

Tragic Character and Ideology in *King Lear*

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In so far as tragedy depends on a central character to accomplish its aim for tragic effect¹ the construction of that character is partly determined by the attempt to elicit the audience's sympathy for his person and his suffering. As Margeson observes, "we shall not be moved by crisis or confrontation unless the figures caught up in it are characters with whom we can feel some sympathy" (8). Although the audience's sympathy for dramatic characters is predicated on a lot more than pure emotion, there is an important sense in which the favorable, or partly favorable, representation of the tragic hero is a generic requirement, one that privileges him from the outset. An interesting question that arises, and my concern here, is how this privileging of the tragic protagonist can coexist or clash with subversive elements in the text and how it may affect, through the process of displacement, the authorial position.

In Shakespearean tragedy the protagonist is endowed with selected flaws, requisite for his inevitable fall, but also privileged with outstanding qualities, sometimes superhuman, which give him some claim to greatness –ie., military skill, eloquence, capacity to love deeply or to sacrifice for an ideal, sensitive conscience, superior moral worth, or just overall stature. Often, as in *Othello*, the privileging of the tragic hero is accomplished through character construction as well as through the tragic form itself. The latter means, in effect, that the tragic text provides ideological support for its hero. In *King Lear*, however, we witness a breakdown in the various modes of support for the tragic protagonist. Lear is neither presented as a great man nor supported in the ideas and values he seems to uphold. Tragic character and tragic form are severed.

In this essay I wish to discuss the interrelationship of tragic form, ideology and tragic protagonist in *King Lear*. I will argue that Lear embodies the antithesis –and tension– between feudalism and absolutism, two sociopolitical systems which entail different sets of values and presuppositions and which result in tragic confusion within Lear. I will argue, further, that the play does not adopt this tension as its own but, through its refusal to comply with classical rules for formal closure, it keeps a distance from the protagonist.

From the first act of the play, indeed from the first scene, it becomes apparent that Lear lacks those great qualities we have learned to recognize and to expect in the tragic protagonist. As a king and a father, he is rash, unjust, and unwise: he divides his kingdom and thus creates a potential source of discord; he disinherits his most truthful and loving daughter Cordelia; and he banishes his most loyal counselor, the Earl of Kent. As a man, he does not indisputably possess any high human qualities, like kindness and generosity, and some critics even question his capacity to learn anything at all from his painful experience in the passage from well-being to catastrophe and death.²

Yet there is no doubt that the dramatic narrative is slanted towards its leading character, who remains the principal means of achieving tragic effect in a play that is by many regarded as Shakespeare's greatest tragedy. In other words, despite his lack of great traits, despite even his negative ones, Lear is rendered capable of eliciting the sympathetic response required by the genre itself. How does this come about? First, the sympathetic presentation of the old King is a consequence of the binary structure of the play. On the surface, *King Lear* divides its characters into two groups: the virtuous and the vicious. This division, a feature also of Shakespeare's major source, *King Leir and his Three Daughters* (1605),³ creates a kind of political morality. Goneril, Regan, Edmund and Cornwall on the one hand and Lear, Kent, Cordelia and their supporters on the other are two factions which are divided along ideological as well as moral/ethical lines. There is sufficient 'evil' and 'goodness' respectively to label the two factions involved in the conflict. This sharp division in characterization has been largely responsible for the interpretation of *Lear* as a play about Christian values, suffering and redemption, a view that dominated the critical scene from Bradley onwards and certainly until the early 1980s. In his Introduction to the Arden edition of *King Lear*, for example, Kenneth Muir asserts with confidence: "the symbolic significance of the trial of the two daughters by a mad beggar, a dying Fool, and a serving-man is perfectly clear. He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and the meek" (xlili). Such views were discredited as early as 1960 by Barbara Everett and later by others. More recently they have been given a decisive blow by theoretical perspectives that have provided new ways of relating history to texts and have disclosed the essential conservatism of traditional literary criticism.⁴

Even so, there is more than the inherent conservatism of earlier literary criticism to account for here, for the morality element carried over from the play's sources does have the effect of providing support for Lear. The demonization of the sisters, especially, is an element that works in favor of the old king. And the creation of 'good' characters like Kent and Edgar may be required by the type of conflict dramatized, but it also has the effect of creating for the protagonist a kind of creditable chorus throughout the play, and though this 'chorus' does not manage to provide a meaningful and rational context for the king's actions (Moretti 53), it does work to muster sympathetic responses for Lear by pro-

viding the necessary emotive commentary at the right moment: remarks like “poor old king” and “kind father” are frequent.

The principal means or strategy of providing support for Lear, however, is the intensification and prolongation of affliction. Tragedy, of course, requires that the hero suffer for his part of the responsibility in bringing on the catastrophe. In other words, Lear must pay for his ‘sins’. But it is apparent to many that Lear gets more than his due. Indeed, if there is one thing that critics agree upon in their volumes of criticism on *Lear* it is the fact that this play contains an immense amount of suffering and that the old king is given more than his share of it. Michelle Gellrich, for example, comments on the incommensurability of wrongdoing and suffering in *Lear* that “Lear is not simply a bad man or a foolish king who rightly suffers the agonies of madness, the loss of his family, and the diminishment of his kingdom. Although he bears culpability for his daughters’ usurpation of him, he is nonetheless a man more sinned against than sinning” (Gellrich 224). Such excessive suffering becomes a textual strategy of eliciting sympathy for the protagonist. The audience is made to witness the painful experience of a man almost from the beginning of the play to its very end, something unique even within the Shakespearean canon. (This is a point noted also by Bradley, 242.)

But the play’s bid for sympathy is not based only on the amount of suffering. The appeal for sympathy is made in connection with two other attributes of Lear: his status and his old age. For the play does not stage the suffering of just any individual –not even of a distinguished citizen like Othello– but specifically of a man who occupies the highest position in the political and social hierarchy and who is near the end of his life, “four-score upwards” in years. Produced for an audience that had a gerontological bias (old people were supposed to be kindly treated, respected and obeyed in Shakespeare’s culture), the play repeatedly alludes to Lear’s age in a sympathetic way. Albany considers it a monstrosity on the part of the two sisters to have treated cruelly a “father, and a gracious aged man,/ Whose reverence even the head-lugg’d bear would lick” (IV.ii. 41-42).⁵ And, in the middle of the storm, Lear is made to denounce even nature itself for the violation of the right of an old man to kind treatment: “But yet I call you servile ministers, / That will with two pernicious daughters join / Your high-engender’d battles ’gainst a head / So old and white as this. O, ho! ’tis foul” (III.ii.21-24).

When this old man is a king, suffering is supposed to elicit all the more the sense of pity and fear that Aristotle speaks of, for if a king is subject to such pain, then what is to await the common man in the audience of Shakespeare’s theater? Indeed whatever responses the text claims for Lear they are, in great part, on account of his status.⁶ Comparatively speaking within the play, Gloucester is subjected to a more cruel treatment than Lear, and for no unusual sin.⁷ Yet Lear’s suffering is represented as more terrible, precisely because his reduction is greater. In the course of the play Lear is stripped of everything that constitutes a civilized level of existence; his pain is mental *as well as* physical. The image of a white-haired king in a storm, houseless and comfortless, accompanied only by a

fool and a beggar, constitutes a degradation of the figure of the sovereign. This degradation has many meanings and effects, especially when it is seen in connection with the handling of tragic form (to be discussed later), but one of its effects in the text is surely to heighten the intensity of Lear's affliction, which is supposed to elicit a sympathetic response necessary for tragic effect.

Such support for the tragic protagonist, however, does not simultaneously entail endorsement of his ideology. What is Lear's ideological framework, and how does it relate to his suffering and to the tragedy that the play produces?

Lear's ideology is inscribed in the assumptions and expectations that underlie his actions and attitudes. These assumptions, which lead Lear to tragic errors, are framed by his double identity as retiring king and father. These are, in turn, constituted by sixteenth-century notions of monarchical and paternal authority, for despite its legendary beginning, the play is deeply embedded in the ideologies and social practices of the early modern period. In the sixteenth century a monarch's kingdom constituted his property. This included the kingdom as land, which was ultimately controlled by the state, the revenues from monopolies and taxes, and the precious crown that symbolized the unity as well as the all-encompassing and absolute power of the divinely-sanctioned sovereign over the fates of his subjects. He was the supreme and sole arbitrator of the lives of those who lived in his land. He could reward or punish; keep or banish. The authority of the king to arbitrate, to decide, to command, and to demand obedience depended directly on the power he had to inflict punishment, if his subjects refused to comply with his commands and wishes. Without this power, which was backed by the revenues of the kingdom and the right to decree and sign, authority is devoid of substance.⁸ The title of king, although symbolic of status, can impart authority only to the extent that status can inspire it. But status, in turn, requires material backing—like proper (expensive) clothing, paid servants, great houses, and other things. Without this material backing, one cannot have any recognizable and substantial claim to status.

In the beginning of Shakespeare's play, King Lear exercises—and displays—absolute authority and power. He does so through an act that is both contrary to reason (Moretti 53) and contrary to the interests of monarchy as an institution: the division of the kingdom.⁹ Consulting no one about such an important matter—as if the kingdom were his own private land—he comes to announce his “darker purpose,” having already decided the portion he will assign to each of his three daughters. Cordelia, especially, cannot draw “a third more opulent” than her sisters, since the assignment of each of the two previous portions has been sealed by oath (“to thine and Albany's issues/ Be this perpetual,” “To thee and thine, hereditary ever”). He orders people to speak and to express publicly their love, an emotion which is by its very nature inward and voluntary, not subject to command. He punishes those that contradict him (Cordelia and Kent), banishing them without due trial. He can do all this because he is king not in name only but has actual power. When Kent insists on telling Lear to revoke his abdication, the latter has the power to punish what he perceives as a disobedient

subject: "That thou hast sought to make us break our vow,/ ... To come betwixt our sentence and our power,/ Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,/ Our potency made good, take thy reward./ Five days we do allot thee for provision/ ... And on the sixth to turn thy hated back/ Upon our kingdom" (I.i. 167-75). When he abdicates and transfers his property to his daughters, Lear retains only symbolic forms of status and none of his actual power and possessions. In fact, he dis-possesses himself entirely:

I do invest you jointly with my power,
Pre-eminence, and all the large effects
That troop with majesty. Ourself, by monthly course,
With reservation of an hundred knights
By you to be sustain'd, shall our abode
Make with you by due turn. Only we shall retain
The name and all th' addition to a king; the sway,
Revenue, execution of the rest,
Beloved sons, be yours: which to confirm,
This coronet part between you.

(I.i.129-38)

Central to an understanding of Lear's values and ideas is the issue of authority. It seems that Lear embodies two divergent forms of it, voiced by Goneril and Kent, representative members of the two opposing factions in the play. In her first confidential chat with Regan, Goneril says:

if our father carry authority with such disposition as
he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.

(I.i. 303-05)

What apparently Goneril objects to here is her father's manner of using authority –"if our father *carry authority with such disposition...*" Authority is something that Lear carries or bears; it is part of his deportment and posture, hence an aspect of his identity. What she actually refers to is Lear's tendency to command and his expectation to be obeyed, a tendency which Lear inherits from his identity as absolute monarch, and which the daughters find offensive, for they are now sovereign powers. "I would speak with my daughter," Lear demands, as if he were still king. He takes as his prerogative to manage his servants as he pleases and to order his daughter's servants also. Thus in the context of "such disposition," "authority" acquires a negative meaning, as it indicates an inappropriate and, in the eyes of the new rulers, unreasonable exercise of power that is supposed to have been relinquished at the moment of abdication. This is made clear by Goneril's use of the word, again, this time in the plural, a couple of scenes later:

... Idle old man,
That still would manage those authorities
That he hath given away!

(I.iii.17-19)

Goneril's observations about her father's tendency to hold on to his authority are borne out by the play. Although in his distracted state Lear admits that authority is a function of political power ("There thou might'st behold the great image of Authority: / A dog's obey'd in office," IV.vi.155-57), he does not fundamentally understand that giving up the one necessarily involves also giving up the other. Authority and power have so informed his identity that he apparently finds it extremely difficult to shake them off and remain power-less, a mere subject. The reduction in the number of his retainers has for Lear the meaning of reducing his status and authority –hence his response, "reason not the need." The horrible curses he hurls at his daughters when they refuse to sustain his retinue are metonymic expressions of this aspect of his identity. Now the power to control or to punish those who contradict him is, of necessity, only verbal, in the form of threats:

... No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall--I will do such things,
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth.

(II.iv.276-80)

Or it is in the form of curses that are to be carried out by goddess Nature, the only force he can appeal to and even command:

... Hear, Nature, hear! dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her!

(I.iv.273-80)

The vengeance with which the curses are pronounced is evidence of the tenacity with which Lear attempts to hold on to an identity that has been shaped by authority and power and is now rapidly disintegrating.

Kent also perceives authority in Lear's physiognomy. But coming from Lear's ideological camp, he reads it differently. When in disguise he asks to serve Lear, he tells the latter:

Kent: ...You have that in your countenance which
I would fain call master.
Lear: What's that?
Kent: Authority.

(I.iv.27-30)

In Kent's view, authority is inscribed in Lear's identity. It is an inseparable part of it, like a facial feature or birth mark. But unlike Goneril's, Kent's

meaning is positive: authority for him is something like the stamp of a *master* that inspires respect and draws faithful *servants*. The meaning of the word here is determined by the identity of the speaker: disguised as a masterless man in search of service, Kent represents the remnant of a social system that was more clearly defined than the Renaissance one. He also represents a social problem that the early modern period inherited from its feudal predecessors: unemployment. But the feudal legacy (echoed throughout the play in the master-servant language) makes reference to a system that involved not just authorities but a set of rights and obligations on both sides: guaranteed subsistence and health care on the part of the governors; loyalty and respect on the part of the governed. Thus Lear embodies both Renaissance absolutism (Goneril's meaning of authority) and feudal lordship (Kent's meaning). The former is the dominant element, as no constraint is recognized by the king who has curtailed the power of his nobles and hence eliminated their organic function (Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse* 97; Moretti 53).

Lear also represents and expresses the Renaissance tension about the relation of values and ideas to material reality and the relation of 'nature' to 'custom'.¹⁰ The tension is no doubt partly due to Lear's confusion, but it is also an actual Renaissance concern. Many things were in theory considered 'natural'. Yet cautioned by an emerging skepticism, the early modern period avoided in practice too great a reliance on 'natural' bonds.

The connection between filial obligation and property inheritance was not a simple matter of nature in the early modern period. In an age when there was no welfare system and no gerontological institutions for the care of the advanced in years, parents used the power that stemmed from the control of their property to ensure that they would have all they needed for the remainder of their lives (Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse* 86-87). As recent historical studies have shown (for example, Erickson 69, 71-72), primogeniture was actually stricter in theory than in practice, so that parental discretion and intention to reward or punish played a considerable role in the inheritance of property. Accordingly, parents would transfer property to their children in exchange for care and provision when they had retired from productive life.¹¹ In doing so they did not, however, depend on verbal vows of affection, or on their children's 'natural' sense of duty towards their parents. Such duty was generally assumed (Stone 421), but as the existence of very detailed maintenance agreements evidences,¹² parents were quite realistic and pragmatic in their expectations of deference, obedience, and support. That is, parents in the early modern period understood the material preconditions of filial obligation: they had to give in order to receive.

Gratitude, kindness and respect are for Lear, and not for him alone, the foremost human values. Their violation disturbs him deeply. Filial ingratitude, particularly, is conceived by him as a "marble-hearted fiend, / More hideous... in a child, / Than the sea-monster (I.iv. 257-59). The tenacity and rage with which Lear protests against the violation of these values by his elder children would seem to indicate that he considers them sacred and inviolable, part of some universal law governing the natural bond between parent and child. Yet Lear's no-

tions are quite literally con-fused. First, through his own actions in the opening scene of the play, he illustrates dramatically how the supposedly natural bond between parent and child is calculated, weighed and assessed in quantifiable terms. "Tell me how much you love me so that I can assess its value and measure out your portion," he, in effect, says to his daughters. Cordelia's "price is fallen" (I.i.196). She is no longer "dear" (I.i.195) when she has refused to put a price on that which is indeed immeasurable (Hawkes 7-8). "Nothing will come of nothing" –no affection shown, no property given– is his final verdict in the opening scene. Then, through his language in the course of the play, Lear voices this tension between the presumed natural bond and material property. Even after the fairy-tale beginning, Lear's language reveals that he sees the affective reciprocity of his children primarily as a function of his having given them property and secondarily as a function of their identity as his offspring. He absolves the forces of nature of any responsibility because they are not his children and therefore have no obligation to be kind to him:

Rumble thy bellyful! spit, fire! spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters.
(III.ii.14-15)

But, as the next three lines clearly suggest, he does so also because he feels the responsibility or obligation is contingent on material gifts. He has not given them anything; hence he cannot expect anything in return:

I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
You owe me no subscription.
(III.ii .16-18)

As in the beginning of the play, so here Lear's notion of filial obligation is dependent on gifts of property. In his view, those who have not benefited from his gifts owe him no "subscription," a word which signifies obedience, obligation, duty. Kindness and unkindness, for Lear, are directly related to property inheritance: he implies that there is no obligation on the part of those who have not been given property. Kindness is something the offspring is obligated to give as a "thank you, father". An ungrateful or thankless child is, for Lear, "sharper than a serpent's tooth" (I.iv. 286). The same with gratitude. It is one of "the offices of nature", but it is also bound up with material gifts and therefore expected as a response to receiving property:

... thou better know'st
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;
Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endow'd.
(II.iv.175-79)

Gratitude is an important value for Lear. The lack of it, ingratitude, drives him to distraction:¹³

Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all, –
O! that way madness lies.

(III.iv. 20-21)

It disturbs him not only because he is an old man who should naturally expect kindness from his children, but also because he is one who “gave all”.

Thus Lear voices the dependence of filial obligation on material gifts. He does so, however, only half-consciously, largely unaware of its significance and of the consequences for a retiring man like himself. For unlike retiring fathers in Shakespeare's society, Lear has relied on signs of affection and supposed bonds of nature –even as he has severed those bonds by disinheriting and disowning his youngest child (“my sometime daughter,” I.i. 119). He has done so, furthermore, without any legal assurance¹⁴ of the benefits he is to receive in exchange. Lear does, of course, mention to the husbands of his elder daughters, who are ordered to “digest” Cordelia's one-third, all the things he desires to keep –the one hundred knights, “the name and all th'addition to a king” (I.i.131-35). But he mentions them *ex post facto*, after the division of the kingdom and his sealing vows (“Be this perpetual”). His stipulations are stated as a postscript or an assumed fact of the transaction. So not only has Lear abolished all forms of legal assurance for the fulfillment of his wishes, but he has made property transfer dependent on affections, which are by their very nature changeable, even when they are initially true.

How can one summarize the protagonist's ideas and values or state what he represents when there is so much confusion in the protagonist himself? Barbara Everett observes that “Lear is divested of that degree of civilized intelligence, subtlety and rationality that Hamlet and Macbeth, and perhaps even Othello possess” (335). We are not presented with a man who abstracts and articulates his thought for us. Lear *assumes* and *feels*, and our task to systematize his thought is therefore so much harder. King Lear certainly begins as an absolute ruler, one whose word must go unchallenged and unquestioned. But in the course of the play it becomes evident that Lear is also linked to the feudal past –through the concept of loyalty and service. So that one could legitimately say that he is a divided figure, just as his only real act in the play is one of division. Lear's identity as a retiring father is not independent of his political identity. If there is anything that is clear in the play, it is the fact that the ‘public’ Lear, which is part and parcel of his absolutism, carries into the ‘private’ Lear, the houseless old father. For as the play progresses it becomes evident that his royal identity has determined his conduct and expectations. Like the retiring fathers of Shakespeare's day, Lear expresses –without being fully conscious of it– a new kind of pragmatism that does not depend on ideals of human kindness grounded in nature but operates on the idea that human values and human conduct are in fact determined by such material things as property. But Lear does not understand the signifi-

cance and the consequences of making values and affective bonds dependent on material conditions. His lack of any legal provision for himself is perhaps one other indication of the carryover of the political or public identity into the 'private' one: retiring from the position of absolute authority, he has apparently assumed that his word would be enough; that he is no ordinary father to require legally binding agreements guaranteeing his proper maintenance. Divided as he is, then, Lear represents on the one hand Renaissance absolutism at its highest, and on the other the tensions that link the disintegrating present with the relatively stable past and the ominously uncertain future. Lear's political friends (Kent, Edgar, Cordelia) subscribe to the feudal ethic of loyalty and service. Lear's enemies are vicious opportunists who see nature as subservient to their will,¹⁵ denying any obligation to follow the conduct prescribed by custom. Lear himself expects to be able to divide the kingdom without contestation because he assumes he has, by his title as king, the right to rule absolutely; and he expects also to enjoy a privileged status as retired king-father because he supposes his children to have, by nature, an obligation to treat their father with respect, kindness, and gratitude. This is the type of order –Tillyard's Elizabethan World Picture– that Lear clings to and defends tenaciously, rambling in the storm about ingratitude, even as he incorporates, in language and action, the contradictions and tension of that order.

As several critics have shown in recent years, *King Lear* in its entirety does not uphold the protagonist's point of view. Despite the play's pagan setting, Lear's view of an order of things with God-given rights of kings and parents and naturally determined laws of human kindness is deeply rooted in the sixteenth century and presupposes the existence of a providential design or plan, according to which everything has its proper place and nothing happens randomly or haphazardly.¹⁶ But in a very influential study, William Elton has proved conclusively that such a plan is inoperative in the play, which gradually strips Lear and leaves him nothing to hold on to. More recent critics, like Greenblatt and Dollimore, have likewise demonstrated that the play repudiates or at best expresses skepticism about the presence of divine providence in human affairs and in nature at large.

The play's form, its refusal to contain dramatic conflict by restoring order in the end, reflects this skepticism towards divine providence (Dollimore 202-03). It is true that the 'evil' characters –Goneril, Regan, Edmund– all die, and on this account one can say that the play employs poetic justice, the convention that governs the proportionate distribution of reward and punishment for the virtuous and the vicious. But proportionate it is not, for two important events –the deaths of Cordelia and Lear– come in the closing moments of the play to topple any simple view of poetic justice and to deprive the audience of the comfort it might have brought. Those characters who survive the destructive upheaval (Edgar and Albany especially) are given lines that may be taken as the play's attempt to re-establish order by affirming the presence of divine justice. Thus Edgar says to Edmund of their father: "The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make

instruments to plague us" (V.iii.169-70). In the same vain, Albany tries, even as he sees Lear re-enter with Cordelia dead in his arms, to present all the havoc as the workings of a God who will set things in their proper order by punishing the wicked and rewarding the good: "All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deservings" (V.iii.301-03). But the play has not borne this out in its dramatic course and does not bear it out in the end. As soon as Albany has made his affirmative statement, Lear dies.

Through its subversion of tragic form the play also refuses to perform the cathartic function proper to its genre. Catharsis,¹⁷ as it applies to an effect on the audience and on the tragic hero, is a method of containing human suffering and re-establishing the initial social and moral order, for through the purgatory moments of the last act the tragic hero comes to a recognition of 'the truth' –the truth of the reality around him and of divine will, and hence also of the tragic errors he has made– and undergoes a self-imposed punishment, which elevates him and achieves his redemption. The hero's redemption is supposed to be simultaneous with the redemption of society, for in his final moments the hero must affirm its traditional frame of values and must be reconciled to it. But nothing of the sort happens in *King Lear*, Shakespeare's first tragedy in which the hero dies unreconciled and indifferent to society. In his classic essay, "The Catharsis of King Lear," Stampfer shows that there is no redemption in Lear; there is only suffering with the fear that penance is impossible because we inhabit an imbecile universe (10). Greenblatt even goes so far as to say that redemption in this play is a persistent wish of the interpreter (much like a dream) that can never come to a theatrical realization (*Shakespearean Negotiations* 125). Lear's greatest punishment in the end, certainly not self-inflicted, is the loss of Cordelia, whom he has just seen as emerging out of the place of penance: "Thou come out of purgatory". Dante tells us that after Purgatorio, there is Paradiso. But not for Lear. "Is this the promised end?" asks the insightful Kent. For Lear and for the audience, Cordelia's death is a devastating event, which leaves the audience immersed in thought and throws a dark veil over Lear's death. Through such a death, Lear is not elevated. Neither he nor the audience can feel catharsis. Rather than affirm his nobility through the uplifting process of recognition, then, the play leaves Lear helpless, reduced to a small human being who resorts to fantasy, largely unaware of what has caused the topsy-turviness around him, despite his occasional taking of the blame. "I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee," he says to the dead Cordelia, as if 'the slave' were the problem or its cause.

There is thus a disparity in the play between tragic form and ideological content. The text keeps a distance from the tragic protagonist, for, if anything, it refuses to ratify the kind of order Lear represents. Certainly it invites our sympathy and compassion. Especially through the intensification of Lear's suffering we are invited to feel for the man who is too confused, too displaced, and too old to learn to come to terms with a topsy-turvy situation which he himself has ironically precipitated with his decision to divide the kingdom, so "that future strife / May be prevented now" (I.i.43-44). But sympathy for Lear and endorsement of

what he represents are kept separate in the text. This disparity, which results largely from the subversion of form, raises the ever-teasing question of Shakespeare's political position.

Alvin Kernan argues that in *Lear* Shakespeare is offering James I a defense of kingship, showing the chaos that results when the 'true' king no longer rules (102). But his argument ignores the effect of a crucial feature of the play: the subversion of formal closure. Shakespeare's position, as indeed any dramatist's, is necessarily affected by the strategies and conventions he uses. The break with a particular dramatic form, suggesting a liberation of the poet from the constraints of tradition, may not necessarily imply the adoption of progressive political views. Shakespeare attempts to break with comic form in the so-called "problem plays". Yet in the most political of these, *Measure for Measure*, he is unmistakably supporting a conservative position. In *King Lear*, however, the subversion of tragic form, which occurs in the context of the destruction of the cultural image of the sovereign (Moretti 47), does tend to push the play as a whole politically forward and therefore to carry the author along with it. By refusing to contain the conflict in the end, by refusing, that is, to revert to the kind of order represented before the catastrophe, the text unleashes socio-political and ideological conflicts that were beginning to gather momentum in the early seventeenth century. Still, the dramatist seems committed as much to the protagonist as to the destruction of the ideology the latter represents. Shakespeare's position may perhaps be likened to that of Andrew Marvell some forty-four years later. In "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland" (1650) the poet gives this description of King Charles I on the scaffold:

...thence the Royal Actor born
 The Tragick Scaffold might adorn;
 While round the armed Bands
 Did clap their bloody hands;
 He nothing common did or mean
 Upon that memorable Scene.
 But with his keener Eye
 The Axes edge did try:
 Nor call'd the *Gods* with vulgar spight
 To vindicate his helpless Right,
 But bow'd his comely Head,
 Down, as upon a Bed.

(ll. 53-64)

Marvell, Cromwell's loyal retainer, marks in the event of the king's beheading all the elements of a cruel tragedy and expresses sympathy and admiration for its protagonist, thus paying tribute to an ideological opponent who has served as a powerful cultural symbol. Shakespeare's position has something of this duality. In staging the death of the absolute ruler, the dramatist has not invested his king with the kind of dignity Marvell sees in his "Royal Actor"; and he has made him and his innocent daughter die just at a moment when their whole

way of life is at stake. But he has placed him in the “bloody hands” of his elder daughters and he has elicited our sympathy, if not our admiration, for a king who has indeed “call’d the Gods with vulgar spight / To vindicate his helpless Right.”

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Notes

1. By this term I do not refer exclusively to the Aristotelian concept, involving pity and fear, but more generally to the affective power of the tragic experience.
2. Some critics will grant that Lear shows compassion on the heath, especially where he offers shelter to the Fool and to Edgar (Poor Tom), but others see Lear as preoccupied mainly with himself, or that compassion may be a virtue specific to our twentieth-century culture, not to Shakespeare’s (Schucking). There is likewise disagreement on the subject of Lear’s gaining insight through tragic experience. A.C. Bradley, Josephine Waters Benett, and Paul Jorgensen are among those who think he does, while a whole host of other critics, including Lily Campbell, Helen Gardner, and Nicholas Brooke, deny that Lear gains any significant understanding of himself, of the world around him, or of the causes of its destruction.
3. As in *Gorboduc* and other plays written under the influence of the Moralities, in *King Lear* there are two counselors, one bad (Skalliger) and the other good (Perillus) – Bullough 278.
4. The most influential of these theoretical perspectives in Renaissance studies are New Historicism and Cultural Materialism.
5. Textual citations here and throughout refer to the Arden edition of *King Lear*.
6. This is true of classical tragedy generally. Aristotle stipulates the high rank of the tragic protagonist.
7. Gloucester’s sin is apparently the begetting of Edmund outside marriage. Certainly Shakespeare’s society was committed to social stability contingent on an indisputable order of inheritance and for that reason illegitimate children, or ‘bastards’ as they were called, were feared and frowned upon. But it must be noted at the same time that in the Renaissance the birth of illegitimate children was not an unusual phenomenon (not surprisingly, in the absence of birth control methods). If therefore Gloucester is punished for his begetting a ‘bastard’, he is punished very harshly indeed.
8. The link between power and authority is evident even in the dictionary definition of these words, as one is defined in terms of the other. Power is, among other things, “possession of control, authority or influence over others” (*OED*, def. 1.a). Authority is “the power to influence or command thought, opinion or behaviour” (*OED*, def. 2.a).
9. From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance the concept of kingship as a unifying force and the representation of unity in the body of the monarch was stressed. Lear’s act of division, probably shocking to Shakespeare’s audience, “reduces the spiritual, ‘unifying’ dimension of kingship to the level of a mere landowner’s project” (Hawkes 3).
10. For most of the ideas in this section I am indebted to Stephen Greenblatt, who first called attention to the custom/nature tension and to the social practices relating to it in

his essay "The Cultivation of anxiety: King Lear and His Daughters" (*Learning to Curse*, esp. 94-95).

11. This practice within the family reflected the wider system of patronage which involved the exchange of gifts and favors –the performance of a service or offer of a gift in return for something else– which was practiced from the monarch and the courtiers down to the last apprentice.
12. Maintenance agreements were legally binding documents that safeguarded the rights of retired parents, who would transfer property to their child(ren) on condition that the latter provide room and board and other basic necessities.
13. The importance of ingratitude for Lear and its cause of mental distraction in him is also noted by Lily Campbell (20).
14. Greenblatt suggests that Lear could not as absolute monarch allow the existence of a legal agreement between himself and his daughters because such a document, implying an autonomous system of law, would have constituted an intervention in his absolutism (*Learning to Curse*, 95).
15. Edmund does so quite self-consciously when he declares, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound" (I.ii. 1-2).
16. For a full discussion of Renaissance concepts of Providence and the degree to which providentialism was upheld in Shakespeare's time, see William Elton, *King Lear and The Gods* (1968), and H.A. Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (1970). Elton concludes that the play is not "a drama of meaningful suffering and redemption, within a just universe ruled by providential higher powers. Lear is not regenerated; providence is not operative."
17. The interpretation of Aristotle's use of this word is much disputed. There seems to be general consensus, however, that: (1) through 'catharsis' Aristotle aims to explain the undeniable, if extraordinary, fact that many tragic representations of suffering leave the audience feeling not depressed but relieved or exalted. (2) Aristotle uses this term to describe the distinctive effect on the audience, "the pleasure of pity and fear", as the basic way to distinguish the tragic from the comic or other forms.

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Tragic Character and Ideology in *King Lear*

Στο *Βασιλιά Ληρ* υπάρχει απουσία των προνομίων που παραδοσιακά αποδίδονταν στον τραγικό πρωταγωνιστή: δε δίνονται εξαιρετικές ιδιότητες στον Ληρ. Επιπλέον, το έργο αρνείται να επιστρέψει στην τάξη πραγμάτων που επικρατούσε πριν την καταστροφή ή να επικυρώσει τις αξίες και τις ιδέες που εκπροσωπούνταν από το γέρο βασιλιά και τους υποστηρικτές του. Παρ'όλα αυτά καταφέρει ακόμα να καταστήσει τον πρωταγωνιστή του ικανό να εκμαιεύσει τη συμπαθητική αντίδραση που απαιτείται για το τραγικό αποτέλεσμα. Αυτό το γεγονός, μια αναγκαιότητα που επιβάλλεται από το συγκεκριμένο λογοτεχνικό είδος, έχει ως αποτέλεσμα να καθορίσει τη στάση του Shakespeare προς την αντιπαράθεση που δραματοποιεί: οι διάφορες δραματικές στρατηγικές που χρησιμοποιεί, συμπεριλαμβανομένης και της ρήξης με το τραγικό είδος, τον κατατάσσουν ανάμεσα στους υποστηρικτές του βασιλιά που είχε μόλις κατεβεί στο χαμηλότερο επίπεδο ενός υποκειμένου.