The Psychology of *King Lear*

*"Do the heavens yet hate thee that thou can'st not go mad?" (*Capt. Ahab to Perth, *Moby Dick.)*

Psychology – or the law of the soul – should be a primary tool for determining authorship. This is because the unconscious never lies, and breaks through the literary camouflage so beloved of the ingenious Elizabethans. There is no hiding the character and landscape of one's soul, the moment the pen creates its trail of ink on parchment. For all such trails, however convoluted, lead back to the heart. And the greater the artist the purer the channel that leads from the heart, down the arm, into the fingers and onto the paper. And by the heart I mean the deepest springs of Nature. Carlyle wrote: "There is more in Shakespeare's intellect than we have yet seen. It is what I call an unconscious intellect: there is more virtue in it than he himself is aware of….Shakespeare's art is not artifice; the noblest worth of it is not there by plan or pre-contrivance. It grows up from the deeps of Nature, through the noble sincere soul who is the voice of Nature."[1]

King Lear, because of its special dream-like and prophetic quality, seems to reveal Shakespeare's inner landscape with peculiar candour and completeness, almost as if Shakespeare's whole psychology had been condensed into a single play. *Lear* possesses that strange swiftness of action so characteristic of the dream narrative, and its characters often seem more symbolic than real. The king alone has full human depth. In a way he comprises all the other characters, who are mere figures in the drama of his soul. For this is Lear's dream, a dream of initiation perhaps, an alchemical dream that transforms our awareness as fully as his. As Jung wrote, "The dream is the theatre where the dreamer is at once scene,

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[1] Carlyle, Thomas: "The Hero as Poet" from *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (1841), p.122.

actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic."[2]

As for prophecy, most of the great prophecies of the world have come to their utterers in dreams. *King Lear* can be said to foretell the Civil War that would tear England apart in the 1640s, with King Charles I as Lear, the highhanded king driven from his palaces out onto the blustery fields of Nottingham, where he raised his standard; and his son Charles II as Edgar hunted through the land like an animal, hiding in trees and hedges, picking berries for his food. Disguised as a peasant, his feet bleeding from his ill-fitting shoes, the young vagabond king went by the name of "Will Jones". Yet through his years of exile and privation, Charles learnt the art of self-mastery. In his first letter as King to the speaker of the Commons, he wrote: "And we hope that we have made that right Christian use of our afflictions, and that the observations and experience we have had hath been such as that we, and we hope all our subjects, shall be the better for what we have seen and suffered."[3]

At the Restoration in 1660 Charles issued a Declaration, granting amnesty to those who had fought against his father, as well as a liberty to tender consciences. With the execution of the King, the nation itself had suffered something in the nature of a nervous breakdown, and Charles's new language – the language of compassion – was designed to heal its wounds. Similarly, Lear's breakdown is England's breakdown, and the return to order and sanity is stimulated by the lunatic king's sympathy for his homeless subjects, of whom he is one:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,

[2] C.G. Jung: "General Aspects of Dream Psychology", ed. William McGuire, tr. R.F.C. Hull (1916, rev. 1948) in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, 2nd. Ed. (1960 rpt., Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, 1969), Vol VIII of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, p.266.

[3] Bryant, Arthur (ed.): *The Letters, Speeches, and Declarations of King Charles II* (1935), p.86.

Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the Heavens more just. [3.4.28-36]

This new language of compassion and the Cordelian silence that punctuates it proclaim a new social order founded on the politics of love – a New Jerusalem if you like – the love which, according to Sonnet 124, "fears not Policy, that heretic/ Which works on leases of short-numb'red hours/ But all alone stands hugely politic…" If, as John Weir Perry claims in his study of schizophrenic patients, new social myths for mankind bubble up from the depths of the psychotic soul[4], then Lear's myth for us is that of the living king within each and every individual – the herald perhaps of true Christian democracy.

Prophets are prophets, however, because they feel the significance of what is happening around them more deeply than other men and women. And as the 1590s wore on Shakespeare could see the seeds of civil war in the factions that had gathered to wrangle over the succession to the Virgin Queen. Indeed the succession crisis dominated the last ten years of the reign, and was made fraught by the fact that Elizabeth had lived a lie, her mask of chastity concealing a predatory sexual nature which absolute power gave absolute licence to indulge. Her flesh had rebelled, and the fruit of that rebellion now stirred in the land. Phoenix means "bloody", and before the reign was out blood would flow from the Phoenix's nest, or the Queen's hidden brood. Besieged and bullied by those jockeying for power in a post-Elizabethan age, the Queen was shoved out into the political wilderness while the dogs had their day.

[4] Perry, John Weir: *The Far Side of Madness*, Prentice Hall Inc., 1974, see Chapter 5.

The complex bureaucracy of deceit that was required to manage the skeletons in the royal cupboard had dimmed the lustre of the throne, while Elizabeth herself was vulnerable to blackmail from the Cecils who, more than anyone, had protected the lie at the heart of government. Their growing lack of respect filtered down through the Court. "Little man, little man, the word *must* is not used to Princes," she is reputed to have said to Robert Cecil.[5] The Queen was old too (Lear's age is stressed again and again), and her mental and physical powers were failing. As her sexual power waned, so did the political power that was harnessed to it.

Elizabeth could never have lived up to the public self-image she created for herself. As it was, it became the perfect screen for her abuse of sexual and political power. But, aside from political advantage, why did she create the image of the Virgin Queen? On an emotional level, it was to obliterate the stigma of incest and adultery attached to her mother Anne Boleyn and so legitimize herself as queen in her own eyes. Anne had been condemned and executed as an incestuous whore. (And though Henry VIII accused her of being her brother's lover, it was believed by many that Anne was in fact Henry's daughter with Elizabeth Boleyn, thus making her not only Queen Elizabeth's mother, but her sister as well.) As a result Elizabeth chose – publicly at least – to identify exclusively with her father, almost as if she had been born fully armed from his brow, like the virgin goddess Pallas Athena from the head of Zeus. Pallas was a rather masculine goddess – of wisdom, warfare, and disguise – and this characteristic coloured Elizabeth's political self-image, the root of the word "virgin" being the Latin word "vir" meaning "force" or "virility". Indeed the original meaning of the word "virgin" may be "born of man". As the Queen herself said on the eve of the Armada, "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart

[5] Hibbert, Christopher: *The Virgin Queen: Elizabeth I, Genius of the Golden Age*, Addison-Wesley Inc., 1991, p.262.

and stomach of a king…"[6]

The nobility had dwindled under Elizabeth's paranoid eye, leaving the monarchy vulnerable to the clawing ambitions of the New Men, entrepreneurs who no longer relied on the Queen's patronage for wealth and position. As the bastard Falconbridge says on discovering the body of young Prince Arthur:

The life, the right, and truth of all this realm
Is fled to heaven: and England now is left
To tug and scamble, and to part by th'teeth
The un-owed interest of proud-swelling state. [*King John*, 4.3.144-147]

Elizabeth symbolized and embodied the concept of sovereignty, the soul and destiny of the nation, the pristine source of true responsible government. When she strayed and lust triumphed over virtue, then England's sovereignty was tarnished. Shakespeare's study of kingship throughout the plays demonstrates one thing above all: that the sovereign ruler must achieve self-mastery before he or she is fit to govern others. He could be said to have written the plays to instruct Elizabeth in this principle. To his mind the Queen had lost sight of the fact that she was playing a role, and had confused the power of the state which she represented with her own personal power. In many ways she was the ultimate Machiavel or Dissembler, who by wearing the mask of the Virgin Queen did much to generate the culture of duplicity that was so strong an element of Elizabethan statecraft, and which created the perfect conditions – a sort of controlled anarchy – in which the Dissimulator (or "politician" as he was also known) could thrive.

To the mediaeval mind Reason was the King within and had dominion over the affections

[6] On the authenticity of Elizabeth's Tilbury Speech, see J.E. Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan History*, London, 1958, pp.104-6.

and appetites. When Lear abandons Reason in favour of his affections in the opening scene of the play, he loses his throne, and having lost his throne he loses the sanity that was the heart of his inner government. Notions of kingship and sanity were strongly linked. The same had happened to Elizabeth: her appetite had usurped her reason.

As the new spirit of capitalism became yoked to the new politics of imperialism, sovereignty and the sanctity of the monarch took a back seat. The new ethos of "each man for himself" meant that – potentially – the throne itself was up for grabs. It is noteworthy that the Machiavel in Shakespeare is as often as not a bastard, who by reason of his illegitimacy stands outside the pale of family, society, and even Nature, owing allegiance to himself alone. He is the calculating observer, the rationalist who sees Nature as extraneous to his own inner workings and thus fit only for exploitation. He sees the bankruptcy of the old order, knows its decadence and is ready to make capital out of it. As Falconbridge says: "Since kings break faith upon commodity,/ Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee!" Falconbridge was of course the son of King Richard the Lionheart, and the royal bastard was a particularly potent and dangerous figure at Court.

Edmund in *King Lear*, another bastard, is essentially an actor, who uses the language of the old order – the language of piety and responsibility - as a stalking horse for his own political ambitions. He is conscious that the life is draining out of these old concepts of sovereignty and society, and is equipped to exploit the new uncertainty. The principal arrows in his quiver are a quick mind and an absence of natural feeling. He realizes that he can become someone else simply by acting the part, thus cutting across generations of custom, obligation and social responsibility. He mimics to perfection the "offices of nature, bond of childhood, effects of courtesy [and] dues of gratitude", which Lear holds precious, while his lack of moral scruple makes him a true man in the eyes of Goneril and Regan. The world is Edmund's stage, and he alone of the characters takes us, the audience, into his confidence.

He is conscious in a way that his father the Earl of Gloucester is not, nor is he bound by collective values in the way his parent is. Having usurped the earldom from both his father and brother, Edmund quickly sets his sights on the throne. His claim is based not on genealogy, but on appetite.

This new opportunism – which was also a new individualism – was not despised by Shakespeare. Indeed, he is wise enough to recognize it as part of his own nature. Rather he sought a way to place this new energy within the boundaries of society, so that the golden principle of sovereignty could remain in tact. He and Elizabeth had both been stigmatized as bastards, and Falconbridge, arch-opportunist though he be, is the hero of *King John*, and declares with undisguised relish, "And I am I, how e'er I was begot." As John Danby writes in *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*, Shakespeare's problem was "how to legitimize the illegitimate".[7] There is no doubt that Machiavellism or Realpolitik was essential to the Tudor doctrine of order-at-any-price. And though it's difficult to know whether the Tudors were the old order or the new, or the new dressed up as the old, one thing is certain: they had learnt the lessons of the Wars of the Roses and were determined to create an impregnable dynasty to maintain power through the ages. In many ways, as we shall see, *King Lear* is a parable of the decay of the Tudor dynasty, shot through with the author's own fantasy of its redemption.

The word "Nature" and its derivatives are used no less than 43 times in the play. Shakespeare's concern with what is "natural" behaviour and what constitutes human "nature" has as much to do with the spirit of ruthless opportunism blowing through the corridors of Whitehall as the venal strain in his royal mistress. Was the behaviour of the New Men "unnatural", or was human nature pushing itself out in new directions? The

[7] Danby, John F.: *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear*, Faber & Faber, London, 1949; p.75,

struggle between Edgar and Edmund seems to reflect a dialogue between two divergent concepts of Nature. For the new order represented by Edmund, there is no such thing as human nature: there is mind and there is animal nature, and the one exploits the other. The two are irreconcilably opposed. For the old order, however, nature – far from being antithetical to mind – is its source, as well as the genius of man's evolutionary urge. Nature under this dispensation is benevolent, intentional, and perfect in itself: it is in fact what Marcus Aurelius called "the creative reason of the Universe".[8]

From 1558-1588, the old sacred dispensation of the holy king at the head of an orderly realm was consciously projected, while the new realpolitik was largely unconscious or thrust into the shadows. In other words, the mask of chastity worn by Elizabeth held up. From 1588 until the Queen's death in 1603, however, the new dispensation (pragmatic, calculating, amoral) emerged into consciousness, while the old sacred order fell into shadow. In other words, the mask slipped, and England, like Lear's fool, went "to bed at noon", i.e. packed up at the height of its glory. It was now only a matter of time before the State – the new bureaucratic system of controlled anarchy – would kill the king (another fifty years in fact). The Earl of Essex rode in on this new wave of energy, and we still don't know today whether he was one of the New Men, a Machiavel, or one of the knights of old, whether he was Edmund or Edgar. Whatever the truth of the matter, the national identity crisis that England was suffering seemed to work in him on a personal level.

Too great a gap between appearance and reality in an individual can lead to breakdown or madness. Elizabeth in the 1590s was known for her great rages, which could last for days. Goneril and Regan, who are a single double-headed dragon, appear to represent the dark side of Elizabeth (as they do of Lear), which was hidden from her adoring people, while Cordelia is the monarch's virginal face. (The fact that Cordelia is the pattern of truthfulness

[8] Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations,* 4.14.3, Penguin Classics, London, 1964; p.66.

suggests that on some profound level Oxford continued to believe in an ideal and incorruptible version of the Queen, as if it had been seared upon his heart as a child.) And if this model is true, then we would expect to find that Lear is concealing a dark secret which triggers his loss of control in the opening scene. The correct identification of this secret should explain the many motivational anomalies in the play.

The gulf between truth and seeming was no less dangerous on a collective level, and before we examine the opening scene for clues to Lear's neurosis, it's as well to consider briefly the sheer expanse of this gulf for the Tudors. We have already mentioned Henry VIII's projection of his own guilt onto Anne Boleyn and her brother George at the trial of his second queen, and the rumours that he had married his own daughter. But then in 1544 at the age of eleven, Princess Elizabeth, the product of that fatal union, translated into English a long devotional poem by Marguerite of Navarre entitled *Miroir de L'Ame Pecheresse* (or "The Mirror of the Sinful Soul") and presented it to her stepmother Queen Katherine Parr as a New Year's gift in 1545. Only she wasn't Princess Elizabeth at all; her illegitimacy precluded such a title. She was the Lady Elizabeth.

Marguerite, the royal author of the poem, was widely believed to be having an incestuous relationship with her adored brother Francois, King of France. The poem is first of all an outpouring of self-hatred, in which Marguerite depicts herself as a vile sinner beyond the pale of God's grace. This, however, proves somewhat disingenuous, for casting herself in the roles of daughter, mother, sister and wife to the Almighty, she goes on to draw four examples from the Bible in which a daughter, a mother, a sister and a wife achieve not only redemption of their sins, but union with the Godhead. In describing herself as the sister of the Almighty, for which she uses the story of Miriam the sister of Moses, Marguerite appears to blur the distinction between God and the King her brother. This allows her to elevate the sin of incest, which is the subtext of the poem, to an intellectual and spiritual

level, and so justify it to her guilty soul. "Now that brother and sister are one, other men matter little to me," she writes in lines 565-566.

It seems likely, then, that Elizabeth had found out about her incestuous parentage, and was already struggling – at the tender age of eleven – to make a virtue of the sin by raising it up onto a spiritual plane. And it may be that the idea of cloaking herself in the guise of the Virgin Queen occurred to her at this time. Not only would this be a form of penitence, but it would in effect convert the taboo of incest into an immaculate conception. Later in life Elizabeth's secret pregnancies without the apparent agency of a male must have appeared to some like immaculate conceptions; to others she probably evoked the phallic goddesses of ancient Sumeria. "Mother and father are one flesh," says Hamlet to Claudius. Elizabeth's bastardy and incestuous heritage had clearly created turmoil in her young heart; it also created chaos at the heart of government. For it represented a violation of the natural order, which was bound to bring divine retribution in its wake. He who, above all men, was charged with the duty of upholding the Natural law had violated it in the most sacrilegious manner. Henry had placed himself above the law. As Goneril says to her husband when he charges her with contriving his death: "the laws are mine not thine./ Who can arraign me for it?" This became the Tudor way.

Later on, Elizabeth's own venality would create bastards at the pinnacle of society, and in one case at least, it seems, she indulged the incestuous strain that lived so strongly in her, producing a royal child from one of her own sons. With others in this room I believe that Shakespeare-Oxford may have been that son and husband, and that in time he too may have attempted to erase his sin by glorifying it as a spiritual union designed to redeem an ailing nation. Even when reality contradicted his vision, the dream lingered. In his *Phoenix and Turtle* he wrote:

So between them Love did shine,
That the *Turtle* saw his right,
Flaming in the *Phoenix* sight;
Either was the other's mine.

Property was thus appalled,
That the self was not the same;
Single Natures double name,
Neither two nor one was called.

Reason in itself confounded,
Saw division grow together,
To themselves yet either neither,
Simple were so well compounded.

That it cried, how true a twain,
Seemeth this concordant one,
Love hath Reason, Reason none,
If what parts can so remain. [Lines 33-48]

In Sonnet 114 he talks of "making of monsters and things indigest/ Such cherubins". If one accepts the thesis, it seems that the more Oxford tried to rationalize what had happened between him and Elizabeth through literary sleight of hand, the more his rage and despair at the taboo they had transgressed welled up from the unconscious. Elizabeth was "the guilty goddess of [his] harmful deeds", and he – with Hamlet – "could accuse himself of such things that it were better his mother had never borne him". *King Lear* is an expression of both that rage and the ideal vision he pitted against it, and in it both he and Elizabeth become "one flesh" in the figure of the old, mad king.

The kingdom without an heir foreshadows the end of a social and political cycle, giving us a

picture of the nation turned back on itself, like the dragon forced to eat its own tail. Incest confounds succession because it forestalls the natural progression of the generations, and in its insularity conjures up images of social stagnation, corruption, political infighting and civil war. It is humanity preying upon itself like monsters of the deep. It is worth mentioning in passing for the benefit of our Stratfordian brothers that one of the essential powers of the Court was to control the presentation of kingship through its patronage of art. A good example is Charles I's patronage of Van Dyck, who presented the diminutive and stammering king as a Herculean figure mounted upon a fiery steed. Given that Shakespeare in *King Lear* presents such a stark picture of ruined kingship, it is inconceivable that the Stratford man, if he was the author, would not have been made to alter his conception.

King Lear begins with talk of a succession crisis. Significantly, the opening dialogue between Kent and Gloucester on the "division of the kingdom" is interrupted by Kent's looking over at the latter's bastard issue and asking, "Is that not your son, my Lord?" Thus within the first seven lines of the play the themes of succession and bastardy are firmly yoked. But the question itself is rather extraordinary, as one would expect two courtiers who are clearly well known to each other to have knowledge of their respective offspring. Shakespeare tidies up the anomaly by letting us know that Edmund has been abroad for nine years, yet the impression lingers that here is a man whose parentage at Court is in some doubt.

Gloucester professes himself ashamed of the lad's bastardy, but concedes that "the whoreson must be acknowledged". There was, he tells us, good sport at his making. Yet at the same time, he manages to disown him, for though the mother has dropped out of the picture, Gloucester doesn't hesitate to describe Edmund as having been born of *her fault*. Thus, as a bastard, Edmund stands outside the patriarchal structure of society, bound instead to the mother's avenging power. "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law/ My services are bound." Edgar, the legitimate son, is by contrast described as born "by order of

law", and in revealing himself to his brother at the end of the play, he declares: "My name is Edgar, and *thy father's son*…" The bastard, then, belongs to the mother; the legitimate to the father. Similarly, when Edgar confronts his brother in the same scene, he doesn't blame the loss of his father's eyes on Cornwall, who performed the horrid deed, nor does he blame Edmund himself directly, but instead lays the charge at the door of his brother's *mother*, or rather her sexuality. "The dark and vicious place where thee he got/ Cost him his eyes." It is an extraordinary assertion, that says much about Shakespeare's own psychopathology.

The fact that Edgar turns out to be the true heir to the throne, as it were, makes his conflict with Edmund into something of a wrangle over the succession. The half-blood heir convinces the true heir that his father is against him. This may refer to some episode of misunderstanding or deceit over the succession between the Earls of Essex and Southampton, both likely progeny of Elizabeth. Maybe Essex had convinced the younger man to back his claim by lying to him about his [i.e. Southampton's] legitimacy. The older Cecil had played both sides of the field, lending his support to both Essex and James Stuart as it suited his purposes, being at times something of a father figure to the former. As such he seems to loom large in the character of Cornwall, who says to Edmund as they collude over Gloucester's vile punishment, "I will lay trust upon thee; and thou shalt find a dearer father in my love."

Either way, Oxford and Elizabeth are likely models for the blinded Earl of Gloucester, an Oedipus figure put on the wrack for his sexual sin. Of course, we know that Oxford's own purported bastardy rankled deeply with him, and for much of his life he may not have known for sure whether he was legitimate or not. Thus the struggle between Edmund and Edgar symbolizes his own identity crisis. On the other hand, he seems to have had little doubt that Southampton was both royal and legitimate, or in the words of the Sonnets, that his Rose was true.

If we understand Goneril and Regan as the avenging agents of violated Nature, then Gloucester's horrific punishment fastens him further to the image of Oedipus, the blinded king who slept with his mother without realizing who she was. For in tearing out Gloucester's eyes, Regan and Cornwall perform a ritual emasculation upon their host. Edgar's language in relating his father's woes is significant. Says he: "…in this habit/ Met I my father with his bleeding rings,/ Their precious stones new lost." So Gloucester has lost his stones and has a bleeding ring instead. He has, in effect, been turned into a woman, or in symbolic terms been forced into the female realm of compassion. Thus is he made to kneel and taste the power of affronted Nature. The same fate is suffered by Adonis in Shakespeare's version of the myth: the goddess that he scorns destroys him in the form of a monstrous boar. And in Gloucester's imagination, Goneril is a wild boar razing Lear's anointed flesh with her "boarish fangs". If Gloucester is being punished for trusting his son too far, the punishment far outstrips the crime. But if he is being punished for transgressing the taboo of incest, we can begin to see a poetic justice at work. In the words of the mad Lear, with his sharpened intuition, Gloucester is "blind Cupid" and "Goneril with a white beard".

The opening exchange between Kent and Gloucester is followed by the entry of Lear himself and his Court. The King, it seems, has summoned his family in order to abdicate, yet he kicks off by announcing that he will express his "darker purpose". This darker purpose cannot be the division of the kingdom that he proceeds to effect because that is already common knowledge, as the dialogue between Kent and Gloucester has made clear. Rather, the darker purpose remains unstated, casting its shadow over the whole play. Nevertheless, the nature of Lear's secret quickly becomes apparent. In explaining his decision to relinquish the reins of power and later in chastising his youngest daughter, Lear uses the image of a baby to describe himself. He will "crawl toward death", and hopes to set

his rest on Cordelia's "kind nursery". The notion of this proud and manly king being nursed at the breast of his daughter is grotesque and certainly anomalous, and immediately alerts us to the generational confusion that surrounds Lear's throne.

Next Lear indulges in an extraordinary charade of emotional blackmail, by making his gifts of property dependent upon his daughters' professions of love for him. This is strongly redolent of Elizabeth's well known weakness for conferring honours on those who flattered her most shamelessly, especially if they appeared susceptible to her sexual charms. Both Goneril and Regan use sexual imagery in their professions of love towards their father: Goneril confesses that her love "makes breath poor and speech unable", while her sister declares herself "an enemy to all other joys/ Which the most precious square of sense possesses…" Cordelia understands the purport of this language when she says: "Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,/ To love my father all."

When it comes to Cordelia's turn to profess her love, her response seems to let the cat out of the bag, for with the use of a single word she sends Lear into a towering rage. The word itself is repeated five times in the space of ten words. The word is *nothing*, an apparently harmless disyllable until one remembers a brief exchange in Act III scene ii of *Hamlet* between Ophelia and the Danish Prince in which the hero embarrasses his fiancée with a series of suggestive remarks:

Hamlet:
Do you think I meant country matters?
Ophelia:
I think nothing, my lord.
Hamlet:
That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs. [*Hamlet*, 3.2.115-117]

Maybe Cordelia has unwittingly confronted Lear with the nature of his sin. Certainly his desire to give himself up to his daughters, in particular Cordelia, has sexual connotations, especially when one considers that the kingdom in mediaeval and Renaissance texts is often portrayed as the body of the king.

And just as Gloucester's wife is never mentioned in the play, so there is no Queen Lear, though she is clearly a strong presence in Shakespeare's source, *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*. It is her death at the start of that play that in part prompts the King to abdicate and divide his kingdom. In ditching the mother Shakespeare is able to reveal Lear's quasi-incestuous, emotionally infantile relationship with his daughters. The Fool perceives this immediately. When Lear asks him, "When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?", he replies, "e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers", and goes on to taunt him with putting down his breeches and giving them the rod.[9] And when Cordelia refuses to "love him all", Lear throws the tantrum of a small child demanding its mother's exclusive affection. But the suppression of the literal mother releases a more sinister force that suffocates the King from inside. "O! how this mother swells up toward my heart," cries Lear. "*Hysterica passio!* Down, thou climbing sorrow! Thy element's below." Lear's very next words - "Where is this daughter?" – suggest that mother and daughter are fused in his mind. Later on, the King says to Goneril: "But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;/ Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,/ Which I must needs call mine…" The key point, however – the really profound one – is that *Lear is mother!*

Curiously, Lear begins dividing his kingdom as soon as the first daughter has spoken, instead of waiting until all three have said their piece. Thus he cannot possibly hope to keep his word to extend his largest bounty "where nature doth with merit challenge". Equally, his question to Cordelia – "What can you say to draw/ A third more opulent than your sisters?"

[9] *King Lear*, 1.4.167-170.

– is absurd, unless he had already divided the kingdom prior to the love contest, with the greatest share reserved for his youngest daughter. Certainly the author himself is keen to stress that there is something true and legitimate about Cordelia that her older sisters lack, and the penitent Lear will later refer to his youngest daughter's "dear rights". Given that such love contests in mythology invariably involved the choice of a wife, it is perhaps not fanciful to understand Goneril and Regan as Lear's mistresses, at least on an emotional level, while Cordelia fulfils the role of wife. Afterall, she loves him "according to [her] bond; no more nor less", as in the word "hus-bond" or "husband". There is no legal bond between father and daughter; they are bound by blood. There is, however, a legal bond or contract between husband and wife. Moreover, Cordelia goes on to say: "Good my Lord,/ You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I/ Return those duties back as are right fit…" Begetting, breeding and loving are the duties of a wife and mother, not those of a daughter. To secure the point even further, one could refer to Lilian Winstanley's book *Macbeth, King Lear, and Contemporary History* in which she draws exhaustive and compelling parallels between Goneril-and-Regan's vicious relationship with Lear and Mary Queen of Scots' treatment of her king-in-name-only husband Lord Darnley. Darnley's murder was described in contemporary accounts as "parricide", and the key role of Mary's lover the Earl of Bothwell consorts with Edmund's plan to murder Goneril's husband the Duke of Albany in order to move one step closer to the throne. Indeed Darnley had been created Duke of Albany in 1565. Thus a story of the vicious relationship between a husband and wife seems to underlie *King Lear*'s tale of strife between father and daughter.

Lear, it seems, makes an interesting slip in his speech cursing Cordelia, by using the image of a child-devourer instead of a parent-devourer in order to describe her savage cruelty towards him:

The barbarous Scythian
Or he that makes his generation messes

To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour'd, pitied and relieved,
As thou, my sometime daughter. [1.1.115-119]

Feeding on the flesh of one's children is a good image for incest, which certainly makes a mess of the generations in a family, confounding the very notion of succession. (Later on Lear will call Goneril a "degenerate bastard", the word "de-generate" suggesting a regression of the generations.) Whatever one's interpretation, the words quoted above demonstrate that Lear is disposed to think of Cordelia as a parent figure, on whose "kind nursery" he had thought to set his rest. Ultimately, Lear seems to have sought some kind of fusion with his youngest born, a return to the womb, which is finally achieved when they are in prison together at the end of the play, a place that Lear evokes in terms of the garden of Eden.

If one examines the language he uses against Cordelia in the first scene, it is clear that Lear is projecting his own guilt at some heinous offence that they share. He accuses her of unnatural behaviour, of being "a wretch whom nature is ashamed/ Almost to acknowledge hers…", while France supposes that she must have committed "a thing so monstrous" in order to lose Lear's favour so completely. Burgundy meanwhile inadvertently hints at the true source of Lear's fury when he says to Cordelia: "I am sorry that you have so lost a father/ That you must lose a husband." Cordelia's refusal to respond to her father except through the word "nothing" may also imply that the secret she carries is incommunicable or taboo in some way. Like many a victim of rape or incest, she falls silent.

Incest, then, seems to be the elephant in the room in the opening scene, and it's only when he has finally lost his wits in the third act that Lear speaks openly of it: "hide thee, thou bloody hand;/ Thou perjured, and thou simular of virtue/ That art incestuous…" The simular of virtue is most likely a reference to the Virgin Queen, who vowed to remain chaste for the sake of her country. Interestingly, at the end of this same speech Lear utters his

most celebrated lines in the play – "I am a man/ More sinn'd against than sinning – surely a *cri de coeur* from Shakespeare himself, who may not have known the truth of his parentage when he first had sexual relations with the Queen, just as Oedipus was unaware that he was marrying his mother, Jocasta. (Jocasta, on the other hand, knew what she was doing, and despite her outward piety chose to defy the gods. Her guilt at what she had done to Oedipus as a child motivated her transgression. She had bound his feet with skewers and given him to a shepherd to be abandoned in the hills. Marrying him altered her relationship from that of mother to wife, helping to erase the memory of her sin.)

At the same time one has to try and explain Goneril and Regan's abominable treatment of the father who has given them everything. Can it really be down to political ambition alone? To shut the door against a man of fourscore and upward in such a fearful storm? "This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,/ The lion and the belly-pinched wolf/ Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs…" According to Gloucester, "his daughters seek his death", but why? Lear has handed them the reins of power and shows no signs of revoking his decision. His hunting and carousing may be a nuisance to the sisters, and evidence of the King's sensual and Falstaffian streak, and his companions may be expensive to maintain, but this hardly amounts to a political threat. If on the other hand he is being punished for a transgression that has defiled them and caused them to feel revulsion towards him, the punishment meted out fits the crime. For they drive the king out beyond the pale of civilised society and into the wilderness, as if he were a scapegoat. Also, Goneril and Regan's part in the ritual emasculation of Gloucester suggests a vicarious revenge upon their father. One must wonder too why Lear wasn't content to eke out his retirement in his own palace, tended in comfort by his own servants, instead of giving himself over to the mercy of his dog-hearted daughters. Such questions, however, can always be resolved on the metaphysical plane, for Lear abandoning himself to Goneril and Regan is Lear abandoning himself to his passions.

But it is not only the King who suffers this terrible reversal; the whole of society is turned on its head. Members of the nobility erase their identities, are banished, dismembered, or forced to become servants and beggars; the Earl of Kent is put in the stocks, which for Lear is "worse than murder/ To do upon respect such violent outrage." Servants defy and kill their masters, children their parents, captive good attends captain ill, and needy nothing trimmed in jollity - principally in the form of Oswald - struts the stage. It is a nightmare vision, or rather a vision of the Wasteland, and drives home the point that the curse that has descended upon the royal house of Lear has infected the whole of society, even the land itself. Lear is King Pellam of Listenesse, the Grail King, in agony from the dolorous blow struck upon his thigh by the spear of Longinus. The fight that led to the wound was caused by Balin's murder of the black knight, who is also the invisible knight. Thus what was dark or hidden in the land has become visible; what was dark and hidden in the soul of Lear has become visible. The devils have been released from Hell.

What is clear from the opening scene of the play, then, is that the succession to the throne has been thwarted, and that bastardy and incest have played a powerful – if subliminal – role. Lear's love contest and carefully choreographed abdication ceremony become a shambles, as his unnatural feelings towards his daughters play havoc with the royal will. The little play within the play that he stages does indeed catch the conscience of the King, creating an inner chaos that spills out beyond the palace walls. Suddenly the lawlessness beneath the ordered panoply of government rears its ugly head. "We have seen the best of our time," says Gloucester, "machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves". The King, according to Gloucester, "falls from *bias of nature*". (In the game of bowls, the word "bias" describes the lopsidedness of a ball - the defect that causes it to swerve from its path.) Lear cannot do what he intends because of this fatal "bias". So even when he divides his kingdom into two instead of three, with Albany and

Cornwall digesting Cordelia's third, he gives his sons-in-law a *coronet* to part between them: not a crown, mark you, but a coronet. Albany and Cornwall already hold the highest title in the English peerage, that of Duke, so Lear's gesture can only be construed as an insult. Or perhaps it is a joke: Shakespeare's joke at the expense of the royal bastards vying for the throne, who for all their ambition are destined to wear the Earl's coronet rather than the crown royal.

In banishing Cordelia, Lear banishes the principle of sovereignty. The dark forces of tyranny and self-interest take over and the kingdom is plunged into anarchy. This is the start of an alchemical process through which Lear himself and the nation he governs are transformed. Cordelia remains pure despite the fault she shares with Lear because the incest in her case is spiritualized, so that her union with her father is presented in terms of the alchemical marriage of brother and sister. In mediaeval texts this is often depicted by the Sun and Moon embracing, and is an image of the soul being infused by the spirit. According to Jung, incest symbolizes the longing for union with the essence of one's own self. The gods of antiquity, who had achieved that absolute selfhood, typically contracted incestuous marriages. Of course, by banishing Cordelia Lear transforms her into a Queen, a title that she alone of the three sisters possesses. Thus at the end of the play Lear and she are King and Queen, an image fastened in our minds when Lear comes onto the stage carrying the dead (or barely alive) Cordelia in his arms, as if he were a bridegroom carrying his bride across the threshold.

Another way to approach this metaphysical union is to see Cordelia as Lear's Heart, and that, indeed, is exactly what her name means: "Coeur de Lear" or the "Heart of Lear". The heart is the fountain of Nature within the body, and Cordelia's purity of heart makes her a healing force both in the land and in Lear himself. When she returns to England in Act IV we see her as Ceres, the Earth Mother, searching "the high-grown field" for her child-father. As

such she is the self-healing, redemptive face of Nature. But she is also the Virgin Mother, who returns to England alone, without her husband, to restore the unity of the realm. In language that could well be used to describe the image of the Virgin Queen that Elizabeth strove to project, the gentleman says to Kent: "it seem'd she was a queen/ Over her passion, who most rebel-like/ Sought to be king o'er her." Goneril and Regan, on the other hand, are alienated from Nature and thus cut off from the wellsprings of the Heart. As Albany correctly warns:

That nature which contemns it origin
Cannot be border'd certain in itself;
She that herself will sliver and disbranch
From her material sap, perforce must wither
And come to deadly use. [4.2.32-36]

Like Edmund and his ilk, the elder sisters live exclusively in the mind, which for them is an instrument for *opposing* Nature. "Then let them anatomise Regan," exclaims Lear; "see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" Lear and Gloucester too at the start of the play are similarly alienated from their own natures, and as such have come to rely on artifice: on dead language and dead concepts. And it is interesting to note that it is the unnatural characters who do all the talking in the first scene, while the true men are either absent or struck dumb. Cordelia's silence creates the nothingness out of which a new language can be born. Nature, Shakespeare seems to say, is superior to art, because even the best art is simply man's attempt to reconnect with his own nature. Religion has the same function. Both grow out of man's sense of alienation from Nature.

When Lear becomes mad he loses that age-old instrument of male authority, the mind, and like Gloucester, is forced down into the feminine realm of the Heart. In both the main and sub plots, the play is about the mind surrendering to the heart, or the ego (the false king)

surrendering to the soul (the true king), both on the individual and on the collective level. Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that if society is to survive in the coming centuries, the heart rather than the mind must become the source of man's political and spiritual authority. Images of the heart tearing, stretching, bursting, cracking and renting fill the play. (Indeed, the word "heart" and its compounds occur 52 times in the play!) Lear, in describing Goneril's harshness towards him, draws attention to her attacks upon his heart: "Thy sister's naught: O Regan, she hath tied/ Sharp-tooth'd unkindness, like a vulture, here…" [pointing to his heart]; and later, "She hath….struck me with her tongue/ Most serpent-like, upon the very heart…" This is Lear's dolorous blow, and England's too. Even the storm upon the heath presents us with images of the body flooded with feeling, as Lear "bids the wind blow the earth into the sea".

Not just in the storm, but throughout the play images and sounds of wind, breath and spirit are pervasive; in the elements themselves, in human speech, in the very life of living things. In Hinduism the heart chakra (or energy centre of the heart), which is sometimes depicted as a lotus, is called the gateway of the winds. When this chakra opens up in an individual, compassion is awakened and flows outwards. It is the first of the higher centres of consciousness, and I feel sure that the all-pervasive winds in the play mark the opening of this chakra in Lear himself, as his centre of consciousness shifts from the mind to the heart. It is through his "loop'd and window'd raggedness" that the compassion flows. Interestingly, when Edgar comes flying out of the hovel in his beggar's rags, like Boreas the North Wind bursting forth from his Aeolian cave, the Fool identifies him as a "spirit". And, indeed, he has come to inspire Lear with new life.

When Cordelia returns to England and joins her "child-changed" father at Dover, she finds him as a votary of Dionysus, wearing a crown of wild flowers and running through the fields in full song. At the beginning of the play, in seeking to assert his authority over the

Earl of Kent, Lear had sworn by Apollo, the god of the rational male mind. Now, however, he is ready to make obeisance to the daughter he has rejected. She has returned as the White Goddess, a second Eve, the Virgin Mother, come to undo all harm and provide him with the "kind nursery" for which he yearned at the start of the play, and to "repair those violent harms that [her] two sisters/ Have in [his] reverence made."

So in Lear's psychopathology of womanhood, there is on the one hand the omnipotent Devouring Mother, who destroys her child (Goneril and Regan), and on the other the all-redeeming Virgin Queen (Cordelia), who repairs the breach in his nature and soothes away all care. This takes us back to Elizabeth's myth of the Virgin Queen, and Shakespeare's own psychopathology. Whether he was the Queen's son or not, it's clear that Shakespeare's early experience of mother left him deeply vulnerable to female power and harbouring a sense of rage. She appears to have been a woman of terrifying power, who in some manner stripped him of his identity. Emotionally, there was no rite of separation. Her rage was his rage. His neurosis is compounded by a deep revulsion towards female sexuality and womankind's procreative power ("But to the girdle do the gods inherit./ Beneath is all the fiend's..."), a power that buoys up his own sense of impotence and bastardy. Lear even calls upon the storm to make Nature - depicted as a pregnant woman - miscarry. "And thou, all-shaking thunder,/ Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world! Crack nature's moulds, all germins spill at once…"[10]

From *Venus and Adonis* to *The Tempest*, in which Prospero drowns his book (returning it to the realm of the Feminine), Shakespeare dramatizes the myth of the White Goddess in one form or another, with himself as the consort who must willy-nilly sacrifice his life and identity in Her service. And such is his dread of Her absolute power, that he takes refuge in the fantasy of a male creation myth, with the father as sole progenitor of the child.

[10] *King Lear*, 3.2.6-8.

Prospero and Miranda, Pericles and Marina, Lear and Cordelia, Polonius and Ophelia all spring to mind as images of this exclusive father-child relationship, which on one level seems to be a metaphor for the relationship between the artist and his works. Even some of Shakespeare's heroines, for instance Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, deny women their procreative power, equating it with death rather than life. In this male-created universe, Nature is perceived as the enemy of reason rather than its source. "Women?" – cries Isabella – "Help, heaven! Men their creation mar/ In profiting by them."

Ceratinly, the influence of the feminine on Shakespeare's early life appears virtually supreme. An instructive analogy is provided by Lancelot, the Grail knight, whose name can mean "small lance" or "spear" (or "spear-shaped"). As a foster child, Lancelot was brought up by the Lady of the Lake and her fairy train. He had no father, and even after joining Arthur's roundtable retained strong ties with the fairy world. He succeeded Gawain as Queen Guinevere's champion and fell in love with her. In his attempts to rid the land of evil, he performed many deeds of chivalry, emulating King Arthur himself. He was cozened into sleeping with Elaine of Corbenic thinking she was the Queen (a bed trick that occurs twice in Shakespeare's plays), and ran mad as a result. Once healed, he took part in the Grail quest but was unable to attain the sacred cup, owing to his adulterous love for the Queen. Instead, he pinned his hopes on his son, Galahad (just as the author of the *Sonnets* looks to the Fair Youth), and this peerless son does finally achieve the quest. Lancelot himself is banished from Court and ends his life as a hermit in the forest.

King Lear is Shakespeare's fantasy of redemption and rebirth, not just for himself and his Queen, but for his country, for which he shows a kingly concern. The ailing King Lear and the ailing land that he symbolizes are redeemed by the appearance of a hidden champion of the true blood, who saves his country from the forces of anarchy and in whom the old king is miraculously reborn. The ailing king and the young champion are mysteriously one. The

Grail Knight who heals the land is known as "He Who Frees the Waters", and it is significant that Lear's first words upon the heath are to call for the heavens to open their flood-gates, while Edgar's first words there as Poor Tom are "Fathom and half, fathom and half!" Edgar is of course the champion of whom I speak and his journey through the play parallels Lear's. Both are deceived by forked tongues; both are forced out onto the heath by those who seek their death, one by his children, the other by his parent; and both suffer madness. Edgar is of course Lear's godson and was named by the King. His name means "royal warrior". He could be said to have two fathers, one an earl, the other a king, to both of whom he acts as guide. He is of course stripped of his earldom by his half-brother, only to become king at the end of the play.

When we first encounter Edgar in his own words rather than through the eyes of his brother Edmund, we find ourselves outside the palaces and castles of the nobility, in a wood or grove, a temple of Nature. Edgar is being hunted through the land like an animal, and it requires exceptional vigilance to survive:

I heard myself proclaim'd;
And by the happy hollow of a tree
Escaped the hunt. No port is free; no place,
That guard and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my taking… [2.3.1-5]

In the first of many disguises or transformations Edgar becomes a Bedlam beggar or vagabond, resembling one of the unlicensed actors of the time, who were branded and left to wander the countryside begging for charity. Undergoing a sort of crucifixion he strikes nails into his arms, and wooden skewers (reminding us of Oedipus's skewered feet) and sprigs of rosemary and roars his way through "poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills". As such Edgar puts himself through a brutal form of penance, though it is he himself who

has been wronged. This should give us pause for thought. Maybe the most vital question in the entire play – and one that all scholars have missed – is *why does Edgar crucify himself?*[11] Like Kent and Lear he exposes himself to feel what wretches feel, and so takes part in the chastening and purification of his class, the expiation of a collective sin. But Edgar is more than a member of a class; he is special, a proclaimed person, who hears his name echoing across the hills. He has received the call to something greater. The pins and skewers in his "mortified bare arms" bespeak the ecstatic state of mind of the initiate. Like the mythical beast that lays its head in the Virgin's lap he bears a single horn, a beggar's horn, which he blows from time to time in his naked progress over the heath.

Edgar escapes the hunt by hiding in the hollow of a tree, and on emerging from the tree decides to assume a new identity. We have here an echo of the myth of Adonis, the son of King Cinyras of Cyprus and his daughter Myrrha, who was turned into a tree, and from whose trunk – as it split open – the beautiful boy was born. Because he was born of an incestuous union, Adonis was hidden in the underworld and brought up by Persephone. Edgar's re-birth from the tree links him with Adonis, another hunted figure, who was pierced by the tusks of a boar, as does his lodging in the dark hovel – or underworld - before he is discovered by the Fool. Edgar's father would not see Goneril "rash boarish fangs" in Lear's anointed flesh. For Edgar, as for Lear and Adonis, the pursuing force is the same: the devouring feminine. Hence he harps upon the foul witch, and drinks from her cauldron ("the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt, and the water").

Throughout the plays Shakespeare uses images of a return to Nature as a means of

[11] With the possible exception of Harold Bloom, who wrote in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p.480, "There is something so profoundly disproportionate in Edgar's self-abnegation throughout the play that we have to presume in him a recalcitrance akin to Cordelia's, but far in excess of hers. Whether as bedlamite or as poor peasant, Edgar refuses his own identity for more than practical purposes."

renewing and reinvigorating the jaded and artificial culture of the Court. We see it in *As You Like It*, with the forest court of Duke Senior, who proclaims that "this our life, exempt from public haunt,/ Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,/ Sermons in stones, and good in everything" – even adversity. And in plays such as *Winter's Tale, Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*, the royal heir – whether Perdita, Polydore and Cadwal, or Miranda – is brought up in secrecy in the wilds of nature, free from the corrupting influences of the Court. Indeed the Court must journey to the wilderness to retrieve the symbol of its sovereignty. Often they are in the wilderness because they were abandoned as babies, as frequently happened in ancient Greece to the offspring of incestuous unions.

In *Winter's Tale* the male heir Mamillius has been killed by the poisonous culture of his father's Court, a culture impregnated with the paranoia and oppressive thoughts of the King himself. The boy dies of anxiety at the thought that his innocent mother might be put to death. His baby sister, Perdita, who is still in the womb at the time of his death, is abandoned on the sea-coast of Bohemia, where she is brought up by a shepherd and his son. Like Cordelia she is the *anima perdita* or lost spirit of sovereignty that must return to her father's benighted land for grace and harmony to be restored. Edgar is the male counterpart to Cordelia, and becomes a Nature spirit whirling his way across the landscape.

Edgar's new name is Poor Tom. He is a shivering orphan of the storm, who keeps repeating the words, "Poor Tom's a cold!" and "Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind". He is the shadow side of Edgar, the royal warrior, and talks of coursing "his own shadow for a traitor". It is poignant indeed to realize that despite his high birth and royal connections, Oxford always maintained that image of himself as the child left out in the cold, the marked man condemned to wander in the wilderness, the outlaw who is "whipp'd from tithing to tithing". Once again Edgar's path mirrors Lear's. For when the King cries out "Who is it that can tell me who I am?", the Fool replies "Lear's shadow". And what is the King's

shadow but that poor, bare forked animal, *unaccommodated man*?

The point at which Lear meets Poor Tom, his shadow, is a crucial one, for it is the point at which he feels his own humanity for the first time. As Lear stands outside the hovel in the raging storm, Edgar is concealed within, like the spirit of the chastened king inside the womb of rebirth. "Come not in here, Nuncle; here's a spirit", cries the terrified Fool. But a sort of baton-change has already taken place during the fool's brief stay in the hovel, and when Edgar comes running out, pursued by the foul fiend, it is to take on the role of guide or psychopomp to the mad King. From now on, the Fool gradually fades from the action; his place has been taken. And like the Fool before him, Edgar in the guise of Poor Tom is relentlessly bawdy, emphasizing Lear's and Gloucester's sensual fault.

When Lear first sees the Bedlam, he imagines that Poor Tom has been made destitute by his daughters. Then his thoughts turn to the poor man's beggarly state: "Is it the fashion," he exclaims, "that discarded fathers/ Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?/ Judicious punishment! Twas this flesh begot/ Those pelican daughters." To which Edgar replies, "Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill", and then blows his horn, which Shakespeare evokes with the words "Alow, alow, loo, loo!" The pelican was an important alchemical symbol, for the legend that the pelican fed her young with her own blood relates to the idea that the *prima materia* contains within itself all that is needed for transformation and perfection, including its own nourishment. (This, incidentally, is the image of human Nature that Cordelia symbolizes.) The Pelican is thus analogous to the Phoenix, and the image of the parent feeding the children with its own blood needs no elaboration in terms of our theme today. Its sexual connotations are confirmed by Poor Tom's pillicock making a mountain of itself, not to mention his horn-blowing. "This cold night," says the Fool sadly, "will turn us all to fools and madmen."

Edgar does more than remind the King of his folly; he initiates the next phase of the alchemical process by leading Lear down into the Underworld. His catalogue of devils marks the moment of Lear's descent into Hell, which is symbolized in alchemical writings by a picture of a king confined in a coffin. Edgar himself is the shaman, who in his self-induced madness or trance exorcises the demons of his class, like Shakespeare in his poetic fury exorcising the bloody and incestuous demons of the Tudor dynasty. And as the nameless one, who has moved beyond the limits of personality, he is a pure channel for mediating these devils and so bringing them into the realm of consciousness. The shamanic initiate would learn the names and functions of the spirits, the mythology and genealogy of his clan, and a secret language in which to converse with the spirits. "Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness. Pray, innocent, and beware the foul fiend." It's not difficult to construe the "lake of darkness" when one remembers that Nero committed incest with his mother Agrippina, who herself had committed incest with her brother Caligula.

The Dark Lady looms large in Poor Tom's mind. Flibbertigibbet who "gives the web and the pin" and "squinies the eye", thus distorting a man's sight, puts the Bedlam in mind of a witch he once thought to marry. "Swithold footed thrice the wold;/ He met the night-mare, and her nine-fold;/ Bid her alight,/ And her troth plight,/ And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!" Poor Tom is the itinerant Saxon saint, Swithold, for he has indeed walked three times across the heath, once as Edgar fleeing from his father, once as Poor Tom guiding the mad king, and once more in leading his father to Dover. The night-mare and her nine-fold is Elizabeth and her brood, and Oxford curses her (aroint thee, witch!) because he has found her troth to be worthless. After the words "aroint thee, witch, aroint thee" Kent says to Lear "How fares your Grace?", thus making the link between witch and monarch.. This witch-queen is also Shakespeare's muse and "haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale", but he has renounced her: "Croak not, black angel;" he cries. "I have no food for thee."

To Lear, Poor Tom is "this same learned Theban" (another reference to Oedipus) and the king's "noble philosopher", whom he keeps fast by his side. When he asks the poor vagrant what his study is, he receives the reply, "To prevent the foul fiend and to kill vermin." In other words, to keep out the mind's oppressive thoughts. Later on, when his father Gloucester is tempted by despair once more, Edgar says "What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure/ Their going hence, even as their coming hither:/ Ripeness is all." And when Gloucester says to Lear on seeing Poor Tom, "What! Hath your Grace no better company?", Poor Tom interjects, "The Prince of Darkness is a gentleman." In other words, he is fit company for a king because he is a hidden prince or a prince in darkness – a typically Shakespearean jest!

Poor Tom has already told us that he has been a gentleman, for he once "curl'd his hair and wore gloves in [his] cap". He also "betrayed [his] poor heart to woman" and is now determined to hold fast and "defy the foul fiend". As soon as he mentions the foul fiend he goes pirouetting off into his own secret language: "Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind; says suum, mun hey no nonny. Dolphin my boy, boy; sessa! Let him trot by." As always with Shakespeare the apparent gibberish is rich in meaning. The hawthorn was sacred to the Greek goddess Maia and was the tree of enforced chastity; yet when in flower in May it was used in orgiastic rites. Either way, it was considered unlucky for marriage. According to Robert Graves, Maia, though represented in poetry as ever fair and young, was "a malevolent beldame whose son Hermes conducted souls to Hell".[12] In Maia, then, we see the light and dark faces of Elizabeth, and in Hermes the psychopomp, we see expressed both Edgar's and Shakespeare's mission of conducting souls to Hell, in other words of forcing people to confront their darker natures. As Hamlet says to Gertrude, "You go not till I set you up a glass/ Where you may see the inmost part of you." We are back with The

[12] Graves, Robert: *The White Goddess*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1989; p.174.

Mirror of the Sinful Soul.

"Says suum, mun hey no nonny": in the Arden Shakespeare "suum" is glossed as the noise of the wind, and certainly the evil winds that blow through the middle acts, like "the rain that raineth every day", can be understood as the harsh conditions imposed upon the subjects of the realm by the crown. But it is also the genitive plural of the Latin word "sus" meaning a pig, and could refer to those courtiers who are under the spell of the enchantress Circe, who turned men into swine, or indeed to Circe herself as their Queen (Regina Suum). So Circe and her swinish courtiers decree that Poor Tom "mun hey no nonny", i.e. "must have no name" because his boy or son is the Dolphin or Dauphin, i.e. the heir to the throne. But "sessa!" or cessez, "let him trot by" i.e. stop right there because he too – royal though he may be – must join the herd and "trot by" like one of Circe's dumb swine, for these are dangerous times.

Edgar transfers his guiding duties from his godfather Lear to his father Gloucester without missing a beat, as if they were one and the same person, which of course on a metaphorical level they are. Gloucester, too, is the deceived parent who rejects the true child in favour of the bastard. Now that he has been blinded, Gloucester is forced into that deep relationship with himself – that inner unity – that is the "incestuous marriage" at the heart of alchemy. Resting on the arm of his wronged son, who is a naked beggar, father and son make their way to Dover, towards which the whole action of the play has already shifted. "Dover" rings like the judgment bell through the previous scene, where it appears four times in five lines. In Elizabethan times the name "De-Ver" would have sounded similar, and here indeed Dover seems to stand for some mythical realm of truth, like the Arthurian Logres, where conflict will be resolved and the kingdom renewed. Maybe it stands for the works themselves, for the descent upon Dover makes it seem that all Shakespeare's characters are returning to their source before his great book is shut for the final time. Certainly

Shakespeare saw the theatre as a place where the social and political problems of the nation could be acted out and resolved.

In leading his father across a level field outside Dover, Edgar persuades him that the ground is "horrible steep", for they are approaching the top of the cliff. He even manages to convince Gloucester that the sound of the waves can be heard, though he cannot disguise the fact that his own voice has changed: the young champion is coming into his own. There isn't a cliff of course, but ask anyone who has read King Lear to relate the action of the play and they will tell you about that famous moment when Edgar leads his father to the edge of the cliff. This is because Edgar manages to draw us into his imaginative world, so that we see the cliff insightfully, through Gloucester's blind eyes. No matter how much we try to discipline our minds to see according to the actual action of the play, Edgar's imaginary landscape – so powerfully evoked – holds sway. Willy nilly, we find ourselves at the top of that celebrated cliff. Harold Clark Goddard wrote: "As *The Merchant of Venice* is itself a casket, and *Hamlet* a mousetrap, so *King Lear* is a cliff."[13] I would go further and say that the entire Shakespeare canon is a cliff, and that Oxford led Elizabeth, his blind parent, to the edge of that cliff and from its summit not only showed her the full scope and history of the nation she governed but forced her to look into the very depths of her soul. It is in the works that Oxford reveals the sinful queen behind the virtuous icon, and through them, then, that Elizabeth suffers her fall. In Sonnet 152 he claims to have given "eyes to blindness" to enlighten her.

More poignantly still, Gloucester is Oxford himself, the blind prophet, who falls from the very summit of society, and in the process gains a sense of his own humanity, coming to realize, like Timon, that the secret of life is life itself. "Thy life's a miracle!" cries Edgar, running up to his fallen and redeemed father. This act of ritual healing is a microcosm of

[13] Goddard, Harold Clark: *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1951; p.538.

the entire Shakespeare canon. The metamorphosis from ruler to seer is the Shakespearean dynamic. Yeats zeroed in on this reality when he wrote: "Shakespeare's myth, it may be, describes a noble man who was blind from very nobility, and an empty man who thrust him from his place, and saw all that could be seen from very emptiness."

The cliff is also a sexually charged image with its "high and bending head" that "looks fearfully in the confinèd deep", and Edgar leads Gloucester there to exorcise his demons. He even describes to the old man the monstrous devil that left him at the summit: "As I stood here below, methought his eyes/ Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,/ Horns whelk'd and waved like the enridged sea…" One is reminded of the biblical story of Legion, the possessed man, whose devils leave him at Jesus's command, and entering a herd of swine, stampede headlong over the cliff. The high and bending head is also the mind, grown dizzy with too much thought – very much the modern disease – and Gloucester's fall is a plunge downwards from the head to a deeper centre of consciousness, the heart.

The Last Battle is fought at Dover. The New Men appear to have won. Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner; Regan and Edmund are now free to marry and become the power in the land. But Edgar has not been led through Hell for nothing; he is ready to face his dark adversary, the black knight, his own clear chivalry forged in the flames of suffering. His initiation is over, and when the trumpet sounds for the third time, he is ready. The herald asks his name and quality, and he replies: "Know my name is lost,/ By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit/ Yet am I noble as the adversary/ I come to cope." If his name is canker-bit, then his name is the Rose, and if it is has been bitten by treason's tooth, then Edgar must be royal, for treason can only be committed against the sovereign and his immediate family. Indeed, when Albany embraces Edgar after his defeat of Edmund, he says: "Methought thy very gait did prophesy/ A royal nobleness."

Edgar is the vagabond heir, the concealed prince, the champion bred apart, that mysterious element of the alchemical process set aside for use at the end. He is also the Knight of the Tree of the Sun. But he is more, he is the prophesied heir just as Jesus was the prophesied saviour. He is Galahad, who in Shakespeare's mythology is the Fair Youth, the brilliant young man who will redeem his ailing nation. Of all Shakespeare's heroes, Edgar's manners are the most faultless. He is Shakespeare's answer to the question, "What can be opposed to the all-embracing power of the Mother?" The immaculately conceived child, who will save the world because he is free of the mother's taint. As Edgar says to Edmund when he reveals himself after the duel: "My name is Edgar, and thy father's son." Lear and Cordelia united in prison, in that deathless space that Lear always sought, bring forth a child. This is the final stage of the alchemical process, and is depicted as a son emerging from the mouth of the king, i.e. the king being reborn. Thus, Lear is reborn through his godson, Edgar, who assumes the throne at the end of the play, and in his first words as King announces that his reign will be based not on artifice, but on truth: "The weight of this sad time we must obey,/ Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say."

To sum up, *King Lear* is about the disintegration of a king and his kingdom, leading to a new and vigorous reign under a chastened monarch, one who has achieved self-mastery through intense suffering. But this only happens because a strange vagabond earl, whose "roguish madness allows itself to any thing", appears out of left field as the final trumpet sounds. He may have no name, but by Heaven, he knows who he is and he knows that his time has come.

The whole canon dramatizes Shakespeare's profound sense of loss and disinheritance, which somehow works on a national as well as a personal level, and his search for a deeper source of power. At the heart of his wisdom is the idea of renunciation: giving up one form of identity or power for another. "And you may marvel why I obscur'd myself,/ Labouring to

save his life…" Duke Vincentio says to Isabella of her brother Claudio. This was the task of salvation that Shakespeare set himself through the theatre: to return his countrymen to the source of all good government: Human Nature. And in so doing he wore a far richer crown.

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