

**All or Nothing at All: The Political Approach to *King Lear*
(An Introduction for Teachers)**

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The king is a thing...of nothing.
—*Hamlet* IV. ii. 27, 29

Shakespeare's clowns are philosophers, geniuses, demigods; but Shakespeare's clowns are clowns. Shakespeare's kings may be usurpers, murderers, monsters; but Shakespeare's kings are kings.
—G. K. Chesterton, "The Humour of King Herod," in *Uses of Diversity* (NY, 1921), 148

There was a man in our town
and he was wondrous wise:
he jumped into a bramble bush
and scratched out both his eyes—
and when he saw that he was blind,
with all his might and main
he jumped into another one
and scratched them in again.
—Nursery rhyme

When one is faced with the task of teaching *King Lear*, the greatest play of the English language's greatest poet, how is one to begin? The most prudent place to begin is the beginning, namely the perplexing opening court (i.e., public) scene (I. i. 32 ff. V/33 ff. A)¹ with its private and ostensibly casual conversational prologue (I. i. 1-31V/1-32A). Since one should beware of acting toward the play as Lear seems to act toward Cordelia, the most prudent way to begin is to examine as dispassionately as possible the issues that organically arise from these two sets of initial interchanges. Everyone teaching the play needs to keep this in mind and should begin any examination with a detailed consideration of the opening events.

¹ V designates the Variorum edition lineation, A the Arden edition lineation.

The issues are legitimacy and succession, political issues concerning the perpetuation of a regime (whether it be the state or the family). In addition, since the political problem is treated not abstractly in isolation but rather in its concrete context, and since the political realm (the realm of law) is an intermediate domain not unlike a transhuman subdivine entity, i.e., not unlike a demigod, the corollary issue of the relationship between politics or law and the gods, on the one hand, and love (the Socratic intermediary between the human and the divine), on the other, is also raised, at least implicitly. Thus, if some approaches to the play fail, it is not because they are the approaches that they are (whether they be dramatic, anthropologico-ritualistic, formal, imagistic, metaphoric, structuralist, sociological, etc.), but rather it is because they skirt the central political issues surrounding the transmission of a successful exercise of power. That general failure is rooted in the specific failure to appreciate the significance of the division of the kingdom and the use of the love test, although the division of the kingdom is more fundamental, since the love test is in its service.

In general terms, and stated as radically as possible, the dilemma of most readings of the play is this: Lear in his sufferings is said to possess an unparalleled magnificence of soul, a cosmic grandeur, yet Lear in the beginning is said to possess an incalculable pettiness of character, a puny petulance. Hence, the play falls so far short of Aristotle's prescription as to become a middle without a beginning or an end. While the fool, then, accuses Lear of having "pared [his] wit o'both sides and left nothing i'the middle" (I. iv. 179-180V/194-195A), the critics accuse Shakespeare of having pared his play in the middle and left nothing on both sides (cf. Coleridge, 182). If the critics were correct, this would be a unique case in the Shakespearean corpus. As a rule, Shakespeare's beginnings are rich, carefully constructed portals to the events that follow them (cf. Cunningham, 104). One need think only—to select a few—of the opening statements of Aegeon and the Ephesian Duke Solinus in *The Comedy of Errors*, of the merchants in *The Merchant of Venice*, of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, of Flavius and Marullus and the artisans in *Julius Caesar*. In the tragedies the initial interchanges on the parapet in *Hamlet*, on the street in *Othello*, and on the heath in *Macbeth* are pregnant with themes that will pervade the plays that they introduce.

Yet, when it comes to *King Lear*, there are critics who would willingly excise the opening scene or relegate it to the status of a mere device (cf. Coleridge, 182). One might well exclaim against them, "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III. vi. 75-76V/78-79A). Even if one were to agree that Shakespeare nods on occasion, *King Lear*, the peak of his achievement, hardly seems the likely occasion. In light of this, one must assume, at least as a working hypothesis, that the opening scene shows us a King Lear who is integral with the King Lear whom we see on the heath, because if one does not, then the power and meaning of the play as a whole are seriously threatened (cf. Reibetanz, 11-12).

That the opening scene is integral with what follows is the core of the analysis of Harry V. Jaffa. Jaffa's argument presupposes nothing more than an awareness of: (1) the kind of classically grounded humanist education that Shakespeare must have had; (2) the kind of knowledge that the Elizabethan playgoing audience demonstrably did have of issues of political succession (cf. Axton, 1973/74, passim; Axton, 1977, 12 ff., 48, 55, 145-147; Bloom, 1960, 462; Kantorowicz, 13; Levine, 89-90, 111-112; Maitland, 248-256; Sharpe, 1, 54, 59-60); (3) the foundation of those issues in the lively politico-theological debates of the medieval tradition (cf. Gierke, 22-24, 37-45, 93) and the politico-philosophical writings of ancient Greece (especially Plato and Aristotle: cf. Burnet, 163, 168; Sitwell, 58, 63, 64, 73-77); (4) Shakespeare's deliberateness as a writer (of which his

willful alteration of his sources is an important part). It is surprising that Jaffa's argument has not received the attention, or gained the currency, that it deserves.

Jaffa focuses, as one must, on the problem of the division of the kingdom, which is not as rash as often it is taken to be (cf. Schoff, 158-160). First, one must stress that abdication and division of a kingdom are not shocking as such, as the case of Charles V of Spain had shown. In addition, in the very first English tragedy (1560), *Gorboduc* the king of Britain abdicates and divides his kingdom between his two sons in the hope that under his tutelage while he remains alive they will learn to rule well (*Gorboduc* I. ii. 127-136). The plan fails because the sons were ambitious and because the division was into two, which is traditionally the number associated with strife and antithesis (as opposed to three, which is traditionally the number associated with union and synthesis).

With regard to *Lear*, we must distinguish between his original plan, which before the play begins is "already determined...in all its particulars" (Coleridge, 178) and to which there seem to be no objections from Kent or Gloucester (both of whom are privy to it: cf. I. i. 1-6V/1-5A), and his altered plan, to which Kent does not hesitate to object strongly (I. i. 119V/120A; cf. Davis, 6-7). There is, then, strong *prima facie* evidence for assuming that *Lear's* original plan was the "product of sound principles of statecraft" (Jaffa, 119). *Lear*, the only Shakespearean protagonist outside the history plays to be designated "king" in the title of the play (cf. Goddard, 2, 142-143) is portrayed by Shakespeare as England's greatest ruler, the only English king in Shakespeare to preside over an England that is domestically at peace and internationally tranquil. However, kings do not live forever. Yet, there is the hope that by wisely providing for succession, the king may ensure that the regime will live beyond him, perhaps even live forever. Such is the task that *Lear* seems to set himself.

Lear tries to perpetuate the regime by dividing the kingdom into three as a hedge against the danger of civil war, which a division into two would invite, by marrying Cordelia to Burgundy (the symbol of whose granted dukedom is the coronet that *Lear* carries: I. i. 138V/139A). This would create a foreign allegiance to check France's possible encroachment (cf. Goddard, 2, 138; Greg, 441 ff.; Jaffa, 124-125; Vitale, 142) by securing public pledges of love and loyalty from his other two daughters and their as yet dowerless husbands who represent the geographical ends of England (Cornwall the south and Albany the north), by centrally locating Cordelia and her husband as a buffer between Goneril and Regan, and by residing as king (while retaining his crown) for an unspecified time with Cordelia alone.

It is the love test, manifestly a charade with regard to its role in determining the division of the kingdom, that is meant—among other intents—to effect the public pledges of support that the plan requires. Cordelia's refusal, however, destroys the public facade and with it the political efficacy of the test. It also destroys *Lear* as King, driving him first into blind anger and ultimately into an apolitical madness that is the *sine qua non* for the private affirmation of love that he also wants (cf. Bennett, *passim*).

In other words, by the time that it is Cordelia's turn in the love test, it is apparent that the division has been predetermined; therefore, from Cordelia, and from Cordelia alone, *Lear* expects a public affirmation that is simultaneously a private affirmation, a ritual response that is simultaneously a spontaneous effluence (cf. Boose, 332). Cordelia realizes that what *Lear* wants is an impossibility, that the love that is commanded never can be the love that is granted freely, or rather that the command utterly compromises the free granting, that law cannot guarantee love (cf. French, 225).

Lear's failure to understand this impossibility is the rock on which he founders: only by divesting himself totally can he receive the tribute that he may richly deserve. This is

the deeper meaning of Cordelia's "nothing," Lear must live down his title "king" and live up to his name "lear" (which I assume to be a variant of the Anglo-Saxon *lāer*, "empty") by becoming empty of the political as a preparation for becoming receptive to the humanly loving fulfillment that he deeply desires. He begins by being as blind to his name as Oedipus is to his feet (cf. Rosenberg, 41). He must learn that the power of politics extends only to governing well here and now, whereas the attempt to perpetuate good governing is to arrogate to oneself the power of the gods.

The inevitable failure of this attempt to overreach the political delineates the limits of the political, the inability of the political to rid itself of mortality. If pomp is to take physick, it cannot be self-administered, but rather it must come from some extrapolitical source, i.e., from nature.

Lear's political failure, then, brings him face to face with nature in the raw, nature as love (with which is connected the gratitude/ingratitude theme) and nature as divinity (with which is connected the piety/impiety theme) (cf. Berns, 1972, *passim*). Lear's natural stature is a consequence of his political nature, and nature stands out most clearly—Shakespeare seems to suggest—when politics peaks and plummets into the abyss that is always and everywhere its circumambient context: the cliff of Dover from which Gloucester falls is a physical adumbration of the cliff of political perspicuity (but natural blindness) from which Lear falls (cf. French, 219). Just as "in determining the tensile strength of a cord, it is necessary to find the least weight that will break the cord in order to find the greatest weight the cord will support" (Jaffa, 129; cf. Sewall, 5-7); so too in determining the limits of politics, it is necessary to show the greatest king failing at the greatest conceivable political act, the act of perpetuating a well-governed regime. If humans are essentially political animals, this would also entail showing the limits of the human. Lear, even at the beginning of the play, must be shown to be worthy of being the carrier of this insight into the limits of the human and political. This can be shown only if his political goals are closely understood, and these political goals are embedded with remarkable concision in the opening scene of *King Lear*.

The setting of *King Lear*, then, is decisive to any understanding of the play. This is not surprising, because Shakespeare—as all too few of his commentators have observed—was never as careless in creating the settings of his plays as his critics have been in their understanding of those settings (cf. Bloom, 3; Cantor, 9; Keeton, 5). Shakespeare's care in this regard must be appreciated if the reader of the plays is to discern the full burden of their meanings. In addition, the settings as a rule tend to suggest, or set the stage for suggesting, the character of the regime in which the events of the play occur. Therefore, if one expects fully to understand the actions of the play, actions that are characteristic of, and grounded in, the concrete regime in question (however transpolitical their ultimate consequences may be), one must first grasp Shakespeare's philosophy of regimes, i.e., his political philosophy.² Shakespeare was a consummate political philosopher, one who wrote verse (as Lucretius did) and dramas (as Plato did).

² Cf. Alvis, 5; Berns, 1981, 48; Bloom, 1960, 459, 462-464, 471; Bloom, *SP*, intro.; Burckhardt, *passim*; Cantor, 7-8; Cavell, 295; French, 31, 35-40, 200, 225; Friesner, *passim*; Greg, 440; Heilman, 27, 34-35; Keeton, v; Kernan, 9-10; White, 7, 12, et *passim*.

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