.

Among the Four Great Tragedies, however, King Lear seems to be least in popularity.¹ This may be due partly to the difficulty in grasping the huge significance of the play even when it is read carefully; and it is certainly due partly to the difficulty of presenting the play on the stage. The action implies much more than can be shown on the stage; the characters are gigantic, often beyond the ability of the actors to portray. But whatever the reason, comparatively little has been written about King Lear. Obviously the Hamlet criticism takes undisputed lead in quantity over the criticism on any other play of

1. A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 243.

Shakespeare, and indeed over that on any other single play by any dramatist. But even a comparison of the criticism on Macbeth with that on King Lear shows one and one-half times as many bibliographical items on the former as there are on the latter. Moreover, only twenty-one composers have written music for Lear, whereas about fifty have composed for Macbeth. Finally, Lear is produced on the stage much less frequently than many other plays of Shakespeare, probably because of the difficulties already mentioned.²

Nevertheless, it should not be concluded that there is a paucity of criticism on Lear. The fact that less has been written about this play than has been written about others is interesting, but proves nothing. All the great commentators have had something to say about King Lear; and often their interpretations are at wide variance one from another. One author sees in the Lear universe an expression of the beauty of lawful order; another sees a Hardyesque world ruled by cruel and malignant Fate. One considers that poetic justice is done at the end of the play; another finds poetic justice completely reversed. And so in almost all aspects of the criticism and interpretation of the play there is great divergence.

The purpose of this thesis, then, will be to give

2. Samuel A. Tannenbaum, Shakespeare's 'King Lear': A Concise Bibliography, p. vii.

a conspectus of critical opinion about the play since the beginning of the present century. The work of representative critics will be summarized, and care will be taken not to distort their views in the condensed version to be given. Moreover, only the criticism which deals with interpretation or appreciation of the play will be summarized; problems about the text, date, staging, etc. will not be included. Finally, the summaries will be given for the most part without comment; any conclusions or judgments about individual writers will be reserved for the final chapter. It is hoped that by this method the status of present-day critical opinion on King Lear will become clear and that the material will be useful for handy reference.

It has been stated that the criticism to be summarized will deal chiefly with interpretation of the play. In the case of King Lear, interpretation of the play very often amounts to speculations and judgments as to whether the play reflects a pessimistic or an optimistic view of life. Hence, special emphasis will be given to critics' views in this regard. But the theoretical approach of each critic will also be given when one has been stated, since the critic's approach obviously has great importance in his interpretation.

The choice of critics whose work is to be summarized has been determined in several ways. The

fact that only interpretative criticism is to be given explains the omission of some prominent Shakespearean scholars. For example, Harley Granville-Barker has been omitted because his work deals chiefly with the theatrical presentation of the play; the valuable work of Miss Lily B. Campbell has not been dealt with because it is limited to tracing Elizabethan psychology in the play; Miss Caroline F. E. Spurgeon's interesting analyses of Shakespeare's imagery have been omitted because they have little bearing on the interpretation of the play. For the same reason, critics who, like J. M. Robertson, deal chiefly with the chronology and authenticity of the plays have not been included. Likewise, those who seek biographical information in the plays, as for example Darrell Figgis and Frank Harris, are among the omissions.

On the positive side, the attempt has been to choose critics who are for some reason outstanding among the more recent writers on Shakespeare. The choice of these critics has to a large extent been guided by the choice of Augustus Ralli in his excellent book, A History of Shakespearian Criticism. This book has been taken as a sort of Who's Who among Shakespeareans, and the critics included in this work have been included in the thesis when their contributions were sufficient in kind and amount to be pertinent to the thesis. But since Ralli's book does not go beyond

1925, other critics have been chosen from those who, in the last fifteen years, have written along lines especially pertinent to the thesis. In this selection Tannenbaum's bibliography was of considerable aid.

With regard to the general approach of the present-day Shakespearean critics, it is common knowledge that their work has tended to be much more scientific than that of the nineteenth-century critics. The contrast is well expressed in the following words:

Romantic and Victorian critics, such as Coleridge, Hazlitt, Arnold, and Dowden, tended to think of Shakespeare more as an idol to be worshipped than as an artist to be understood.

.....
 Toward the close of the nineteenth century the more aggressive students of Elizabethan drama became more and more dissatisfied with the easy-going assumptions taken for granted by their predecessors. They began to wonder whether, after all, the flood of uncritical rhapsody bestowed on Shakespeare could be justified when examined in the light of historical data.³

The author of the foregoing quotation goes on to say that the skeptical critics did their best work during the first two decades of the century and that they succeeded in making clear the distinction between the stereotyped elements which Shakespeare took from his sources and the original elements which Shakespeare's genius added. Often enough, however,

3. Paul Mueschke, "Recent Trends in Shakespearean Criticism," The Michigan Alumnus, XLIII (Spring, 1936), p. 133.

these critics lacked that intuitive insight which is indispensable for just criticism of poetry. This deficiency has been supplied by critics who have written after 1920. Men like J. Dover Wilson⁴ and G. Wilson Knight have returned, in a way, to the sympathetic attitude of the Victorians; but at the same time they have profited by the huge store of information gathered by the patient scholarship of the historical critics.⁵

A final word may now be added about the various types of criticism represented in the thesis. The transition, so to speak, from the Victorian to the historical criticism is represented by A. C. Bradley, Walter Raleigh, E. K. Chambers, and Stopford Brooke. It is with diffidence that E. K. Chambers is said to represent the transition period, but the work summarized in the thesis appeared in a series of editions which came out between 1904 and 1908--at a time when his great historical investigations were perhaps in an inchoative stage. The historical, or skeptical, critics are represented by their leader, Elmer Edgar Stoll, as well as by Hardin Craig; Richard Perkinson may also be classed with this group. Impressionistic criticism has an able exponent in J. Middleton Murry, who is the

4. It is regrettable that a small book by J. Dover Wilson, Six Tragedies of Shakespeare, 1927, in which there is a criticism of King Lear, was not available for the thesis.

5. Paul Mueschke, loc. cit., p. 138.

only ex professo impressionist represented. Another type of criticism is found in the work of Professor Benedetto Croce, who, for want of a better term, may be called a philosophical critic; he seeks for the philosophical presumptions of Shakespeare's mind, but at the same time there are many conventional elements in his interpretation of individual plays. In one last class may be gathered most of the more recent critics included in the thesis: G. Wilson Knight, Mark Van Doren, and Hazelton Spencer. These critics appear to be somewhat impressionistic, but not in the strict sense; they rather give interpretations based on the text. And since they have also profited by the scholarship of the historical critics, their type may be called the historical-interpretative.

So much for a pre-view of the critics dealt with in the thesis. The selection may seem to be incomplete, but it is hoped that those chosen will be sufficient to satisfy the purpose of the thesis as limited above.

CHAPTER II

THE OPINIONS OF A. C. BRADLEY

A. C. Bradley has been called the "most robust of modern critics."¹ And he seems to deserve this high praise for several reasons. His criticism is wider in scope and deeper in penetration than that of most other twentieth-century critics. Bradley seems to consider all the interpretative problems, not merely those in which he is interested for some more or less private and personal reasons. Moreover, he considers the problems in their relation to one another and arrives at a balanced conclusion from his consideration of the whole. As Augustus Ralli says:

Professor A. C. Bradley is acknowledged to be the greatest living Shakespearian critic, and one of the very greatest in the history of Shakespearian criticism. He combines wide philosophic outlook with grasp of detail, and synthetic power with analytic. In treating a single character he never forgets its relation to the impression produced by the whole play. His mind is powerful enough to cope with the entire world which Shakespeare has hung in chains over chaos, and it is fundamentally poetic. His analysis is effective in so far as it is helped by memories and associations stirred up by the poetry of Shakespeare. He is never merely philosophical²

1. Wm. J. Grace, "Power in King Lear," America, LXVIII (November 7, 1942), 129.

2. Augustus Ralli, A History of Shakespearian Criticism, II, 200.

Further, it is fitting to begin with Bradley a treatment of contemporary Shakespearean criticism because he may be called first in time as well as first in excellence. His Shakespearean Tragedy³ was first published in 1904. It contained new insights into Shakespearean tragedy, which had before escaped even a Coleridge or a Johnson.⁴ Hence, all subsequent critics have had to take note of Bradley's criticism, although some disagree with him in his approach to the plays. It is true, too, that new knowledge about Shakespeare and his times has, since Bradley wrote, been garnered by scholars; but nevertheless Bradley remains in a position of pre-eminence. Since he is, therefore, a critic of such importance, the summary of his work will be considerably fuller than that given for subsequent critics.

Professor Bradley's analysis of King Lear is divided into a twofold consideration.⁵ He regards the play first from a strictly dramatic viewpoint; and secondly, he appeals to "a rarer and more strictly poetical kind of imagination"⁶ for a complete understanding of the play. In the first analysis

3. The edition used in the thesis is the following: A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Criticism, Second Edition, London: Macmillan and Company, Limited, 1910. Pp. xi + 498.

4. Ralli, op. cit., II, 201.

5. Bradley, op. cit., Lectures VII and VIII, pp. 243-330.

6. Ibid., p. 248.

Bradley tends towards examination of the play in its parts; he notes its improbabilities and inconsistencies, the vagueness of its settings, the monstrous iniquity of the evil persons, the parallel plots, the repeated allusions to brutes, the storm scenes and their power, the catastrophe, and finally the expressions regarding the ruling power of the universe. This analysis lays emphasis on the "pessimistic" aspects of the play; but the critic is careful to point out that this view is the narrower one and does not give the total impression produced by the play. It is the total impression explained in the second analysis which will reveal the meaning of the play.

Before proceeding with the summary of Bradley's criticism, it will be well to define the meaning of the term "pessimism." The word is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as "the tendency or disposition to look at the gloomy aspect of things; the habit of taking the gloomiest view of circumstances." This definition obviously refers to an emotional state which results often from some sort of frustration or bad luck. But another meaning of the word refers to a philosophical theory: "the name given to the doctrine of Schopenhauer, Hartmann, and other earlier and later philosophers, that this world is the worst possible, or that everything naturally tends to evil." The critics have found both

the emotional and the philosophical types of pessimism in King Lear; but probably the greater number see in the play a pessimism of the emotional type. Bradley is among these latter; he thinks that the play reflects the attitude of the poet at a time when he was disillusioned and saddened by personal misfortune, and looked out on his fellowmen with anger and disaffection.

Bradley cites many details in King Lear which do actually indicate a pessimistic attitude toward life. Prominent among these is the fact that the characters, with the exception of Lear, Gloster, and Albany, fall into two distinct groups--one predominately good, the other predominately wicked. The good characters exemplify extraordinary virtue, while the evil have few redeeming traits. It would seem as though the very spirit of good were in conflict with the naked forces of evil, "....as if Shakespeare, like Empedocles, were regarding Love and Hate as the two ultimate forces of the universe."⁷

Closely allied to the foregoing is the presence in the play of characters so monstrous as to seem inhuman. What elements of human nature are so distorted or lacking as to produce such flagitious people as

7. A. C. Bradley, op. cit., p. 263.

Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall? The dramatist himself seems to ask this question: "Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III, vi, 80-83)⁸ And these characters are fit subjects for the comparisons to monstrosities which are frequent in the play. Consider the allusions, for example, in Lear's lines:

Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous when thou show'st thee in a child
Than the sea-monster! (I, iv, 281-83)

and in:

Filial ingratitude!
Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to't? (III, iv, 14-16)

And although Shakespeare's characters are generally considered as true to life, still it is possible that his genius is here beginning to analyze human nature into its parts and thence to build up strange natures, as later in Ariel and Caliban.

The pessimistic aspects of the play are further intensified by the repeated allusions to the lower animals.⁹ The animals mentioned are not only the higher, domesticated animals, but also the more vile forms-- the pole-cat, the civet-cat, the fly, the rat, the mouse,

8. All quotations from the play itself are taken from the edition by Thomas Marc Parrott, Shakespeare: Twenty-One Plays and the Sonnets, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938.

9. See also G. Wilson Knight's comments on this subject in The Wheel of Fire, pp. 197-99.

the wall-newt, the water-newt, and worm. At times, a character is expressly compared to an animal, as in the following examples: Goneril is a kite. (I, iv, 284) For her husband, she is a gilded serpent. (V, iii, 84) She and Regan are tigers, not daughters. (IV, ii, 40) Oswald is a mongrel. (I, iv, 53) These examples are but a few from many, but they are sufficient to illustrate the point. It would seem almost as though Shakespeare were seriously considering men in the light of the doctrine of metempsychosis, which had previously been for him a subject of jest.¹⁰

.... He seems to have been asking himself whether that which he loathes in man may not be due to some strange wrenching of this frame of things, through which the lower animal souls have found a lodgment in human forms, and there found--to the horror and confusion of the thinking mind--brains to forge, tongues to speak, and hands to act, enormities which no mere brute can conceive or execute.¹¹

The pessimistic impression from the play is further strengthened, in a way, by the storm scenes. In the roaring of the wind and thunder, the torment in Lear's soul is symbolized. Moreover, he is buffeted and battered by the elements in spite of his plea

10. See, for example, As You Like It, III, ii, 187; and Twelfth Night, IV, ii, 55.

11. Bradley, op. cit., p. 268.

that they should avenge him, "a poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man." (III, ii, 20) But Nature seems to be convulsed, bent on bringing her children to destruction.

In such a world, the shocking catastrophe is only what might have been expected. Although the deaths of Cordelia and Lear seem far from inevitable, since they cannot be thought to have deserved death, nevertheless in Shakespeare's world of King Lear weakness and innocence are not spared.

At this point, the question as to what power rules such a world naturally forces itself on the mind. This is Bradley's final question in his part-by-part examination of the play. It is, besides, a question frequently proposed by the characters in the play. There are at least four different answers given by them. Kent states his view in these words:

It is the stars,
The stars above us, govern our condition.
(IV, iii, 34f.)

Edmund in these:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. (I, ii, 1f.)

Gloster as follows:

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

Edgar:

Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.
(IV, vi, 73f.)

Besides these four distinct theories as to the nature of the ruling powers, there are numerous references to justice and divine retribution in the play.¹² Mockery of justice, however, is so frequent in the play that the reader is puzzled as to what Shakespeare himself intended to convey. For example, Lear's first appeal to a supernatural power:

O heavens,
If you do love old men, if your sweet sway
Allow obedience, if yourselves are old,
Make it your cause, (II, iv, 193-95)

is immediately answered by the harsh voices of his daughters laying down the conditions under which he is to dwell with them. Again, when after leaving his daughters, Lear prays to the gods:

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both:
(II, iv, 275f.)

he is rewarded by the tumultuous storm on the heath.

Undoubtedly, the reader of King Lear is from time to time oppressed by feelings of despair; but Professor Bradley thinks that these sentiments cannot be the final and total impression left by the play. No other great work of art, he says, leaves the reader with the painful emotions of depression, despair, or indignation.

12. See also the fuller analysis of this aspect by Hardin Craig, "The Ethics of King Lear," Philological Quarterly, IV (April, 1925), 97-109.

And since King Lear is admittedly one of the world's greatest poems, it is difficult to subscribe to criticism which attributes to it a totally depressing effect. Rather the total and final impression left by the play

.... is one in which pity and terror, carried perhaps to the extreme limits of art, are so blended with a sense of law and beauty that we feel at last, not depression and much less despair, but a consciousness of greatness in pain, and of solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom.¹³

It is this total and final impression which Professor Bradley analyzes in his second lecture on King Lear. Wherein consists this "greatness in pain"? this "solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom"? In answering these questions Professor Bradley concentrates on the persons of the drama--a most necessary procedure since the centre of tragedy is "action issuing in character."¹⁴ The action may seem to portray a fatalistic world, but the development and deeds of the characters must be considered for the final interpretation of that world. If the characters are responsible, even in part, for the course of the action, then their fortunes cannot be attributed without qualification to a preternatural power, malignant or otherwise.

The character of the hero of the play, King Lear, is the first to be expounded by Professor Bradley.

13. Bradley, op. cit., p. 279.

14. Ibid., p. 11f.

And Lear's development, when seen in globo, helps to soften rather than increase the terror induced by the play. The reader inclines to sympathize unreservedly with the old king in all the suffering and misfortune that come to him. However, it should not be forgotten that Lear is the protagonist in the tragedy. Although during the last four acts he is a passive character, still he is the inciting force of the first act and therefore of the whole drama. He is responsible for the "hideous rashness" (I, i, 153) with which he divided his kingdom in order to escape the burdens of ruling; he is guilty of the ancient Greek *ὑβρις* in his harsh treatment of Kent and Cordelia. Moreover, this *ὑβρις* remains with Lear on up to the storm scenes. His curse of Goneril (I, iv, 297-310) is not as unjust as his treatment of Cordelia, but there is in it the same *ὑβρις*. For a proper reading of the play, Lear's faults must be remembered, not because they are proportionate to his suffering, but because they are at least a part-cause of his suffering. There is a strict connection between act and consequence, which indicates that a moral and rational order is present in the world and precludes the feeling that the world is subject to an arbitrary and malicious power.

In still another and more poignant way the career of Lear in the play is made less frightful. As a result of his sufferings, he changes completely from the imperious and despotic tyrant he was at the beginning of the play to an humble old man with a fellow-feeling for other men. He advances from despotism, through destitution, to humility. Thus, the tragedy might be named The Redemption of King Lear. At the end of the play Lear is a greater man than he was at the beginning.

The purification¹⁵ of Lear is limned in some of the most touching scenes of the play. It begins during the storm on the heath. At first Lear rails against the elements, calls upon them to avenge him against his daughters. But later when they have come upon the howel, he gently insists that Kent go in:

Prithee, go in thyself; seek thine own ease.
 This tempest will not give me leave to ponder
 On things would hurt me more. But I'll go in.
 [To the Fool.] In, boy; go first. You house-
 less poverty,--
 Nay, get thee in. I'll pray and then I'll sleep.
 (III, iv, 21-27)

And Lear prays for the poor people, not for himself:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe're 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 season such as these? O, I have ta'en
 Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,

15. Bradley credits this word to Professor E. Dowden, whom he also acknowledges as having influenced him most in his interpretation of King Lear; see Bradley, op. cit., pp. 285 and 330, note.

That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just. (III, iv, 28-36)

The Lear of these lines is much different from the Lear of the first scene, and much more admirable.

Again, the redemption of Lear is evident in the quickening of his perception of moral values. When he meets Edgar on the heath, he realizes that the naked beggar represents truth and reality more than do the corruption and flattery to which he had before been victim.

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 perfume. Ha!
here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art
the thing itself; (III, iv, 107-111)

And later, at the end of the play, Lear shows himself repentant, superior to the things of time, and converted to love for Cordelia:

Come, let's away to prison;
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk of 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 gods' spies; and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon. (V, iii, 9-19)

A last consoling note in the career of Lear occurs in that most pathetic of scenes where he brings in the dead body of Cordelia. Lear is generally acted at

this point as though he were overcome with grief. He is, at first; but his grief changes into ecstasy just before he dies, for he believes again that Cordelia still lives:

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there! (V, iii, 309f.)

Shortly before, when he had thought that she was reviving, he had said:

..... she lives; if it be so,
It is a chance that does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt. (V, iii, 265-67)

Hence it would seem that Lear's last gestures and words should express the utmost joy, if the role be acted true to Shakespeare's mind. Lear dies rejoicing in the mistaken belief that Cordelia still lives.

Such a view of Lear's part in the play leaves the reader with hope that there is some good to be derived from life, even from the sufferings and misfortunes of life. Bradley next considers the group of evil characters, then the group of good, and finally Cordelia.

In the Goneril-Regan-Edmund-Oswald group, Oswald is by far the most contemptible. He is a mere time-server. Yet he has one or two good traits: he is loyal to Goneril, but loyalty even to evil has some natural goodness in it. Cornwall, on the other hand, is without redeeming traits; he is a fit mate for Regan. And Regan is the most detestable of the group: she lacks

the power of Goneril, needlessly lies to Oswald (IV, v, 24-26), is indifferent to her father's curse (II, iv, 293f.), and never once mentions the gods as do all the other characters in the play. Edmund, although he is a cool, calculating criminal, wins our sympathy in some ways. He is a good sport and has a sense of humor. His villainy, moreover, is brought about by his bastardy, for which he is in no way responsible. His rejection from the social order is unjust; hence his guilt in fighting back is somewhat palliated.

Now in a pessimistic world, such a group of characters could be expected to have full sway and to succeed in their undertakings. But this does not happen in Shakespeare's world of King Lear. The evil embodied by the wicked characters is merely destructive. Although almost to the end they seem to have the upper hand, still even before the end they have sown the seeds of their destruction. Goneril and Regan are mortal enemies even before the battle is won. All the evil characters are dead within two weeks after the outburst of their evil rebellion against the moral order of the world. This fact indicates that the world of King Lear is unfriendly to evil and that it strives to eject evil, even though in doing so it convulses itself.

The opposing group of characters--Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and the Fool--are as remarkable for their

goodness as the evil group are for their wickedness. Kent is completely unselfish; he serves the king at any cost, and he is denied even the reward of being recognized by the old man in the end. Edgar is a thoroughly religious man, always hopeful and buoyant even in his worst ill-luck. The Fool is one of Shakespeare's best-loved characters because of his boyish devotion to the aged king. The devotion of all three--Kent, Edmund, and the Fool--is high-lighted in the storm scenes. The power of Lear in these scenes and the loyalty of the other three give a sense of the dignity of man and of his superiority to external adversity.

The character of Cordelia is singled out for fuller development, first because of the danger of misunderstanding her part in the tragic action; and secondly because of the difficulty of explaining her death at the end of the tragedy. As regards the first point, Professor Bradley points out that Cordelia does contribute by her imperfections to the tragic sequence of events. No one would think either of justifying her or of blaming her for imperfections which appear mingled with such noble qualities. But the fact remains that she hindered the king's cause by not protesting more convincingly her love for her father; she seemed to be tongue-tied when it was her duty to express her tender love for her father. Moreover, she

even perverts the truth by implying that to give love to a husband is to take it from a father. Such sentiments, expressed before a proud, despotic old man who has doted on her love, hasten on the rash actions of Lear and so contribute to the tragedy. Lastly, Cordelia shows a strain of stubborn pride. She uses harsh language towards her sisters in the first scene; and Professor Bradley doubts whether even in the last scene "she could have brought herself to plead with her sisters for her father's life; and if she had attempted the task she would have performed it but ill."¹⁶ Thus it appears that Cordelia in spite of her noble and amiable nature is not a mere onlooker in the tragedy but has some part in bringing on the tragic ending.

The second point--why Cordelia dies at the end--causes perhaps a greater difficulty for the reader. It cannot be said in any sense that Cordelia's death is due to, or proportionate to, her contribution to the tragic action. But the reader is somewhat reconciled to Cordelia's death by two factors: First, her death is due to the fact that both good and evil spread far and wide beyond themselves. It is a tragic fact of life that the good are often destroyed through the agency of evil-doers. Thus, the death of Cordelia is

16. Bradley, op. cit., p. 322.

true to life. But this affords little solace. More adequate solace follows from the feeling that the heroic being is, after all, superior to world he lives in. This feeling implies that the heroic being is somehow "untouched by the doom that overtakes him; and is rather set free from life than deprived of it."¹⁷ It is true that this feeling, if it were prominent in the consciousness, would transform the tragic aspect of tragedy; for it would imply that tragic events are not so tragic as they appear but really bring the victim to a higher plane of existence. Nevertheless, the feeling described accompanies the tragic emotions, though the reader may be unconscious of the implication. This feeling, moreover, is evoked with quite exceptional strength at the death of Cordelia. Pity and fear are softened by the feeling that what happens to such a being does not matter; all that matters is what she is."¹⁸ The thought that the good should prosper suddenly seems wrong, and is replaced by the thought "that the outward is nothing and the inward all."¹⁹

This indictment of prosperity is present in King Lear. It is this aspect of the tragedy that constitutes Shakespeare's "pessimism," if the word must be used;

17. Bradley, op. cit., p. 324.

18. Ibid., p. 325.

19. Ibid., p. 326.

and the darkness of the tragedy may be due to a period of depression in the poet's life. But pessimism is not the whole spirit of the tragedy, for King Lear presents a world in which the good grow side by side with the wicked, a world in which suffering and death matter greatly, and at the same time a world which has a deeper meaning than is at first apparent. The world of King Lear is one which, no matter how starkly evil it seems to be, still leaves the spectator with the hope of optimism.

In concluding this summary of Professor Bradley's criticism of King Lear, it may be stated that the attempt has been to state Bradley's views without comment. In the last chapter his views will be compared to those of other critics, and evaluated.

CHAPTER III

THE "OPTIMISTIC" INTERPRETATION

Although the critics summarized in this chapter represent several different trends in criticism, they have been grouped together because they see in King Lear a universe that is not pessimistic. That is, they do not consider evil to be triumphant in the play; nor do they think that Shakespeare meant to portray in King Lear a universe ruled over by a malignant power indifferent to the fate of men. How much they derive from Bradley would be difficult to determine, and foreign to the purpose of the thesis. But they agree with Bradley at least on this important point, that the evil in the play is due to the actions of men, not to some external, omnipotent force of wickedness.

The critics so chosen for this chapter have been arranged according to the chronological order of their publications. This order has been chosen not because it illustrates any particular developments, but because it happens to provide a satisfactory grouping also according to schools of criticism. Since the first three critics represent disparate methods, each is in a class by himself. The last three use the historical approach

in their studies. Thus, the chronological order is coincidentally the best order also from the viewpoint of critical trends.

JOHN MASEFIELD

It is with some doubt that John Masefield¹ is placed among the "optimists." On the one hand, he considers the chief lesson of the play to be that any injustice delivers a man to powers who will restore the balance; on the other hand, he seems to conceive these powers as impersonal and fatalistic. The first idea points toward an optimistic interpretation of the play, while the second coincides with the pessimistic. In any case, since Mr. Masefield does not explicitly develop his conception of the nature of these ruling powers, he is placed among the critics who give an optimistic interpretation of the play.

King Lear is, according to Mr. Masefield, the most affecting and the grandest of the tragedies. The evil in the play springs both from the blindness of Lear and from the blindness of Gloucester. Lear is blinded to the natures of his wicked daughters by his unjust desire to lay down the burdens of kingly power in favor of women. Gloucester is blinded to the true nature of Edmund by the sentimental, sweet remembrance of the treachery which begot this bastard son. In both cases, the blindness,

1. John Masefield, "King Lear," William Shakespeare, pp. 186-95.

which has resulted from an injustice, is made use of by fate for the restoration of order. One of the chief lessons of the play is the following:

Any injustice, trouble or hunger in the mind delivers man to powers who restore calmness and justice by means violent or gentle according to the strength of the disturbing passion.²

In Lear, the injustice is against nature; it is unnatural that Lear should give his kingdom over to women, that he should curse his youngest daughter, that Gloucester should so suddenly and easily believe evil of the finest characters in the play. Now since the injustices have been against nature, the retribution will also be violently unnatural: Goneril and Regan rule their father, resort to ghastly cruelties, lust after Edmund, and die unnaturally; Lear goes mad; France makes war against his sisters-in-law; Cornwall is stabbed by a servant; Edmund dies by the hand of his half-brother; Gloucester has his eyes gouged out; Cordelia dies by order of her sisters' supposed lover.

And all this unnatural evil is an "image of what was most constant in Shakespeare's mind."³ Each of the tragedies expresses some great figure caught in a net. In Lear the effect is more terrible because a man of tremendous strength is caught, and he is powerless. "He is so strong that he cannot die. He is so strong that

2. Ibid., p. 189.

3. Ibid., p. 191.

he nearly breaks the net before the folds kill him."⁴

As it was said before, Mr. Masfield is with some doubt placed among the optimists. However, the fact that he sees Lear's sufferings as due to injustices seems to indicate that for him the world of King Lear is not one in which things tend toward evil. If injustice is punished, then there must be some principle of good which has dominion over the doers of injustice.

The foregoing is the criticism of a poet, the present laureate of England. As a poet, Mr. Masfield quite naturally receives the matter of Shakespeare in a poetic way and uses his own creative genius in interpreting Shakespeare's work. It will be interesting now to turn to a philosophic criticism and see how Shakespeare's matter appears under a philosophic light.

BENEDETTO CROCE

Professor Croce approaches Shakespeare from many different points of view.⁵ He considers at length the necessity for distinguishing between Shakespeare's poetic personality and his historical personality. He proposes a theory with regard to Shakespeare's "sentiment," i.e., "the characteristic spiritual attitude of Shakespeare."⁶ He goes on to investigate the motives and development of

4. Ibid., p. 191.

5. Benedetto Croce, Ariosto, Shakespeare, and Corneille, pp. 117-334.

6. Ibid., p. 138.

Shakespeare's poetry, his art, the criticism of his poetry, and finally our own attitude toward Shakespeare. For the purposes of the present study only the pertinent parts of Croce's dissertation will be summarized, namely, the part dealing with Shakespeare's sentiment⁷ and the part interpreting King Lear.⁸

Professor Croce begins his analysis of Shakespeare's sentiment by asserting that Shakespeare was not a poet of any sort of ideals. As a poet, he was not interested in solving religious, ethical, political, or social problems; and there is nothing in his plays to show that he had any inclinations to solve problems of this sort. Although he magnificently portrayed the setting for such problems, he always went beyond them and centered his interest on life itself as seen in them, without attempting to formulate any faith to explain the riddles of life.

To feel life potently, without the determination of a passion or an ideal, implies feeling it unilluminated by faith, undisciplined by any law of goodness, not to be reduced to the enjoyment of idyllic calm, or to the inebriation of joy;⁹

Hence Shakespeare cannot be called religious or irreligious, moral or immoral, assertor of free will or determinist, optimist or pessimist.

In other words, Shakespeare sees life entire in all its facets: joy and sorrow, goodness and evil, freedom

7. Ibid., pp. 138-62.

8. Ibid., pp. 230-36.

9. Ibid., p. 141.

and fate, etc. On the other hand Shakespeare does not consider the phenomena of life to be self-explanatory; in the words of Professor Croce:

He who nowhere in his works refers directly to God, has ever present within him the obscure consciousness of a divinity, and the spectacle of the world, taken by itself, seems to him to be without significance, men and their passions a dream, a dream that has for intrinsic and correlative end a reality which, though hidden, is more solid and perhaps more lofty.¹⁰

It is true that the good in Shakespearean drama is always superior to evil, not because it overcomes evil, but simply because it is the good, which Shakespeare seizes in its pristine beauty and strength. However, there is really no deciding of issues between good and evil. A certain calm may be restored at the end of a tragedy, "but the desolation of faith betrayed, of goodness trampled upon, of innocent creatures destroyed, of noble hearts broken, remains."¹¹ Hence, the vision of life in the plays is not oversimplified or superficially portrayed as the mere antithesis between good and evil. There is always a mystery surrounding the course of events, of which the poet does not know the philosophical explanation nor the ultimate resolution.

In the depths of his consciousness, then, Shakespeare was entirely lacking in any religious, transcendental, or theological explanation of the universe. He is neither

10. Ibid., p. 143.

11. Ibid., p. 144.

Christian nor pagan; but he has a delicate perception of moral values, and is strongly influenced by the Christian ethic. Since, therefore, Shakespeare shows himself to be neither Christian nor pagan, it must be inferred that he was skeptical as to the existence of a rational Providence. But, on the other hand, he did not believe in Fate, nor determinism, nor predestination. It will be well here to quote the words of Professor Croce, lest they be misinterpreted:

.... he recognizes human spontaneity and liberty, as forces that prove their own reality in the fact itself, though he nevertheless permits liberty and necessity to clash and the one sometimes to overpower the other, without establishing a relation between the two, without suspecting their identity in opposition, without discovering that the two elements at strife form the single river of the real, and therefore failing to rise to the level of the modern theodicy, which is History.¹²

Such were the philosophical presumptions of Shakespeare, but they were not formed into a philosophical system. Nevertheless, the modern idealistic and historical philosophers have been strangely attracted toward him as to one who shared their views. The reason for this is that Shakespeare had rejected the Middle Ages and was filled with the Renaissance spirit. In his portrayal of the cosmic strife of things, he seems to offer material shaped to the needs of the modern dialectician.

So much for the exposition of Croce's views on the

12. Ibid., p. 155f.

sentiment of Shakespeare. In his interpretation of the plays the learned critic is more conventional. In dealing with the tragedies, his purpose is to show the contrast and strife which Shakespeare placed between good and evil. The historical plays showed individuals in action, suffering external loss and gain; but the tragedies, going beyond the external conflict, show also the winning or losing of the soul itself, "the strife of good and evil at the heart of things."¹³

In King Lear, Cordelia is the personification of goodness; she is like a lone star shining out on a dark night. The rest is horror and cruelty and wickedness; but the repugnance against the evil does not lead to the feeling of doubt as to the existence of good, for in the end the wicked are shown to be compounded only of malice and hardness of heart. In the person of King Lear, all humanity is represented as raging against itself and the world, because it has allowed itself to be deceived by moral wickedness and the world has concurred in the deceit. King Lear is pitiful in his cries of anguish; he is also an object of sarcasm in that he was foolish before he became mad. The character of King Lear, as well as those of Goneril and Regan, are gigantic in their proportions because Shakespeare wished to give a gigantic picture of reality. Goneril and Regan are boundless in their ego-

13. Ibid., p. 233.

ism, merciless, and unscrupulous.

Yet in spite of the hatred in the play, the inspiration of love seems to be equal or stronger. "Cordelia is goodness itself in its original well-spring,"¹⁴ She is courageous, prudent, dignified, and modest. She is firm in speaking the truth, even when doing so means that she will be disinherited. She is forgiving towards her father, and she is calmly resigned in the face of final defeat. Other good personages in the play--Kent, Gloucester, Edgar, and Albany--also affirm the reality of good as opposed to the deceitful show of goodness. But Cordelia is above these characters; "she is made of celestial substance, of purest humanity, which is therefore divine."¹⁵ Why does not such goodness as Cordelia's prevail over her enemies? Why is she defeated in battle, thrown into prison, and later hanged? "The tragedy of King Lear is penetrated throughout with this unexpressed yet anguished interrogation, so full of the sense of the misery of life."¹⁶

But for Professor Croce "the misery of life" seems to consist in the ever-present struggle between good and evil, which are but two manifestations of a single reality. In this struggle good is somehow superior to evil, and therefore the single reality is predominantly good. Al-

14. Ibid., p. 233.

15. Ibid., p. 235.

16. Ibid.

though in Professor Croce's opinion the superiority of good is not due to a rational Providence, still the mere fact that it is superior is contradictory to the pessimistic world view. Now since King Lear reflects this reality which is predominantly good, it is evident that Professor Croce does not subscribe to a pessimistic interpretation of the Lear universe.

Professor Croce's writing is often difficult to understand. The reader feels that a formal knowledge of Croce's philosophy is necessary to understand him, and that the lack of such a knowledge makes his criticism appear obscure and contradictory. The following critic, like Professor Croce, is also difficult to read and, at first sight, appears obscure. However, a careful reading of J. Middleton Murry reveals much that is worth while and clears up the obscurity which was due to the difficulty of the matter. Here is impressionistic criticism at its best.

J. MIDDLETON MURRY

In his essay, "The Nature of Poetry,"¹⁷ Mr. Murry states that he follows wholeheartedly the dictum of Anatole France that criticism is the confession of the adventures of a man's soul among books. On approaching a great work of literature, Mr. Murry feels that there

17. J. Middleton Murry, "The Nature of Poetry," Discoveries, pp. 13-44.

is a dense, dark wall before him which is analogous to the darkness which was in the poet's creative mind as he brooded over his brainchild. Gradually the mystery becomes plainer and the rhythm of the poet's work enters into the mind of the critic, until poet and critic seem to be united in spirit. At this moment, the critic knows the work; and in this sense he will never know it more.

This is the moment of knowledge; when all the words that a poet has spoken, all the characters that a novelist has created, appear to us as things in themselves no longer, but as the inevitable conditions, the necessary garment of invention through which a living yet secret reality was compelled to manifest itself in the material world.¹⁸

This secret reality the critic will call by various names according to his own mental background, but Mr. Murry prefers to call it the rhythm of life. At the moment of greatest knowledge, the critic is born along on the waves of rhythm and is rapt out of himself. In his criticism he can only attempt to show where in the work the veil is thinnest, where the motion is most visible, and how the secret pattern works out in structure and detail.

With this statement of his critical theory, Mr. Murry sets out to explain the nature of poetry. Moreover, he explains the nature of poetry by explaining the nature of Shakespeare's poetry. For the purposes of the thesis it will be sufficient to emphasize his remarks about King Lear.

18. Ibid., p. 16.

Mr. Murry subscribes to the idea "that the characteristic emotion of poetry is a longing for the things that are not, for permanence amid change, for security in unrest for eternity amid mortality."¹⁹ But poets express their desire through the medium of an imaginative world. Hence, Aristotle could define poetry as an "imitation of emotions and actions." As Bacon says, the poet "submits the shadow of things to the desires of the mind;"²⁰ and again, "the use of poetry hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it."²⁰

Poetry, then, seeks to give expression "through the shadow of things" to some deeper reality. In the tragedies Shakespeare seems to be struggling to give expression to a vision which he had experienced of a reality beyond the plane of ordinary human knowledge. "... he had apprehended as realities a truth, a harmony and a love which are not to be found on earth, and are not fully expressed in terms of earthly happenings."²¹ This vision of something beyond the world explains Shakespeare's preoccupation with death in the plays from Hamlet onward. From this time, Shakespeare treats death as a passage from doubt to the assurance of finality, as a triumph over life, as a period to mortality. Thus can be explained the ap-

19. Ibid., p. 21.

20. Quoted Ibid., p. 22.

21. Ibid., p. 32.

parent cynicism which pervades the plays of the tragic period; Shakespeare is hovering between the rejection of a life which he loved deeply and the acceptance of an experience which transcended life. The so-called serenity of the Tempest period can also be explained, not as a renewed acceptance of life, but as an acceptance of his own rejection of life. Shakespeare has given up trying to express his vision in terms of this world.

The rejection of life in the various tragedies is expressed in various moods according to the different emotions Shakespeare felt as one play succeeded another. In Hamlet the mood is one of utter bewilderment at the incompatibility between the vision and the actuality. In Macbeth the mood is one of complete despair and loathing for human destinies; but through the blackness runs the faint strain of the higher vision.

King Lear, however, is less dark than Macbeth. It sounds the purely superhuman note more clearly than any other tragedy. By means of human symbols it communicates more than any other play Shakespeare's secret knowledge.

Through the fury of the elements and the fiercer fury of evil souls we hear a divine music, an assurance of that which can be only by virtue of the forces which seem to deny it.²²

22. Ibid., p. 21.

The spirit which shines through the whole play is most brilliant in the character of Cordelia. She and Kent are as close as earthly characters could be to the perfect fidelity which Shakespeare had experienced.

Indeed, this theme of perfect loyalty seems to be for Shakespeare the best symbol of his vision. It shadows forth somehow the higher relation that he knew. "And the diffusion of the radiance of loyalty through King Lear and Antony and Cleopatra sets these two plays apart as the pinnacle of his expression in literature."²³ In them Shakespeare succeeds better than anywhere else in putting into earthly symbols his intuition into ultimate reality. Antony and Cleopatra (and Mr. Murry is thinking also of King Lear) portrays suffering and death and disaster as the result of loyalty and sacrifice. And it may be that these are the situations in which men come closest to divinity. Yet the mystery which has haunted men from the time of Christ is not solved. "He that loseth his life shall save it" remains a paradox. But as Christ's death was his triumph, so the death of Cordelia and Cleopatra is their victory.

Such criticism as the foregoing is undoubtedly subjective to a great extent, though this fact by no means condemns it. The historical critics, however, imbued

23. Ibid., p. 22.

with the scientific spirit of the age, wanted to ferret out as much objective truth about the plays as possible. The following three critics are excellent examples of this tendency and of its results.

HARDIN CRAIG

Hardin Craig's thesis²⁴ is that Shakespeare reflects in his work the ethical philosophy of his day, and that this system of ethics was Aristotelian and Thomistic. He illustrates by showing how the concept of justice figures in the play King Lear.

In the popular philosophy of Shakespeare's day the virtue of justice is the "highest manifestation of nature."²⁵ Justice is "in the large sense the law of nature, since it has the same content and the same utility."²⁶ Now political institutions are included by Aristotle among natural phenomena. Hence, violations of the law of nature "had about them the maximum degree of heinousness, because such offences struck at the foundations of all social and political life."²⁷ And it is "the function of the law of nature and the virtue of justice to establish and maintain civilization and its institutions."²⁸ A contemporary statement of this idea is quoted from

24. Hardin Craig, "The Ethics of King Lear," The Philological Quarterly, IV (April, 1925), 97-109.

25. Loc. cit., p. 100.

26. Loc. cit.

27. Loc. cit.

28. Loc. cit., p. 101.

Wilson's Art of Rhetoric:

The wisdom of princes and the fear of God's threat, which was uttered by his words, forced men by a law both to allow things confirmed by nature and to bear with old customs, or else they should not only suffer in body temporal punishment, but also lose their souls forever. Nature is a right fantasy hath not framed, but God hath grafted and given power thereunto, whereof these are derived:

Religion and acknowledging of God.

Natural love of our children and others.

Thankfulness unto all men.

Stoutness both to withstand and revenge.

Reverence to superiors.

Assured and constant truth in things.²⁹

Moreover, though justice results from an innate tendency it is a moral virtue and must be guided by the intellectual virtue of prudence. Hence, Lear's folly is fundamental to his tragedy. Regan and Goneril both remark on the king's rashness (I, i, 291-310); and the Fool and Kent constantly emphasize it.

The idea of commutative justice plays a prominent part in the play. Consider Lear's words in regard to the contract with his daughters:

Ourself, by monthly course
With reservation of an hundred knights,
By you to be sustained, shall our abode
Make with you by due turns. Only we still retain
The name, and all the additions to a king.

(I, i, 134-38)

It is the violation of this contract and the lack of respect for his kingship which drives Lear to madness.

29. Thomas Wilson, Art of Rhetoric, quoted by Hardin Craig, loc. cit.

Furthermore, in his own suffering the king realizes the necessity of distributive justice:

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 season 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)

Wilson's six subdivisions of justice are also amply illustrated in the play. The examples are usually clearly marked as violations or observances of the virtue in question; and the violations are considered to be the cause of the evils, whereas the observances are considered as the cause of good for the world. It will be sufficient for the most part merely to list the references to the places where these examples are to be found.

First, the virtue of "religion and acknowledging of God" appears in the piety of Lear and the good characters; on the other hand, Edmund's rejection of the supernatural is due to infidelity. Expressions of faith in divine providence are found in IV, vi. Gloucester despairs after losing his faith and desires suicide (IV, i, 38-39; IV, vi, 34-41); but he is restored by Edgar's reminder of man's subjection to higher powers in the matter of life and death (V, ii, 9-11).

The second and third aspects of justice, filial reverence and gratitude toward all men, are of course the

fundamental themes of both the major and the minor plots.

How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child! (I, iv, 310-11)

Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend!
(I, iv, 281)

These two examples will be sufficient to illustrate the oft-repeated sentiments of Lear with regard to his daughters' lack of affection and ingratitude. The hero of the subplot, Gloucester, also speaks in the same strain:

To his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves
him. (I, ii, 103-4)

The fourth point, stoutness both to withstand and to revenge is frequently illustrated: I, v, 42; I, iv, 323-32; II, iv, 279-89. Lear's chief weapon of revenge consists in "the untented woundings of a father's curse." (I, iv, 297-311; II, iv, 164-70)

Fifthly, the virtue of reverence and loyalty towards superiors has an important role in the play. It appears in its larger aspects in the degeneracy and flattery of Lear's court. Here, of course, the virtue is illustrated by its opposite vice.

Finally, the sixth point, assured and constant truth in things, is illustrated by the characters. Kent and Cordelia are models of truth; Oswald and his kind are mere flatterers; and Edgar is surpassed as a hypocritical liar only by Iago among all the characters of Shakespeare.

In the final analysis, the play King Lear shows the complete and final chaos in family and state as a result

of multiplied sins against justice. The decay of the state is manifest in two ways. One is the abolition of law and virtue and the directive control of reason; the other is the liberation of the forces of evil.³⁰ Lear's mind, stripped of reason, reflects the state stripped of morality and religion. With reason gone in the king, law and order vanished from the state, it is easy to understand Lear's ravings when he meets Gloucester in IV, vi.

None does offend, none, I say, none; (IV, vi, 172)

For Professor Craig, therefore, the world of King Lear is one which has been reduced to chaos by reason of violations of justice. The awful tragedy of the play results not from the caprice of a malignant deity, but from violations of the order established by a just God. In such a universe there is hope that man can retrieve his losses by again conforming to the just order, and make progress towards a better world.

Professor Craig's article is a good example of the method used by the historical critics. These critics try to reconstruct the atmosphere in which Shakespeare lived and the conditions under which he worked. Thus

30. Cf. F. C. Kolbe, Shakespeare's Way: "King Lear, analysed to simplicity, is the tragedy of Discord brought into man and society and Nature by the violation of ties of Love and Gratitude,--the four italicized words indicating the various unifying strands of expression which keep the one simple idea continuously before the mind." P. 136.

they hope to arrive at a truer understanding of how Shakespeare himself understood his plays. Professor Craig's article assumes that if certain ideas about justice were current in Shakespeare's day, then Shakespeare shared those ideas. In the following article, Professor Stoll shows how the dramatic conventions of the day affected Shakespeare's drama. Since Stoll is the leading exponent of the historical method in America, his work may be taken as an outstanding example.

ELMER EDGAR STOLL

Professor Stoll's critical method³¹ consists chiefly in applying to Shakespeare's plays the dramatic conventions of the time. Moreover, Stoll considers that the use of these conventions is determined and conditioned by the exigencies which face a dramatist in any age. Now the prime exigency of all dramatists has been a striking situation, one which will lead to a striking conflict. "The sharper conflict provokes the bigger passion; the more striking contrast produces the bigger effect; and to genius the improbability is only a challenge."³²

On this principle, Professor Stoll explains the improbability of the situation in Lear. The wrath of the king and the tactlessness of Cordelia are simply neces-

31. Elmer Edgar Stoll, "King Lear," Art and Artifice in Shakespeare, pp. 138-43.

32. Ibid., p. 2.

ary to make the play. Again, in real life Lear's wrath might have overcome his affection for Cordelia and turned into hatred against her; but since such a change would destroy our pity for Lear his wrath remains merely opposed to his affection, and there is no psychological reconciliation between the two passions in his soul. Furthermore, the dramatic necessity for emotional effect explains the scenes on the heath. In these scenes, although the character element suffers in the ravings of Lear and the babbling of the Fool and the gibberish of Edgar, still the emotional gain more than compensates for the improbabilities in the characters. Finally, the long digression in the last scene, in which Kent seems to forget about Lear and Cordelia, is necessary to work the audience up to such a pitch of anxiety that the deaths of Cordelia and Lear will have the greatest possible tragic effect. The digression, of course, would never have taken place in real life; and in the play its purpose is not to explain the deaths of Cordelia (the catastrophe is certain before the digression, V, iii, 36), but to make their passing tremendously more effective by heightening the suspense.

With regard to the question of whether the play reflects pessimism or optimism, Professor Stoll has some interesting comments which would seem to follow from his general theory of dramatic criticism. He disagrees with

Bradley's contention that the painfulness of the catastrophe is softened by the fact that death makes little difference in the case of characters as noble as Lear and Cordelia. Professor Stoll believes that their nobility "makes their tragic fate only the more lamentable, not irrelevant."³³ Neither does Stoll find alleviation in Shakespeare's intimation of the dreaminess and unreality of life, which, he says, does not add to the tragedy as such. But in spite of all these differences, Professor Stoll agrees with Bradley in holding that the play is not pessimistic. His reasons are fundamentally about the same as Bradley's; but he adds to Bradley's explanation, when he says that we feel exalted at the end of the play because of Shakespeare's exalted presentation. A rather long quotation is necessary here to do justice to Stoll's final judgment on King Lear:

And all that I can discover to alleviate our dismay when for the last time the curtain falls, is, apart from the life-giving spirit of poetry moving and hovering over the stage, the breadth and fairness, the exaltation and pity, in the presentation. (These are no matters of inference but of direct imaginative or emotional effect.) There is no cynicism, no pessimism--the vision is too clear and broad. Good and evil are not, as to-day, confused or merged, but are, as Croce says, "as light opposed to darkness". Evil is not negative or incidental; but while under suffering it may grow worse, as in Macbeth, good, on the other hand, may grow better, as in Lear. And by evil good is not in the long run triumphed over or overshadowed The earth

33. Ibid., p. 164.

trembles; but the verities are unshaken, the moral values and even the social sanctions are unbroken. Justice is administered, not only, in the end, to the villains, but (though in disproportionate measure) to the hero and heroine In fine, the poetically and dramatically transmuted and transformed material of life still retains life's proportions and values; and Shakespeare's tragedy wears the steadying, though not comforting, aspect of truth.³⁴

Some of the situations in the play explained by Professor Stoll are further explained in the following article by Professor Perkinson. Whereas Stoll implies that much of the tragic material was added merely for emotional effect, Perkinson shows why it was also necessary for dramatic consistency. Although Perkinson's article does not expressly deal with the question of optimism or pessimism in the play, it is included here because it helps toward the optimistic interpretation of the play inasmuch as it explains, without recourse to pessimism, why Shakespeare added to the action a great deal of seemingly unnecessary suffering and cruelty.

R. H. PERKINSON

In the traditional story of King Lear, according to Perkinson,³⁵ the old king is the central figure. He puts his daughters to the test and suffers through their ingratitude, but in the end he is happily restored to his throne. The legend of Cordelia is entirely another story,

34. Ibid., pp. 164-66.

35. R. H. Perkinson, "Is This the Promised End?" Englische Studien, LXXIII (1939), 2:202-11.

both historically and fictionally. Now this history of Lear and Cordelia was well known to the Elizabethan audiences, who had frequently heard it from Holinshed, Higgins, Spenser, and the old play King Leir. The people were used to a happy ending for the story of Lear; but Shakespeare makes him a tragic figure.

The problem which bothers critics is to determine why Shakespeare injected so much seemingly irrelevant tragic matter into the Lear story--for it was not his custom to change to the course of a familiar story. Some answer the problem by pointing to an ethical flaw in the characters which brings about their ruin. Others attribute Shakespeare's tragic handling of the story to his reputed Weltschmerz. Professor Schücking holds that there was a psychological inconsistency in the older versions between the initial situation and the outcome; the author of King Leir chose to provide the motivation in the introductory matter, while Shakespeare chose to adapt the subsequent action to the initial action. This solution, however, overlooks the fact that the Cordelia fate was not included in the original Lear story; hence there was no psychological inconsistency.

The answer to the problem is that Shakespeare decided to telescope the happy Lear story with the tragic Cordelia sequel. He was not compelled by the initial situation to write a tragedy, for the beginning of Lear is

less tragic than the beginnings of some of Shakespeare's comedies. Nor did he feel that unusual motivations for Cordelia's attitude was necessary, for he could have supplied that had he desired. By deliberately determining to write the story as a tragedy, then, Shakespeare forced himself to introduce much seemingly irrelevant tragic matter.

One reason why Shakespeare chose to write a tragedy probably lies in the attractiveness of Cordelia. He wanted to bring her story into the play; and since her story is tragic, Shakespeare had to alter the more important part of Lear to fit the less important episode of Cordelia. In order to do this Shakespeare emphasizes the tragic character of the old king. He portrays him as much sinned against, and adds the madness to the original character.

By these means, Shakespeare foreshadows the tragic end for his audience. He had to introduce the tragic elements early in order to warn the spectators of an ending they were not expecting. This he did deliberately because he had determined to join the Cordelia story to Lear's, and thus he turned them both into a tragedy.

The foregoing array of critics offers a fair sampling of those who consider king Lear as an expression of optimism, that is, of a world where good is superior to

evil. One point of similarity among them may be pointed out before the chapter is brought to a close. This point is that all of these critics (except Perkinson) take a large view of the play. They seek for the total impression left by the play when all the characters and episodes are considered together. They indicate different views about the nature of the power which is above the characters and episodes; but they all agree that the universe pictured is not one of chaos, meaningless suffering, and triumphant evil.

They make definite statements to the effect that the Lear universe is ruled by malignant fate; or they deny the existence of any righteous order in the world of the play. Their final judgment, therefore, is that Shakespeare represented a philosophy of pessimism in Lear.

The criticisms in this chapter have been arranged, like those in the last chapter, in the chronological order. They are the work of critics who belong to what was called in the introduction the historical-interpretative school. They give their subjective interpretations of the play, and their judgment is enlightened by modern historical scholarship. The chronological order indicates no particular order in criticism since, as it has been stated, all the critics represented use the same general approach to Shakespeare. Hence, the chronological order should be as satisfactory as any.

CHAPTER IV

THE "PESSIMISTIC" INTERPRETATION

The critics synopsized in the present chapter give a pessimistic interpretation of the play King Lear. That is, the impression they receive from the play is predominantly one of pessimism. It is true that most of them recognize the presence of good in the play, but they feel that the good is overwhelmed by the evil. They make definite statements to the effect that the Lear universe is ruled by malignant fate; or they deny the existence of any righteous order in the world of the play. Their final judgment, therefore, is that Shakespeare represented a philosophy of pessimism in King Lear.

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SIR E. K. CHAMBERS

It is a fortunate circumstance that this chapter can begin with Edmund Kerchival Chambers,¹ who has contributed a vast amount of fruitful scholarship to the study of Shakespeare. His books on the Elizabethan stage and on the life of Shakespeare have helped a great deal in understanding the plays; they have cleared up many of the "problems" of the older critics and have undoubtedly given great impetus to the historical method of criticism.

Chambers' essay on King Lear was originally published in the Red Letter Shakespeare, 1904 to 1908. This, of course, was before the publication of Chambers' great works on the Elizabethan stage and on the life of Shakespeare. But in the preface to Shakespeare: A Survey, 1925, Chambers says that his more mature judgment is in substantial agreement with his judgment of 1904 to 1908.

In the opinion of Chambers, King Lear is the most tragic of all the tragedies of Shakespeare. It is so because it effects more than any other the Aristotelian purification of the emotions. King Lear effects the ideal purification of pity and fear, which is to elevate these emotions and universalize them by fixing them on those elements of experience which are in themselves most pitiable and most awesome. Lear differs from the earlier

1. E. K. Chambers, "King Lear," Shakespeare: A Survey, pp. 240-48.

tragedies in that its scope is cosmic, while Julius Caesar, Hamlet, and later Antony and Cleopatra are essentially studies of individual characters. The cosmic scope of King Lear and Macbeth is apparent from the fact that the cause of the tragedy is some external force, although the individual is still to some extent responsible. Nevertheless, in the cosmic tragedies of Macbeth and King Lear the hero is under the curse of an external power. It is this element that convinces the reader of Shakespeare's pessimism in these plays: there may be some hope of mitigating individual wickedness, but hardly of changing for the better an external, superhuman power.

The cosmic scope of the tragedy does not, of course, eliminate the psychological element. Lear is himself a subtle psychological study of one possessed wholly by two instincts, that of desire for power and that of natural affection for his daughters. Blinded by these instincts, he gives up his power in order to show his affection for his daughters. But in this very act he frustrates his desire for power by surrendering to Goneril and Regan, while at the same time his domineering temperament is unable to see the fine shades of meaning in the words of Cordelia, his one daughter who would have satisfied his desire for affection.

The frustration of Lear's desire for power and of his affection for his daughters leads at once to violent consequences. Lear indulges in unrestrained cursing of

the two ungrateful daughters, and appeals from them to the heavens with the cry that his cause is just. At this point, the cosmic side of the tragedy becomes evident. The storm on the heath is symbolical of the indifference on the part of the superhuman powers to human injustice. Nature refuses to come to the rescue of the old king; rather it is Nature that in the end brings him to subjection. Finally, as a symbol of his defeat comes his madness, the culmination of a tragic issue.

In order further to enforce this fatalistic picture of the universe, Shakespeare has been careful to exclude every Christian touch from the play; although he is usually careless about anachronism, there is no Christian intrusion into the paganism of King Lear. The superhuman power is always referred to as Nature, or by the names of pagan deities. Moreover, the Lear plot is universalized by the addition of an exact parallel in the Gloucester plot. Thus the story of Lear cannot be taken as one that would merely happen to an individual. A further universalizing touch is added in that the protagonist in the Gloucester plot is a bastard, which suggests that wickedness flourishes in houses of every degree.

The final irony of fate is expressed in the last scene. Hope is aroused that the beautiful Cordelia with the help of her armies will conquer the forces of evil in England and restore justice to the land. But such hope is soon found to be vain, for Cordelia and her army

are simply defeated. It is true that Edmund, Goneril and Regan are caught in the web of their own treachery and done away with; but with them Lear and Cordelia are also swept away. There is no poetic justice, but only the caprice of high-judging Jove, who sends down his thunder on the just and the unjust alike.

It was said in the Introduction that Chambers, Walter Raleigh, and Stopford Brooke, (as well as Bradley) belong to what might be called a transition period between Victorian criticism and modern skeptical criticism. They were the pioneers in the skeptical approach; yet they retained a degree of worship for Shakespeare. Part of Sir Walter Raleigh's work is summarized in the following. He was a worshipper of Shakespeare, but his was a balanced worship.

SIR WALTER RALEIGH

An important contribution to modern Shakespearean criticism was the Shakespeare volume in the English Men of Letters Series by Walter Raleigh,² a professor at Oxford University. Raleigh's general purpose is to analyze Shakespeare's mind insofar as that great mind can be caught and inferred from the whole book of his work. Professor Raleigh belongs to that school of Shakespearean biography which holds that a great deal can be known about Shakespeare

2. Sir Walter Raleigh, Shakespeare, passim.

from his plays. Raleigh, however, is thinking chiefly of Shakespeare's mind-life, not of his external, visible life.

No dramatist can create live characters save by bequeathing the best of himself to the children of his art, scattering among them a largess of his own qualities, giving, it may be, to one his wit, to another his philosophic doubt, to another his love of action, to another the simplicity and constancy that he finds deep in his own nature.³

Hence, if King Lear is pessimistic, Raleigh would infer that Shakespeare was pessimistic at the time when he wrote it.

As a matter of fact, however, it is difficult to know whether or not Raleigh considers the play to be an expression of pessimism. The difficulty arises partly from the fact that Raleigh's book is not a collection of essays on individual plays, but a synthesis of Shakespeare's thought. Thus, when Professor Raleigh considers the women in Shakespearean tragedy he sees a refutation of the contention that Shakespeare was pessimistic. On the other hand, he holds that Shakespeare's tragic world is one in which chance or fate may turn the world over to chaos. It will be sufficient to state both these views and give the reason why Raleigh is placed in the present chapter.

Shakespeare's women, according to Sir Walter, are either good or bad. They act not on thought, but on instinct; and once they have set on a course, they do not

3. Ibid., p. 7f.

pause to reason about it. The good women are, therefore, wholly good. They are instinct with love and service; unselfish nobility is characteristic of them. Such women as these, says Raleigh, preserve Shakespeare's plays from pessimism; their radiant goodness shines in the darkness of the deepest tragedy. As Professor Raleigh says:

.... in the Tragedies they are the only warrant and token of ultimate salvation, the last refuge and sanctuary of faith. If Othello had died blaspheming Desdemona, if Lear had refused to be reconciled with Cordelia, there would be good reason to talk of Shakespeare's pessimism. As it is, there is no room for such a discussion; in the wildest and most destructive tempest his sheet-anchor holds.⁴

On the other hand, when Raleigh comes to consider Shakespeare's concept of the universe, he attributes to the poet a very dark outlook on life, at least in the tragedies. Firstly, Raleigh denies that Shakespeare had any definite philosophy about the meaning of the universe:

It is vain to seek in the plays for a philosophy or doctrine which may be extracted and set out in brief. All doctrines and theories concerning the place of man in the universe, and the origin of evil, are a poor and partial business compared with that dazzling vision of the pitiful estate of humanity which is revealed by tragedy.⁵

This implies that Shakespeare was at best a skeptic, bewildered by the enigma of suffering. Secondly, Raleigh denies the existence of any morality in the plays. The

4. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 195f.

perception of morality in them results merely from the reader's desire to escape from the naked brutality of the world as painted by Shakespeare. In other words, if a man can say that the evil in Shakespeare's plays is due to some human error, he will have hope of avoiding the error and thus the terrible consequences. But in Shakespeare's tragic world there is no hope of escape by good conduct.

Morality is not denied; it is overwhelmed and tossed aside by the onrush of the sea. There is no moral lesson to be read, except accidentally, in any of Shakespeare's tragedies. They deal with greater things than man; with powers and passions, elemental forces, and dark abysses of suffering; with the central fire, which breaks through the thin crust of civilization, and makes a splendour in the sky above the blackness of ruined homes. Because he is a poet, and has a true imagination, Shakespeare knows how precarious is man's tenure of the soil, how deceitful are his quiet orderly habits and his prosaic speech. At any moment, by the operation of chance, or fate, these things may be broken up, and the world given over once more to the forces that struggled in chaos.⁶

This rather obscure passage seems to negate Professor Raleigh's statement that there is no pessimism in Shakespeare. At least the ideas here stated are considered sufficient reason for placing Raleigh among those who feel no sense of law and beauty at the end of the tragedies.

There may be doubt as to Raleigh's view on the ques-

6. Ibid., p. 198f.

tion of pessimism in King Lear, but there can be no doubt about the opinion of the following critic. Stopford Brooke sees unmitigated pessimism in the play. His criticism of King Lear was originally published in 1913, and it is perhaps not much influenced by the modern historical skepticism. Augustus Ralli says that "he refines upon accepted views and explains rather than initiates."⁷ The influence of Bradley is noticeable in his remarks on the redemption of King Lear; but this is the only light that he will admit into the darkness of the tragedy.

STOPFORD BROOKE

At the beginning of his essay, Stopford Brooke⁸ states clearly the general impression made upon him by King Lear. The play, he says, gives the darkest picture of the world that has ever been created by the tragic imagination. There is no justice in King Lear; there seem to be no gods above the sorrow and wickedness of mankind. The world is ruled by the stars, "destroying planets who hate the human race."⁹ Even the good characters do not relieve the bleakness of the picture; for they suffer more for their goodness than the wicked do for their crimes. Nature herself is blind and helpless; or if not blind, wicked.

7. Op. cit., p. 333.

8. Stopford A. Brooke, "King Lear," Ten More Plays of Shakespeare, pp. 197-224.

9. Ibid., p. 198.

The characters in this chaotic world are men and women of a primitive civilization; they are just emerging from savagery. Their barbarity is clearly discernible in the gouging out of Gloucester's eyes, in the unnatural hatred of Goneril and Regan against their father, in the bold lust of Edmund for both the sisters, in the cruel hanging of Cordelia. And to make matters worse, there is no Nemesis to pursue the wicked. They simply do themselves to death without even feeling remorse of conscience. Lear himself, even before he is mad, is full of savage passion; he rejects his only true daughter in a moment and calls down on Goneril such a curse as could come only from a savage mind. Edmund belongs to this society when he needlessly orders Cordelia to be hung. His vices, however, are anachronistic; his greed and his lust after Goneril and Regan belong to a more civilized age of wealth and power. Kent also shows affinity to an early age of society in his rugged loyalty and outspoken manner. He is delighted with his attack on Oswald, and with the invective occasioned by the encounter. Still he is a man of steadfast common sense, to whom the king's political affairs are entrusted during the play. Edgar alone among the characters seems to belong to modern civilization. But once he has feigned madness, he is extremely capable at playing the part and probably is delighted with it. In his disguise, he is able to utter sentiments that would have to be concealed, even though felt, in ordinary con-

verse. In his role as Poor Tom, he reveals a personality that might have been his had he followed the bent of his subconscious.

It is among such characters as these that Shakespeare plots the fortunes of King Lear. Lear, too, is a member of this uncivilized society. He is not mad during the first scene of the play, but he is so blinded by vanity and violent temper that his actions are those of a madman. We feel pity for him at first, because his folly is motivated by the desire to be loved; but the pity is mixed with just contempt. Later, however, the cruelty of his daughters makes him an object of pity alone. It is true that the cruelty of his daughters had some excuse in the suffering they had had to endure from him. Haughty and independent as they were, they had for years been subject to this egotistic and overbearing father. They had suffered, and now they had ample means of revenge. Goneril promptly takes advantage of her new power to criticize her father and his retinue. The old king does not know what to make of this; it is the first time he has ever been crossed. When his anger bursts forth, it takes the form of an impassioned curse--"primeval in its antique simplicity, terrible on a father's lips, coming home to that which is deepest in a woman--appealing to great Nature herself."¹⁰

The agony of Lear continues at Gloucester's castle,

10. Ibid., p. 211.

where he meets Regan. Regan is still more cruel than her sister; she enjoys cruelty for the sake of cruelty, as is later evidenced by her treatment of Gloucester. Lear strives to keep his mental balance, willing to reason at first, but furious at seeing Kent in the stocks. He curses Goneril once more but then resorts to pleading with Regan. Finally, when Goneril arrives, he can contain himself no longer. Calling on the heavens to take his part, he goes out into the storm and joins his sorrow to that of the universe.

Out in the storm, Lear is beaten to and fro from fury to self-control. The tempest has heightened his powers of perception. He sees the elements as destroyers of himself and of the whole world. He exonerates the winds of the sin of ingratitude; in this they are not as bad as his daughters. In a terrible imprecation, he penetrates the crime of the whole world and calls on the elements to destroy hidden criminals. Then he finds pleasure in the storm, because it distracts him from the greater malady in his soul. Finally, at Edgar's cry, "Fathom and half, fathom and half," (III, iv, 37) he goes mad. Reason returns momentarily when Lear perceives man as he is in the person of naked Tom o' Bedlam. But from this point on, Lear is completely mad. Shakespeare has built up to this madness with consummate art that gives the lie to the contention that he was careless.

All through this storm scene the Fool has accompanied Lear, but at this point he disappears from the play. He has been angry with Lear for exiling Cordelia; yet there is love between them because of their mutual love for Cordelia. When Lear's love for Cordelia returns, the Fool forgives his action, but cannot help being bitter in his remarks. This bitter recalling of Lear's folly is the one constant element in the Fool's thought; for the rest he is a half-wit. But it is their mutual love for Cordelia which brings about the deep understanding between Lear and the Fool. This it is which gives the universal attractiveness to the Fool's part in the play.

Lear's madness continues until he meets Cordelia at Dover. Her goodness is seen in superb contrast to the hatred of Goneril and Regan. The divine simplicity of her words is unmatched in Shakespeare. Her love for Lear has not been diminished one jot by her exile; and their reconciliation at the end of Lear's career makes a scene of such extreme pathos that many have wanted a happy ending for the play. But Shakespeare was in no mood for this during these sunless days of disbelief in any just gods. The redemption of Lear's soul, however, is a sure sign of Shakespeare's exalted nature. Lear is made happy for a moment, and realizes that love is truly greater than power, wealth, or flattery.

The following criticism by G. Wilson Knight is very

similar to that just given from Stopford Brooke. Dr. Knight also sees very little to relieve the darkness in the play except that he extends the redemption motif to all of the good characters. Subjective elements are quite prominent in the criticism of Dr. Knight. Although learned in Shakespearean scholarship, Dr. Knight is little restrained by it in putting forth his own theories. The following quotation expresses his shortcomings, harshly perhaps:

Mr. Knight is a critic entirely without caution. He follows his own intuitions recklessly, and this recklessness lead to extravagance and even absurdity.¹¹

G. WILSON KNIGHT

King Lear, in the opinion of Dr. Knight,¹² is one of the starkest tragedies ever written. Yet in its grotesqueness it frequently verges on the comic, a fact which reinforces the tragic power of the play. It is this grotesque comedy which Dr. Knight analyzes in the first of his two essays on King Lear. By "comedy," however, he does not always mean that sort of incongruity which causes laughter. He means merely incongruity, although oftentimes the incongruity in Lear would cause

11. The London Times Literary Supplement, September 4, 1930, p. 696.

12. G. Wilson Knight, "Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque," and "The Lear Universe," The Wheel of Fire, pp. 175-226.

laughter if it were not at the same time so horrible. As it is, it increases the tragic effect without affording comic relief, because it makes the sufferings of the characters seem extremely foolish and unnecessary.

The outstanding examples of foolishness are found in the Lear and Gloucester themes. The old king begins with an absurd mistake in judgment as to the loyalty of his three daughters. When two of them later prove faithless, he becomes a tottering, arrogant, almost ridiculous old man. If he were not so pathetic, he would be ludicrous as he goes from one daughter to the other ranting and haggling over the number of retainers in his train. Out in the storm the autocratic old monarch rails against the elements and expects them to obey him. When he meets Poor Tom, he incongruously decides to become "unsophisticated" by removing his clothes; the Fool reminds him that it is a "naughty night to swim in." (III, iv, 115f)

This grotesque comedy of the old king is paralleled in the Gloucester subplot. He, too, is mistaken in his judgment of his children. He is subjected to unnecessary cruelty in having his eyes gouged out. The incongruity of his struggle reaches its summit when he thinks he is jumping off Dover Cliff, but merely falls forward on his face.

The same sort of cruel, grotesque irony stalks in the paths of practically all the characters of the play.

It makes their sufferings more tragic because they are more unreasonable. To quote a summary paragraph from Dr. Knight:

The tragedy of Lear is most poignant in that it is purposeless, unreasonable. It is the most fearless artistic facing of the ultimate cruelty of things in our literature. That cruelty would be less were there not this element of comedy which I have emphasized, the insistent incongruities which create and accompany the madness of Lear, which leap to vivid shape in the mockery of Gloucester's suicide, which are intrinsic in the texture of the whole play. Mankind is, as it were, deliberately and comically tormented by 'the gods'. He is not even allowed to die tragically. Lear is 'bound upon a wheel of fire' and only death will end the victim's agony:

Vex not his ghost: O, let him pass! He
 hates him much
 That would upon the rack of this tough world
 Stretch him out longer. (V, iii, 313-15)

Lear is supreme in that, in its main theme, it faces the very absence of tragic purpose: wherein it is profoundly different from Timon. Yet, as we close the sheets of this play, there is no horror, nor resentment. The tragic purification is yet complete.¹³

In this paragraph Dr. Knight gives the essence of his interpretation of King Lear. In his essay on "The Lear Universe," Dr. Knight enlarges on his conclusion that mankind is "deliberately and comically tormented by 'the gods'."

The philosophy reflected in King Lear, he says, is naturalistic. Looming large in the play is the part played by physical nature. There are numerous references

13. ibid., p. 191.

to animals--wolves, cats, sheep, swine, horses, rats, and the like. Frequent are the descriptions of nature like that of Dover Cliff. Both Edgar and Lear "return to nature" during the course of the play in that they cast off the accoutrements of civilization and face the naked strength of the elements. Vice is called a deformity of nature; Goneril and Regan are for this reason "unnatural hags." Edmund has a perverted idea of nature when he says:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? (I, ii, 1-6)

In Lear the religion, too, is naturalistic. There are numerous allusions to the gods in the play, but they seem to be mere figments in the minds of the characters. However, at least in the case of Lear, religion evolves from a purely naturalistic concept to a more spiritual realization. His early allusions are all to the man-made deities; but after his sufferings he realizes that the gods above throw incense on human sacrifice. Then, too, he and Cordelia will be "God's spies." (V, iii, 17)

On the practical side of religion, justice also is presented as a purely natural phenomenon. True, there is much talk about justice in the play: Lear constantly thinks of punishment for his enemies; Edmund acts from

a sense of injustice done to himself; and there are many other examples. But in the end, justice is not done; human justice is a mockery, non-existent. "Man's morality, his idealism, his justice--all are false and rotten to the core."¹⁴

Neither is there any divine justice to right the wrongs of men. Lear calls upon divine justice in vain; the heavens pay no heed to his curses on Goneril and Regan. It is true that there are some speeches in the play which refer to divine justice, as when Albany remarks on the death of Cornwall:

This shows you are above,
You justicers, that these our nether crimes
So speedily can venge! (IV, ii, 78-81)

"But there is apparently no justification for the thought: men in Lear are good or bad in themselves."¹⁵ In some cases, indeed, "the story suggests that sin brings inevitable retribution But it is all purely natural: there is no celestial avatar to right misguided humanity."¹⁶ There is natural justice in Lear, not human or divine, but merely resulting from natural forces. Although the good and the bad suffer, the bad come to a worse end than the good; moreover some of the good are spared, but none of the bad.

14. Ibid., p. 211.

15. Ibid., p. 212.

16. Ibid., p. 213.

In spite of this apparent lack of real justice in Lear, suffering humanity seems to be tending toward some purposeful end. The good are ennobled by their purgatorial experience, whereas the bad are degraded. There is a stoic nobility in the attitude of Kent and the Fool. Poor Tom finds comfort at last in his beggarly state. Gloucester finds joy in giving his purse to Edgar before he dies. King Lear himself is the outstanding example of nobility regained from suffering. He awakes after his madness to recognize the transcendent loveliness of Cordelia. He is happy to spend the rest of his life in prison talking to her. He is humbled to love; he realizes that he has been a fool. He has reached the "ripeness" spoken of by Edgar. (V, ii, 11) He is ready for death "and 'the gods'--if indeed those gods exist."¹⁷

In the Lear panoramas of human beings working out their own ruin or their own purgatorial liberation, the figure of Lear stands out supreme. Buffeted by the violence of the storm, he goes through a mad extravaganza with Kent and the Fool. His madness mounts to agony in the mock trial of Regan and Goneril. After the Gloucester-Edgar interlude, the Lear agony reaches its summit as the pitiable king enters crowned in flowers. Then comes the lovely presence of Cordelia with her restorative kiss. Lear awakes to a knowledge of love and beauty. "This is

17. Ibid., p. 218.

the justification of the agony, the sufferance, the gloom. Though once more the shadow closes, it has existed, immortal, in its own right, bending to no natural law."¹⁸

In conclusion of this account of Dr. Knight's analysis of the Lear universe, it will be helpful to quote from a summary paragraph which gives the essence of his philosophical background:

On the wide canvass of this play three persons stand out with more vividness than the rest: Edmund, Lear, Cordelia. They correspond to three periods in man's evolution--the primitive, the civilized, and the ideal. Edmund is a throwback in the evolutionary process Lear himself is a complex of primitive and civilized elements: Cordelia, in that she represents the Principle of Love, is idealized. Edmund is of the past, Lear of the present, and Cordelia of the future dispensation.¹⁹

Like Dr. Knight, the following critic, Mark Van Doren, is a man learned in Shakespeare lore. Yet he does not set out to apply directly to the plays his knowledge of Shakespearean scholarship. The preparation which Mr. Van Doren brings to his work is well put in the following:

This book is the work of a poet who is also a scholar. The sensitive and sympathetic imagination which is constantly alert to overtones of style and subtleties of imagery is grounded upon solid learning and an abundance of common sense.

18. Ibid., p. 223.

19. Ibid., p. 219f.

.... He is abreast with the latest findings and theories of scholarship.²⁰

MARK VAN DOREN

In his Introduction, Mr. Van Doren²¹ states that he is going to ignore the biography of Shakespeare, the work of his contemporaries, the history of his times, the conventions of the Elizabethan stage, and questions of text and authorship. He admits the importance of these matters, but believes that the plays as they stand afford far more interest than matters extraneous to the plays. He proceeds only on the theory that Shakespeare created a new world for each of his plays. His success was not a matter of devices--diction, images, atmosphere, character, or plot--"but of a larger method that tended instinctively to unity and delight."²² While reading a Shakespeare play, one is in a different world and takes in the details one by one without examining whether each detail is consistent with the others. This creature world is not the great world as we know it, but rather some aspect of the world which is so completely described as to seem complete in itself. While in this strange world, the reader "has the excitement of feeling

20. S. C. Chew, "The Play's the Thing," New York Herald Tribune Books, XVI (October 1, 1939), 6.

21. Mark Van Doren, "King Lear," Shakespeare, pp. 238-51.

22. Ibid., p. 3.

that he is where things are simply and finally alive."²³

What then is the world of King Lear? Before answering this question, Mr. Van Doren sums up the career of King Lear through the play. He says that the play has a beginning and an end but no middle. Lear's great folly in the first scene plunges him into a long and terrible catastrophe. The relation between the events is lyrical rather than logical. And to compensate for this lack of logic, Shakespeare had to strive for sensational and immediate effects; hence, the tempests, the horrible cruelties, the monstrous iniquities. Again, orderly progress of events had to be suggested by an analogy with music, and Shakespeare's genius has made the play into a most complex symphony. The movement is slow, glacier-like; and the melody of the Lear plot is answered by the counter-melody of the Gloucester plot.

Through the impassioned music Lear moves on toward his doom. Early recognition of his error does not save him from being rejected and going mad. He has no chance to retrieve his former estate, since Shakespeare wanted this to be such a catastrophe as had never been before. For Lear no happy ending is possible; he has learned much but too late.

The world of the play has been too sinister for any warmth to come at sunset. The ceiling of Lear's world is low, the atmosphere

23. Ibid., p. 5.

is murky. The wet earth creeps with treacherous, slimy-weather beasts: rats, toads, wild dogs, and wolves, eels, pole-cats, snakes, and vultures. The wild flowers in Lear's hair are not flowers at all; he is crowned, says Cordelia

with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,
With hardocks, hemlocks, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow
In our sustaining corn. (IV, iv, 4-7)

The dark sky is oppressive, and clouds of enormous weight hang low in it to torture human beings with their bulk.²⁴

Mr. Van Doren goes on to say that the recognition scenes in Lear increase the pity more than they provide an outlet for pent-up emotions. Ordinarily a recognition scene provides a discharge for intense emotions. But in King Lear the recognitions are incomplete: Gloucester does not know his son Edgar, and Lear never recognizes the faithful Kent. Even the recognition of Cordelia is postponed until hope of relief has passed.

The world of King Lear is, therefore, the world of a man pursued to inexorable doom. The old king does not have a chance of retrieving his lost position once the forces of destruction have been unleashed against him.

The final criticism to be dealt with is that of Hazelton Spencer, whose book is one of the best syntheses of Shakespearean scholarship yet published. Writing in 1940, he sums up the latest views of the historical school of criticism. In his interpretation of King Lear, Mr. Spencer agrees that the play closes on

24. Ibid., p. 248f.

a note of triumph; yet one or two of his remarks about the ruling power in the Lear universe justify his being placed among those who say that the play is pessimistic.

HAZELTON SPENCER

Like all historical critics, Professor Spencer²⁵ demands that the source of King Lear be kept in mind. The original was the story of a mythological kind, which Shakespeare did his best to make realistic. The dramatist sought to distract attention from the disturbing moral issue of Cordelia's silence by Kent's long remonstrance with the king. Secondly, at the end of the act he revives our sympathy for Lear by having the wicked daughters express their hostility toward him. Nor is the rashness of the king so improbable in the first scene as to make him appear mad, as some critics have said. His wilfulness is not lacking in plausibility if it is granted that he is not only an absolute but almost a fairy-tale monarch. When he does go mad in the third act, he is really suffering from delirium rather than insanity.

If the king had not recovered from this fit of delirium, the tragedy would be infinitely less moving. The catastrophe owes its extreme pathos to the fact that the good are swept away just after they have arrived at

25. Hazelton Spencer, "King Lear," The Art and Life of William Shakespeare, pp. 324-33.

peace. In Professor Spencer's mind, the momentary restoration of Lear and Cordelia emphasizes the tragic irony of their end.

No sentences in all drama are more affecting than the simple speeches in which the reunion with Cordelia is accomplished and then ruthlessly broken by a malevolence which, though it operates through human agencies, is invisible and unassailable. What depths of despair Shakespeare had known it is idle to inquire. That he had known them, no experienced reader of King Lear and Macbeth can doubt.²⁶

In these words Professor Spencer implies as his final judgment that the ruling power of the Lear universe is a malignant being which makes sport of man's nothingness. And such a universe would be fatalistic and pessimistic.

At the conclusion of this chapter a suggestion might be added as to why the foregoing critics give a pessimistic interpretation of the play. The reason may be that these men are pessimistic in their own Weltanschauung. They speak of the "ultimate cruelty" of things, of the "irony" of Cordelia's fate, as though they themselves looked upon the fortunes of men in a cynical way. If this were true, it would greatly influence their judgment of a work of literature and could be taken into consideration in judging their criticism. Since, however, the personal philosophies of the critics cannot be known, their work will be judged only on the basis of intrinsic evidence. It will be the business of the next and final chapter to attempt such a judgment.

26. Ibid., p. 330f.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARIES AND EVALUATIONS

A summary seems out of place at the conclusion of this thesis. Since the whole body of the work consists in summaries, a summary of the summaries would be too much of the same thing. It would be worth while, however, to point out the elements which are common to some of the authors, or to groups of them. An attempt will also be made to evaluate the work of the individual critics. No categorical statement will be made as to who's right, who's wrong. Only the principle of contradiction will be assumed, and certain statements of the authors will be subjected to it. Also, some of the laws of correct thinking will be invoked as the critics are brought to judgment.

One of the outstanding points of agreement among all the critics is that King Lear is the starkest tragedy Shakespeare ever wrote. And this would hardly be controverted by anyone who had read the play. The optimists, however, differ from the pessimists in thinking that the final impression left by the play is one of hope. Thus, Bradley speaks of "a sense of law and beauty"¹ at the end of the tragedy; Croce mentions the superiority of good

1. A. C. Bradley, op. cit., p. 279.

over evil; Murry is consoled by the perfect loyalty of Kent and Cordelia, a symbol of a more perfect reality; Stoll finds alleviation in the poetically real and exalted presentation of good as superior to evil. It is true that the foregoing perceptions often go beyond the sphere of drama, but perhaps it is equally true that Shakespeare meant to imply some hope for better things after the cruel realities of Lear.

Another element common to many of the critics is the redemption motif which they see in the fortunes of Lear and of the other good characters. The purification, or redemption, of Lear is given great prominence by Bradley, who attributes the idea to Dowden.² Stoll admits the ennoblement of the hero and heroine; but for him this only increases the tragic pathos of the catastrophe. Hazelton Spencer follows Stoll in this contention. G. Wilson Knight emphasizes the purgatorial liberation of the good. They seem to be tending toward some purposeful end, he says (but it is difficult to reconcile this idea with Knight's concept of the Lear universe). Walter Raleigh and Stopford Brooke also concede the redemption of Lear's soul at the end of the tragedy; but this is the only relief they allow in their deeply pessimistic interpretation. For those who give an optimistic interpretation of the play, the redemption of Lear is the token of hope; for the others,

2. V.s., p. 17, note.

it is merely a puzzling light in a mysterious darkness.

A further idea mentioned by most of the critics is the idea of justice. Very few hold that poetic justice is done in the sense of proportionate reward or punishment. Most, however, perceive at least a causal relation between the deeds of the characters and their fortunes. Bradley, for example, notices that, although mockery of justice is frequent in the play, there are also many references to divine retribution; furthermore, he sees some guilt in Lear and even in Cordelia, but certainly no guilt proportionate to their suffering. Masfield holds the chief lesson of the play to be the inevitable restoration of the balance after an injustice has been done. Craig proves that the whole play is an illustration of the virtue of justice and of its opposite vice; he does not mention poetic justice, but implies it when he attributes the whole catastrophe to multiplied sins against justice. Stoll says simply that justice is administered, though in the case of the **hero** and heroine disproportionately.

Those who give a pessimistic interpretation of the play are, of course, less likely to see any justice in the Lear universe. Thus, Chambers says bluntly that there is no poetic justice in the play and that the supernatural power is indifferent to human injustice. Stopford Brooke says that Shakespeare, during the time of the com-

position of King Lear, had fallen into disbelief in any just gods. The interesting conclusion of G. Wilson Knight is that there is "natural justice"³ in the play, not human or divine; by this he seems to mean that somehow things work out to the advantage of the good and the detriment of the wicked.

The question of justice in the play resolves itself into two aspects. The first aspect deals with poetic justice; and the consensus is that there is no strict poetic justice in the sense of proportionate reward for the good and punishment for the wicked. The second aspect deals with the existence of a just order of things in the Lear universe. Here opinion is divided. The optimists, especially Craig, hold with considerable proof that there is a just moral order in Shakespeare's King Lear, while the pessimists make rather gratuitous statements to the effect that there is no justice in the play.

Another problem for which the consensus of views might be examined would be the question of the ruling power in the world of Lear. However, the critics' remarks on this point are so vague that it seems better not to attempt to arrive at a concept agreed upon by all or several. The critics' remarks on the ruling power

3. G. Wilson Knight, op. cit., p. 213.

will be mentioned in the following evaluations of the individual works.

As it has been said before, A. C. Bradley is one of the most influential critics of recent years, and he is frequently mentioned with respect by later critics. His virtues have been sufficiently mentioned at the beginning of Chapter II. His faults, it seems, lie chiefly in the application of his nineteenth century philosophy to the plays of Shakespeare. Stoll says that "philosophy, transcendentalism does not apply"⁴ in a discussion of tragedy. This may or may not be true, but it seems certain that neo-Hegelian philosophy will hardly be found in Shakespeare. This, says Stoll, is really the source of Bradley's explanation of Cordelia's death.⁵ It is also the source of Bradley's vagueness with regard to the deity in the Lear universe. Bradley's final answer on this point is that the atmosphere of King Lear is one of "law and beauty" and of "solemnity in the mystery we cannot fathom."⁶ Nevertheless, in spite of what seems to be a big defect, Bradley has deepened the understanding of King Lear. Perhaps neo-Hegelianism helped Bradley's insight into the play; but from this it does not follow necessarily that Shakespeare meant to reflect in his work a neo-Hegelian universe.

4. E. E. Stoll, op. cit., p. 166.

5. Ibid., p. 64, note.

6. A. C. Bradley, op. cit., p. 279.

Sir Walter Raleigh's Shakespeare has also been highly praised, though not so highly as Bradley's work:

.... in the attempt to extract a philosophical significance from Shakespeare he has neither the insight nor the synthetic power of Prof. Bradley. Yet the book is distinctly a brilliant piece of writing and one may doubt whether anyone in our generation has said so many keen things about Shakespeare or said them so well.⁷

As it was pointed out in Chapter IV, however, Raleigh involves himself in a contradiction regarding the destiny of man as he finds it in Shakespeare's tragic world. If morality is "tossed aside," if the world is a place of "naked brutality," how are noble women going to bring about "ultimate salvation"?⁸

Equally unsatisfactory are E. K. Chambers' remarks that the tragic outcome of King Lear is due to malicious external powers and that there is no justice whatever in the play. The latter is stated without proof, although to many critics, like Bradley and Craig, it does not appear to be self-evident. The former loses force in the light of Professor Bradley's well-posed conclusion that there is a causal relation between the acts of the characters and the consequences. Chambers' perception of the cosmic nature of the great tragedies, however, is helpful and undoubtedly a just insight.

7. W. A. Neilson, "Recent Shakespearean Criticism," The Atlantic Monthly, C (December, 1907), 824.

8. Walter Raleigh, op. cit., pp. 196 and 180.

The criticism of Stopford Brooke is decidedly romantic. His treatment of Lear is acutely and correctly dealt with in the following:

.... Stopford Brooke refines upon accepted views and explains rather than initiates. By stating definitely certain things he brings them home to us--such as the degree of savagery in the human nature of the play. We knew before but not in so detailed a manner that Lear's passion increased his powers. If it is possible to vindicate Goneril and Regan to some slight extent he has done so--and here his criticism gets an imaginative tinge. If he is right that the Fool was angry, this is indeed something new: but we will leave it undecided.⁹

Stopford Brooke is silent about the deity in Lear. He says simply that Shakespeare had lost belief in any just gods; but there is no positive statement as to the nature of an external omnipotence, if any.

Another critic who derives from Hegel is Benedetto Croce, who wrote in 1920 to prove that Shakespeare all but arrived at the dialectical-historical idealism of the neo-Hegelians. Croce's essay on the sentiment of Shakespeare is a labyrinth of contradictions. The few passages quoted in Chapter III illustrate this fact. For example, after saying that Shakespeare "nowhere in his work refers directly to God,"¹⁰ he says a few pages farther

9. Augustus Ralli, op. cit., p. 333.

10. For a refutation of this sweeping generalization, see Leo Francis Stock, "Some Traces of Scholasticism in Shakespeare," The American Catholic Quarterly Review, XLVII (July, 1922), p. 302.

on: "The God that should pacify hearts is invoked,"¹¹ Moreover, he denies that Shakespeare had any definite system of ethics or any definite beliefs, then in the end makes him out to be, almost, a follower of the modern dialectic. He arrives at this conclusion by investigating in some mysterious way "the profound character"¹² of the man, although he has previously taken pages to show how ridiculous it is to attribute to a poet the sentiments he expresses in his work. The upshot of Croce's essay is that the reader is as bewildered about Shakespeare as Shakespeare, according to Croce, was about the universe. Only the hope remains that from the strife of the contradictions a synthesis of truth will emerge.

Contrary to Croce, J. Middleton Murry believes that a great deal can be known about a poet's mind-life from an examination of his works. Murry examines Shakespeare's works and arrives at an ingenious and original theory about Shakespeare's "sentiment" during the tragic and romantic periods. Ralli doubts whether the explanation is true;¹³ and T. S. Eliot finds that there is more of Murry in it than of Shakespeare.

It seems to me that one of the chief reasons for questioning Mr. Strachey's Shakespeare, and Mr. Murry's is the remarkable resemblance they bear to Mr. Strachey and Mr. Murry.¹⁴

11. Benedetto Croce, op. cit., p. 144.
12. Ibid., p. 153.
13. Augustus Ralli, op. cit., p. 437.
14. Quoted by Wm. S. Knickerbocker, "Mr. Stoll's Shakespeare," The Sewanee Review, XLII (April, 1934), 213.

But of course Mr. Murry's answer is that criticism is the confession of the adventures of a man's soul among books. Whether or not Murry's explanation is true, it is undoubtedly interesting. There is very likely, however, much objective truth in his explanation of the nature of poetry.

The article by Hardin Craig, summarized in Chapter III, stands on its own merits. It is reasonable to assume, as Craig does, that since Shakespeare was not a professional philosopher, he shared in the ideas popular in his day about ethics, religion, and other philosophical matters. The procedure, then, is to find out what the popular conception was on a given question and to investigate Shakespeare's work to see if this conception is borne out. In the article referred to, Craig states the popular Elizabethan conception of justice and then proves by means of a large number of pertinent quotations that Shakespeare injected this concept even into the stark and chaotic world of King Lear. This method seems to be so logical and scientific that the conclusion must of necessity be granted.

Stoll, Perkinson, and Spencer apply the historical method to different problems and arrive at conclusions that are very satisfying because they are very reasonable. The difficulty with historical criticism is not the method itself, but the unreasonable extension of the method. If the historical critic forgets that he is dealing with

poetry and not with a catalog of conventions in a certain age, his criticism will very likely go awry.

Any procedure which tries to hold in just equilibrium external influences upon the dramatist, and the mysterious vast of genius, is bound to err in details. Being human, the critic cannot always hold the balance true. So Legouis thinks that Stoll does not always make sufficient allowance for Shakespeare's imaginative freedom.¹⁵

This is undoubtedly true. Many think that Stoll errs in excessive insistence on the conclusions of the historical method. Spencer shows great skill in combining the findings of historical criticism with a true appreciation of poetry. And Parkinson, dealing with the source of King Lear, is not greatly interested in interpretation.

G. Wilson Knight is an example of the critic who condemns historical criticism and attempts to arrive through intuition at Shakespeare's meaning. In the process he unconsciously, perhaps, sets Shakespeare's stage with his own modern intellectual props. Thus, his discovery that the idea of progress is represented in the characters of King Lear is probably due to modern anthropological conceptions rather than based on sound evidence in the play itself. It is true that the idea of man's progress from savagery was current even in ancient literature; but there is little reason to suppose that Shakespeare meant to illustrate the idea in King Lear. But whatever may be

15. Quoted ibid., p. 216, from W. W. Lawrence, Shakespeare's Problem Comedies, p. 29.

the truth with regard to this particular question--if the actual, historical background of Shakespeare's work is rejected, another background of the critic's own invention will be substituted.

.... to throw out Shakespeare's stage and theatrical technique in one sweeping sentence shows just how far the critic will lead us from Shakespeare and his age into the mystical dreams of modern metaphysics.¹⁶

This applies also to throwing out Shakespeare's sources and Shakespeare's thought background. And the result of doing so is well exemplified in the vagaries of G. Wilson Knight.

The ideal critic, then, would be one who combined vast learning with deep poetic insight. Mark Van Doren, though not a very influential critic, is credited with this rare combination of qualities. Hazelton Spencer also approaches it, though in his book the emphasis is on the retailing of facts. In the following two quotations both Van Doren's and Spencer's merits are justly expressed:

This book [Van Doren's] is the work of a poet who is also a scholar. The sensitive and sympathetic imagination which is constantly alert to overtones of style and subtleties of imagery is grounded upon solid learning and an abundance of common sense.¹⁷

Comparison of this book with Mr. Mark Van Doren's 'Shakespeare' is obvious. Each

16. R. W. Babcock, "The White Knight As Critic," The Sewanee Review, XLII (July, 1934), 323.

17. S. C. Chew, "The Play's the Thing," New York Herald Tribune Books, XVI (October 1, 1939), 6.

supplements the other most acceptably. The poet gave us a more profound and more sensitive commentary; The professor has had to pack in short compass all that we know, together with what may be validly assumed, concerning Shakespeare's life, social and professional environment, technique, and achievement.¹⁸

The first of these quotations may seem to contradict Van Doren's statement that he is going to ignore questions of text, source, authenticity, etc.; but at the same time Van Doren had this knowledge to steady his poetic temperament in his judgments about the plays.

With regard to the ruling power of the Lear universe, Van Doren is silent; however he implies a malicious deity when he says that Lear is the tragedy of a man pursued to inevitable doom. Spencer also implies a malicious power which, he says, operates through human agencies.

The foregoing judgments on the various critics represented in the thesis are offered as evaluations which are somewhat tentative. The primary purpose of the thesis, however, was not to determine finally which of the interpretations were the best, but to give a summary, as objectively as possible, of the foremost interpreters of the play since the beginning of the century. This has been done in Chapters II, III, IV.

In making the summaries, however, it was impossible

18. S. C. Chew, "Who William Shakespeare Was," New York Herald Tribune Books, XVI (March 31, 1940), 6.

not to notice some points of similarity and difference and to make some judgment as to the relative merits of the various works. These points of similarity and difference have been added in the final chapter together with the evaluations of the various works. In final analysis, then, what conclusion can be drawn as to the present-day status of criticism on the meaning of King Lear? To the writer, it seems that the optimists have the advantage over the pessimists. The main reason is that their arguments are better supported by evidence from the play. A second reason is the great authority of the critics who hold the optimistic interpretation. In this regard few critics could be found superior to Hardin Craig, J. Middleton Murry, Elmer Edgar Stoll, and A. C. Bradley. In the writer's judgment, these men have given the best interpretations of King Lear.

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