

November 14. Lecture on "Meta-drama in *King Lear*" for the Angel Foundation

I draw a distinction among the so-called "four great tragedies" (AC Bradley)

Between *Hamlet* as belonging to the old Elizabethan age, charged with problems,
and the three Jacobean tragedies as constituting Shakespeare's Passion Play,

Then among those Jacobean tragedies, from 1604-6

Between *Othello* and *Macbeth* as pure tragedies and morality plays
and *King Lear* as tragi-comedy, leading up to happiest of happy endings (Act IV)
saddest of sad endings (Act V)

Contrary to commonly received opinion, stated by James Shapiro in *Year of Lear*

that the play is based from the outset on the division of kingdoms,

as in current division of Scotland and England under one king James I

that it becomes the grimmest of plays, culminating in despair and death

owing to failure to recognize the meta-drama of the play, consisting in

the Biblical dimension of references to the Passion and

the topical religious dimension of Catholic recusancy under Elizabeth.

Shakespeare's delight in triplets, here three basic themes, 3 N's,

Opening division of Britain based on love contest among Lear's 3 daughters

two false and one true, but false gifted with eloquence – Goneril and Regan
true unable to speak out – Cordelia

Question, "What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?"

Answer, "Nothing!"

but two meanings of "Nothing", Lear's Aristotelian nothing

Cordelia's Christian Nothing = Everything

Developed variously in subsequent scenes,

as Cordelia in absence replaced by Lear's Fool, Wisdom by Folly

contrasted in second plot by false Edmund, in reply to old Gloucester

i.e. Another unique quality of KL, with two parallel plots

old men deceived by false children, Lear by daughters, Gloucester by sons,

based on two different sources, Holinshed etc. and Sidney's *Arcadia*

Secondly, N for Nature, meaning ideal relation between parents and children

realized in Cordelia to Lear, Edgar to Gloucester, as assisting their parents,

who have unnaturally turned their good children out of their houses,

while parents subsequently turned out of their houses by false children

wandering on lonely heath in tempest, one mad, the other blinded,

with good children leading their fathers (no mothers) to salvation

Edgar pretending to be mad beggar and Cordelia returning with army.

Note, play supposedly set in ancient Britain, 700 BC.

But no mention of "Britain", only of Albany = Scotland, and Cornwall (plus Wales)
titles of two dukes and two earls, Albany and Cornwall, Gloucester and Kent,
events moving towards Dover, the only place-name in the play
contrasting with later *Cymbeline*, when "Britain" mentioned 27 times,
implying contrast between Elizabethan England in KL (Catholic)
and Britain under Henry VIII in Cym.(Anglican)

Thirdly, essential movement in KL, N for self-knowledge

Contrast between Regan, "The old man hath ever but slenderly known himself"
and Lear, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?"

From now on he has three successive tutors,

first, the Fool, who wisely answers, "Lear's shadow" – having given away all,
who keeps Lear's attention away from himself and madness,
secondly, Tom, the seemingly mad beggar, Edgar in disguise,
who appears out of a hovel as "the Thing itself", "unaccommodated Man",
but whom Lear wishes to take as his philosopher, like Cynic Diogenes,
thirdly, Cordelia herself, who has come with army from France to save Lear
who has him brought sleeping to her tent, waking up in her arms.
when he feels as if she is a goddess and he "bound on a wheel of fire"
and then he exclaims, "Do not laugh at me, for as I am a Man, I think
this lady to be my child Cordelia", and she replies, "And so I am, I am!"

Such is the happiest of happy endings at the end of Act IV,

In contrast to the saddest of sad endings at the end of Act V

When the army of France is defeated by the British forces under Edmund etc.

Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner, and she is hanged in prison,

Lear comes on stage with the dead body of Cordelia, crying "Howl!"

All understood in the light of meta-drama

with Cordelia = Christ, France, "Most rich being poor, most loved forsaken",
and Gentleman, "one daughter who redeems nature from the curse",
when she exclaims, "I am, I am" – echoing the divine name, "I AM" (Moses)

So movement of the last two Acts, as inversion of Gospel story,

From Resurrection in Act IV to Passion in Act V and image of Pieta.

Also reflection of dramatist on events in past Tudor period

from Henry VIII, in Lear's rejection of Cordelia as Catholic faith,
to Elizabeth I, with persecution of Catholic recusants, figured in Edgar,
also in loyal Kent, though banished yet returning in disguise, like priests.

Speeches

Act III (Lear thrust out of doors into the tempest on the lonely heath)

"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, Blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Smite flat the thick rotundity of the world!
Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful Man!"

Act IV (Lear meeting Cordelia in her tent)

"Pray do not mock me.
I am a very foolish, fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour or less,
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Do not laugh at me,
For as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia."

Cord. "And so I am, I am!"

Act V (Lear carrying the dead body of Cordelia into the stage)

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

(again) "Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.

Do you see this? Look on her! Look! Her lips!
Look there, look there!" (He dies)

Kent. "Break, heart, I prithee, break!"