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Lear and his Daughters

Charles Hanly 

King Lear is commonly held both by critics and theatre-goers to be Shakespeare's greatest achievement (Johnson, 1765); (Lamb, 1808); (Hazlitt, 1817); (Coleridge, 1818); (Swinburne, 1876); (Bradley, 1904); (Hunter, 1972). Coleridge, who held this view of the play, nevertheless, considered it to lack dramatic, formal unity. He thought that the principal action of the first scene, Lear's division of his kingdom among his daughters, was a psychological *deus ex machina*, an action unintelligibly artificial in itself, but from which everything else follows with tragic rigour.

Let the first scene of this play have been lost, and let it only be understood that a fond father had been duped by hypocritical professions of love and duty on the part of two daughters to disinherit the third, previously and deservedly, more dear to him;—and all the rest of the tragedy would retain its interest undiminished, and be perfectly intelligible (p. 330).

The greatness of Shakespeare's greatest play, in Coleridge's view, consists in the extraordinary *tour de force* by which the playwright's powerful language is able to win from us an acquiescence in the originating cause of the tragedy despite its improbability. But, although the language of the play can, in fact, create complex effects, can it be that Shakespeare's greatest play is an aesthetic failure, that it lacks unity? Can it be that the poet who conceived of his art as 'holding a mirror up to nature' could rest content with an arbitrary action as the motor of a play which had brought his genius to its greatest height?

I do not wish to assert that Coleridge's perception of the play is universally held by critics and scholars. However, less sharply defined variants of it are to be found among contemporary scholars. One view is that, having rejected the political and personal reasons of the earlier 'King Lear' from which he worked, Shakespeare offers no motive at all for Lear's division of the kingdom, that Shakespeare made Lear's action intelligible only in so far as it was wilful and arbitrary (Hunter, 1972). But Shakespeare has Lear reveal that his action is motivated: 'Meantime we shall express our darker purpose'. This 'darker purpose' is only slowly revealed in the unfolding of the play; it is a 'darker purpose' than Lear knew.

King Lear, despite its political theme, is a tragedy of family life. Johnson (1765) believed the soul of the play to be Lear as father, 'Lear would move our compassion but little, did we not rather consider the injured father than the degraded king' (p. 162). (See also Coleridge, 1818); (Ray, 1847); (Kellogg, 1866); (McFarland, 1981.) The relations between a father and his daughters, a father and his sons and of sisters and of brothers are at the heart of the play (Snider, 1887). Shakespeare uses Lear's madness as a device for stripping away the narcissistic illusory aspects of royalty in order to try to lay bare what is essential to the human condition. It is this very narcissistic illusion, which Shakespeare was concerned to penetrate, that many critics have found necessary to preserve in their idealization of Lear. Lear's exercise of political authority has often received comment, but the calamity of Lear's exercise of parental authority has largely been passed over in silence. It is in the further analysis of the play as a tragedy of familial relations, that Lear's 'darker purpose' is to be found.

Freud (1913) did not do justice to Lear's daughters or to Lear's relations with them. Freud takes it for granted that Lear's contract with them even

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if tragically misguided can be fully comprehended in terms of Lear's failing struggle to accept decline and death. This perception is sound as far as it goes. But Freud treats Lear's daughters merely as abstractions—as symbolic representatives of the fates from whom Lear cannot escape—and not as dramatic characters in their own right. Freud's interpretation of the daughters as fates is inconsistent with Cordelia's efforts to save and protect her father and with the fact that Lear is indirectly responsible for Cordelia's death. Freud passed over what is in my opinion a crucial psychoanalytic perception of the play and its central and secondary themes and characters—a perception that reveals the play's dramatic unity.

Freud was not alone in treating Lear's daughters as abstract symbols, although this treatment is more usually limited to Goneril and Regan who, not infrequently, have been treated as 'personifications of ingratitude' rather than as plausible, if horrifying personalities (Hudson, 1848). Although Coleridge (1818) showed that Shakespeare had taken pains to prevent evil in Edmund 'from passing into utter monstrosity', he did not attempt any similar understanding of the characterizations of Goneril and Regan. They have been referred to as the 'inhuman sisters' (Thomdike, 1908). They have been seen as animals who 'violate their proper functions as human beings by their lust for Edmund, a lust which ends in murder and suicide' (Spencer, 1940, p. 143). Goneril and Regan are, according to these critics, too monstrous to be human, their actions too evil to be explained. And yet, there is no foundation for this treatment of Goneril and Regan in Shakespeare's language. On the contrary, Shakespeare has Lear treat his daughter Goneril very much as a woman when, in his rage at her refusal to entertain his knights, he curses her with barrenness. Shakespeare treats them as manipulative, evil, scheming women but women, nonetheless (cf. Granville Barker, 1946). The intellectual denial of humanity to Goneril and Regan is instrumental to the psychological denial that they really are Lear's daughters. This denial, as we shall see, is part of a failure to come to terms with the psychological meaning of the opening scene of the play which, as a consequence, is experienced as lacking in verisimilitude.

The play opens with a simple yet powerful conversation between Kent and Gloucester. We learn that Lear equally esteems his two sons-in-law, Albany and Cornwall, while Gloucester discloses that he is ashamed of one of his two sons, his bastard son Edmund, despite the fact that nature has given him physical and mental strengths at least equal to those of the legitimate son, Edgar. As the action of the play unfolds we realize that Lear has been blind to the grave differences in the characters of his sons-in-law: Albany decent and weak, Cornwall weak and cowardly but vicious. Similarly, we discover how unreliable Gloucester's judgement is. In the presence of Edmund he speaks wittily, sensually, yet degradingly of Edmund's mother and the circumstances of his conception. Because of his illegitimacy, he has deprived Edmund of any stable, continuing relationship to himself and the beneficial influence of a father on a son. Out of shame, he has maintained Edmund in a condition of exile from himself, and informs Edmund and Kent that this deprivation is to continue.

Gloucester: He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again, The King is coming (I.1, 31–32).

Lear's appearance in Act I Scene 1 is announced by Gloucester in conjunction with this rather brutal dismissal of his son. Moments later we will hear Lear's scarcely veiled though unconscious insults to Goneril and Regan and his enraged, brutal disowning of Cordelia. The themes of the sub-plot and the main plot of the play are tied together at the outset by Shakespeare. With the sure psychological instinct of the great dramatist, Shakespeare taps into the logic of free associations in his use of contiguities and juxtapositions, such as this one, while simultaneously elaborating his themes according to the logic of historical exposition. Unconscious, implicit connexions and meanings are integrated with conscious, explicitly elaborated themes.

Coleridge, astute psychologist, that he could be, was sensitive to the provocation and rejection inherent in Gloucester's treatment of Edmund. He saw that it could arouse in him a desperate, vengeful, rage which could subvert his ambitions (which were consonant with his exceptional endowments), through the choice of violent means for their realization. As Coleridge (1818) puts it, 'all the kindly counteractions to the mischievous feelings of shame, which might have been derived

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from co-domestication with Edgar and their common father, had been cut off by his absence from home, and foreign education from boyhood to the present time, and a prospect of its continuance, as if to preclude all risk of his interference with the father's views for the elder and legitimate son ...' (p. 336). To which one might add that Gloucester's attitude to Edmund deprived the son of any affection for his father and, thus, of the positive side of the ambivalence that could have helped him to accept and identify with his father's authority and, hence, with the authority of just law and self-restraint. His lack of any legitimate hope of advancement commensurate with his capacities neutralized in him the anxiety that might, otherwise, have imposed some constraint on him in his choice of means. Coleridge has demanded of us that we seek an understanding of the evil in Edmund, without forgiving the evil he does, and that we appreciate the dilemma of Edmund's defiant prayer by which he steels himself in his plan to have Edgar exiled and not himself, 'Now gods stand up for bastards!' (I.2, 22). Edmund is exposed to overpowering feelings of sibling jealousy. Edmund's ambitions mount as fresh opportunities present themselves, but his first intent was bred out of sibling jealousy: to turn the tables on his legitimate and preferred brother.

well then,
 Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
 Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
 As to the legitimate. Fine word 'legitimate!'
 Well, my 'legitimate', if this letter speed
 And my invention thrive, Edmund the base

Shall top the legitimate, I grow, I prosper (I.2, 15–21).

If the sub-plot is, in fact, dramatically bound to the main action by repetition of theme with variation, we would expect to find something of this 'preference and rivalry' in the relations of Lear and his daughters.

With few exceptions, the critics have found the sub-plot of the play to be essential to it precisely because it does reflect the characters and actions of the main story. Johnson defends the place of Edmund in the play for the opportunity it afforded 'the poet of combining perfidy with perfidy, and connecting the wicked son with the wicked daughters, to impress this important moral, that villany is never at a stop, that crimes lead to crimes, and at last terminate in ruin' (cf. Warton, 1974, p. 161). The duplication of plots, according to Bradley (1904), 'startles and terrifies by suggesting that the folly of Lear and the ingratitude of his daughters are no accidents or merely individual aberrations, but that in that dark cold world some fateful malignant influence is abroad ...' (p. 262). But while entirely agreeing with the critics concerning the dramatic and aesthetic importance of the relation of the sub-plot to the main story, I do not believe that the nature of this relationship has been either adequately or completely understood. Indeed, it has been partly misunderstood in so far as it has involved the dehumanization of Goneril and Regan and the idealization of Lear. What is this fateful, malignant influence? Where does it spring from? Why invoke satan or the gods or unredeemed animality? What if the poet's combining of perfidy with perfidy includes the fathers as well as the son and daughters? After all Gloucester is not so 'unsuspicious' as Bradley would have him, otherwise how could Edmund have so easily aroused suspicions and fear of Edgar in his father. May not similar tragic flaws appear in Lear's relations to his daughters, if, indeed, the two plots do reflect each other as it is agreed they do? Like Gloucester, Lear is deceived by his faithless daughters and repudiates his true daughter. Moreover Lear is active while Gloucester is only reactive. Lear invites Goneril and Regan into the situation in which they deceive him with false promises of fidelity. Gloucester submits to deception; Lear invites it.

By means of these repetitions with variations, Shakespeare holds a mirror up to the characters and actions of Lear and his daughters, that dramatically illuminates without verbalizing it, the nature of Lear's 'darker purpose' in the division of his kingdom. Coleridge went half way toward grasping this crucial structural relation within the play in his analysis of the character of Edmund but was then stopped short by his own idealization of Lear and corresponding derogating fear of Goneril and Regan. Let us then extend Coleridge's insights into the character and motives of Edmund to Goneril and Regan and see what understanding of the main story and its great protagonist this vantage point offers. For Lear's treatment of Goneril and Regan in Act I is no

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less provocative than Gloucester's treatment of Edmund.

If Edmund was driven by jealous rage against his brother to take by deceit what had been denied to him by his father, can less be said of Goneril and Regan? Lear makes his preference for Cordelia over her sisters naïvely and harshly clear.

Now our joy,
Although our last and least, to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interested; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? (I.1, 82–86).

And again,
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery (I.1, 123–124).

Goneril and Regan have been placed in a situation of severe humiliation by their father. They are invited to compete with each other for the richest portion of their father's gift in the knowledge that they must lose to his favourite Cordelia. Could it be that the deceitfulness and coldness they exhibit comes from their own chilling realization that nothing they can do or say could win for them an equal place in their father's heart? The tendency of some critics to hold that the play has no past—only the improbable present of Act I Scene 1—from which the tragedy follows, can be understood as the consequence of the denial that Lear is the father of Goneril and Regan as well as of Cordelia. If her father's love provided a fertile soil in which her goodness could grow, then the absence of genuine fatherly feeling must have been the barren ground from which the deceit and hate of Goneril and Regan have sprung. In fact, one of Lear's tragic flaws revealed in the opening scene is his demand for a show of love so narcissistically invested that he is filled with rage at Cordelia's refusal to comply. When one attends to the psychology of the relations between and among Lear and his daughters, the scene's roots in the past come clearly into evidence: it is a fateful repetition at the end of Lear's life of character forming episodes in the past.

In this connexion one must underline once more Freud's astonishing psychological purblindness to this dimension of the

play, 'the relationship of a father to his children, which might be a fruitful source of many dramatic situations, is not turned to further account' (p. 301), other, that is, than as symbolic representatives of the Three Fates. Freud (1900) saw with perfect clarity the oedipal theme in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But from his (1913) reading of *King Lear* this awareness is entirely absent, even explicitly denied. However, in 1934 Freud corrected this earlier misreading of the play without abandoning his allegorical interpretation, in a letter to Bransom cited by Jones (1957). Freud treats Cordelia's silence and her repudiation of her father's demand as a reaction against 'her love for him . . . her holy secret' (p. 487). But there is also a strength and courage; a wish to be free of her infantile attachment to her father, 'to love him according to her bond' so that she can leave him to love a husband.

Lear's rage, which causes him to unleash the series of events leading to the final scene of destruction, is a reaction to Cordelia's perfectly healthy, decent and honest refusal of Lear's demand for an avowal that she love only him. Shakespeare's language is simple, direct, unequivocal and extraordinarily powerful in its assertion of a fundamental emotional truth,

Haply when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take away my plight shall
carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all (I.1, 100–104).

Shakespeare confirms Cordelia in two ways: by having Kent, who is utterly honest and entirely loyal to Lear, come to Cordelia's defence; by having Cordelia chosen by France who loves her for her own sake after Burgundy rejects her because she has lost her dowry and has been disowned by her royal father. These are the very values and truths which make life worthwhile in the face of an indifferent universe and death—values for which Lear gropes in his madness. Lear's folly is not merely that he decided to divide his kingdom and resign his authority and power to his daughters and their husbands, nor is it merely that he failed to anticipate the ingratitude of Goneril and Regan. It is rather that he undertook all this in a way that imposed a demand for falsehood and emotional disorder on his daughters without knowing what he was doing.

Lear declares that one of the purposes for dividing his kingdom is so,

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... that future strife
May be prevented now (I.1, 44–45).

But his method of carrying out the division with its inherent preference for Cordelia must set her sisters against her and, in effect, could only avoid future strife by precipitating it in the present. His other purpose is to find relief from the cares and responsibilities of his great office,

... and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburdened crawl toward death ... (I.1, 48–51).

There is a profound irony in this statement, since Lear is altogether unaware of how 'unburdened' he will become. But there is also a profound self-deception in Lear caused by his denial of death. Although Lear seems to accept the reality of his death, the details of the contract he forces upon his daughters reveals his narcissistic conflict. The effect of these arrangements, had they succeeded, would have been to recreate for Lear the emotional conditions of adolescence, carefree, without responsibilities, surrounded by his chosen companions, and also of early childhood with its omnipotent illusion of being cared for by an all-loving and all-powerful mother who is able to protect her child from all dangers and who needs nothing from the child herself. Lear's division of the kingdom was neither an accident, nor an unmotivated act, nor the dramatically unintegrated residue of an ancient tale. Shakespeare has made the division of the kingdom psychologically inevitable because Lear had to divest himself of the responsibilities that bound him to reality and, thus, to mortality in his attempt to give 'objectivity' to the narcissistic illusion to which he unconsciously clings (Hanly, 1984). Lear has to make himself helpless in order to reassure himself that he enjoys the unconditional love of his daughter-mothers. Lear proposes to retain one hundred knights to be sustained by his daughters as well as 'the name and all th' addition to a King'. Lear's folly in so far as it consists of believing that he could possess the dignity of office having handed over its powers and prerogatives has not escaped the critics (Colie, 1974), nor has his folly in trusting himself to Goneril and Regan while disavowing Cordelia. What has not been well perceived, if at all, is the libidinally provocative contract Lear proposes to make with his daughters. In exchange for their shares of the kingdom, Lear considers himself entitled to demand of them what no mature daughter can or ought to give. The overpowering force of Lear's rage reaction to Cordelia's clear perception of the nature of this demand and her refusal of it, is Shakespeare's

way of embodying this meaning in dramatic action. Lear becomes enraged with Cordelia because she has touched on the sensitive core of his folly, she having no alternative but to do so, if she is to remain loyal to herself and to the truth.

Thus it is that Goneril and Regan, by playing upon their father's narcissism—and by acting upon the maxim of their own damaged pride 'if I cannot have his love, I shall get whatever of his power and his property I can' manage to do to Cordelia, without trying, what Edmund by scheming does to Edgar. They dispossess her of her inheritance and secure her exile. In this way Shakespeare prepares through the action of the opening scene for the fateful inter-twining of the sub-plot and the main story which leads to the catastrophic conclusion of the play. Goneril and Regan both fall in love with Edmund. Freud (1921) has pointed out that the most primitive attachment is one of identification. There is a psychological inevitability in their attraction because they share with Edmund a common circumstance of paternal devaluation and a criminality, in part, as a result of it. Edmund is the masculine incarnation, rendered effective by his martial strength, his ruthless commitment to the pursuit of power at any cost and his courage, of their own bitter, vengeful hatred. Regan had already found something of such a man in Cornwall. But his cruelty is cowardly. And he is killed by one of Gloucester's servants who tries to stop him from trampling out his master's eyes with his spurs. As for Albany, Goneril's husband, he is both decent and weak and, hence, of no real interest to her. Thus it is that Edmund is offered, by the sisters, an opportunity, far beyond his original hopes, to make himself king by defeating the French forces brought by Cordelia to rescue Lear. And thus it is that Edmund, having gained the upper hand in the battle and having captured Lear and Cordelia, gives the order for their deaths and becomes the vehicle for the final realization of the patricidal

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and fratricidal wishes of Goneril and Regan—wishes that he shares with them.

Pauncz (1952) and Donnelly (1953) have pointed out the incestuous nature of Lear's attachments to his daughters. To demand all the love of a daughter is a thinly veiled repetition of the child's possessive, incestuous love for his mother. Lear's apparent acceptance of old age and death is in reality a rejection of it. His plan is to be regal, without responsibility, at ease and carefree surrounded by his retainers and completely cared for and doted on by Cordelia. In fact, the prospect of being stripped by death of his monarchy, his pleasures and his life is greeted in Lear with a narcissistic refusal and, hence, by the pursuit of a magical return to boyish vigour and irresponsibility, to infantile erotic possession and to the status of his 'majesty the infant' who is the unique recipient of self-less love. The unconscious, magical idea inherent in this regression to early stages of narcissism before death acquires its full meaning and reality for the ego is the psychological core of the 'darker purpose' that Lear carries out in his division of the kingdom.

Donnelly (1953) points out that it is inadequate parents who accuse their children of ingratitude. An adequate parent is able to take satisfaction in his child's independence and autonomy. Lear's narcissism does not permit him to know these satisfactions which are one of the healthy sources of consolation in face of old age and death. Lear's accusations of ingratitude while, in one respect, justified by his daughters' callous behaviour toward him, are also expressions of his denial of his own threatening and impossible demands on them. Nothing could be more threatening to a daughter than the demand Lear makes. Nothing is more psychologically damaging to a daughter than to submit to the demand. Goneril and Regan, whose mastery of their hostility is precarious at best, are confronted by a father whose love for them, inferior as it is to his love for Cordelia, is eroticized. (In saying this, I do not mean that Lear actually had conscious ideas of having sexual intercourse with his daughters any more than a 5-year-old boy at the height of his oedipal passion would plan a sexual seduction of his mother in the adult sense. In fact, nothing could be more disturbing to a child than to have a parent attempt to realize these wishes by attempting a real seduction.) What is meant is that Lear's speech and conduct give expression at the conscious level of reactivated, infantile fantasies which are at once oedipal and pre-oedipal. It is because Lear's emotional life is thus governed by fantasies that one is entitled to emphasize Lear's narcissism. It is these same fantasies that also cause Lear to act toward his daughters as though they were to mother him.

I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery (1.1, 123–124).

The reaction of Goneril and Regan is compliance on the surface and a cold hatred and fear of their father beneath. Hatred of the father has become their only defence against the danger of the instinctual calamity that would otherwise confront them. It is this hatred that makes sense of the sisters' determination to rid their father of his knights and render him helpless, dependent and subject to their control. The destructiveness of Goneril and Regan is motivated by the repetition of a self-degrading, regressive recoil to Lear's inappropriate demands. Their actions manifest an anal sadistic, manipulative hatred which seeks the possession of power and objects and the vengeful degradation or destruction of persons. (The anal sado-masochistic aspect of Lear's relation to Goneril and Regan has been touched on by Sharpe (1946), although, for the most part, she has missed the psychological significance of the relation between Lear and his daughters. Like Freud and some of the non-

analytic critics she treats Goneril and Regan as symbolic rather than as dramatic characters.)

Lear's narcissism makes him blind to the reality of the situation that this same narcissism has brought about. He is unaware of the fear and hatred Goneril and Regan have for him as a consequence of his preference for Cordelia. He is, accordingly, unable to sense their own coldly calculating manipulation of him in their false declarations of love. No more is he able to respond to the honesty, loyalty and appropriate love in Cordelia and Kent. Instead, he imperiously dismisses Cordelia as worthless now that she has lost his favour and his dowry and he exiles Kent for trying to get him to see what he is doing. Having rendered himself all but defenceless, he turns to Goneril and Regan for succour. Goneril and Regan are presented by Shakespeare as being

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aware of the surface of Lear's folly and as being afraid of it,

Goneril: The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash. Then must we look from his age to receive not alone the imperfections of long ingrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them. Regan: Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment (1.1, 294–300).

There is an irony in the cold, detached calculating attitude the two sisters have to their father—an attitude that echoes something of his attitude to them in so far as they existed for his convenience, whereas Cordelia was his 'joy'. They appear to be completely detached from Lear as though he were to them only a rather threatening, deteriorating old man from whom they had to protect themselves. And yet they are bound to him sadistically by having submitted to him masochistically in falsely promising the fulfilment of his wishes. They believe themselves free to manipulate him at will since they do not really love him at all. But at a deeper level they are driven by their own erotic fear of him into a sadistic determination to strip him of his 'riotous', 'disordered' knights and to take pleasure in rendering him completely helpless.

This sado-masochistic bondage to Lear repeats itself in the loves of Goneril and Regan for Edmund. The sisters must fall in love with Edmund for the reasons already considered above, but also, because his reckless daring, his lusty determination to have his way, his self-willed purposes indifferent to the needs of others or to the law cause him to appear to Goneril and Regan as the youthful embodiment of their father's reckless imperiousness. They are fascinated by him. They wish to submit to him emotionally and sexually. In this way, their sado-masochistic love of their father returns to haunt them in the person of Edmund. And he, like their father, treats them as mere conveniences for his own purposes.

Edmund: To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
Each jealous of the other as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? One? Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed
If both remain alive (V.1, 56–59).

Goneril and Regan had thought themselves to be indifferent to the ordinary filial bonds and affections. And so they are. But their indifference, their capacity for cold manipulation is rooted in their sado-masochistic bondage to their father. And so it is that they are fascinated by Edmund's virile wilfulness which causes them to be as womanly as they are able to be. And so it is that their suspicious, envious rage and destructiveness are turned against each other.

Lear's narcissistic blindness—the source of his folly which sets the tragedy in motion—persists to the end. Lear could not bear the truth Cordelia had to tell at the beginning of the play. He was not able to learn it from the catastrophe he suffered. The insights that take Lear's mind by storm concern the reality of the human condition when the narcissistic supports and stays of office, privilege, wealth and power have been stripped away. But he remains as blind as ever to Cordelia's needs, to her separate existence, to the end.

Cordelia: We are not the first
Who with best meaning have incurred the worst.
For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;
Myself could else out-frown false Fortune's frown.
Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?
Lear:
No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;
When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news ... (V.3, 4–14).

Cordelia is angered by her defeat at her sister's hands; she is aware that she is 'cast down'; prison is no 'nursery' for her. She is a young woman, married to a man who loves her. She wishes to be engaged in life and not a mere spectator of it. Lear is content to have her back; to have her all to himself to serve his old age, to comfort and amuse him. He demonstrates no awareness of the devastating sacrifice involved in this position for his daughter. Cordelia is nature's martyr; she is among the truest and best of all of the great personalities that people Shakespeare's plays. But Shakespeare's comprehension of life was never, at its best, compromised by idealizing distortions. The love 'according to her bond' which gave Cordelia the freedom denied her sisters to live and love independently of her father, also bound her to him. She had to return from France to try to rescue him from her sisters and, hence, to be hanged.

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The tragedy of Lear is the tragedy of his narcissism and his violent search for a love that cannot flourish or succeed because it is contrary to nature. In this respect, as well, the sub-plot echoes the great themes of the main story. Edmund, as he dies, consoles himself with the knowledge of the appalling testimony of Goneril and Regan's love for him.

Edmund: Yet Edmund was beloved.
 The one the other poisoned for my sake
 And after slew herself (V.3, 237–238)

It is this desperate assurance that he was loved that releases in him the will to try to prevent the murder of Cordelia and Lear. Gloucester's real physical blinding also echoes and illuminates Lear's affective blindness. Gloucester, during his blinding, learns the truth about Edmund's treachery and his own injustice towards Edgar. His physical suffering is overtaken by his remorse and his wish to make amends to his loyal son for his mistrust and mistreatment of him. Lear betrays no equivalent realization of his folly or of his mistreatment of Cordelia. The harsh truth of *King Lear* is that so much suffering could result in so little insight, correction or amelioration. In the end there is violence, despair and death. Lear comforts himself with the thought that he has killed Cordelia's hangman. He knows what he has lost but he scarcely knows the daughter he has lost. His despair can only be softened by the delusional uncertainty as to whether Cordelia is alive or dead. Shakespeare expresses in Lear a despairing longing which clings to reality and to unreality all at once.

She's gone for ever,
 I know when one is dead and when one lives;
 She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
 If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
 Why then she lives (V.3, 258–261).

Lear dies uncomprehending as he lived. **(See also Stompfer, 1960) ; (Brooke, 1963) ; (Gardner, 1967) ; (Goldberg, 1974) ; (Zak, 1984.)**

An understanding of narcissism and its relation to sadism helps us to see the opening scene for all it reveals of Lear's family relations. The aesthetic unity of the play can be grasped in a new way if Lear's 'darker purpose' in the first scene is understood both as an essential part of the tragic flaw in his character and as the spring which sets the action of the play in motion. The division of the kingdom is not merely a modified borrowing from a received legend, an extraneous and arbitrary act used as an artifice by Shakespeare to set the action going. On the contrary, Shakespeare has written the scene so as to make it, by means of its psychological depth, reverberate with the past and portend the future. Heraclitus said that 'character is fate'. Shakespeare uses the action of the division of the kingdom to convey implicitly, in affective language and action, the characters of Lear and his daughters and the misfortune to which they are exposed by Lear's gift and what he wants from it.

The linkages that the best critics have always seen between the main story and the sub-plot are enriched by extending Coleridge's understanding of the character and motivation of Edmund to Goneril and Regan. Coleridge's inability to do so derives from a need to maintain idealizations of fathers and, hence, of King Lear – the father *par excellence*. Coleridge **(1818)** gave eloquent expression to this idealization and its consequences,

All Lear's faults increase our pity for him. We refuse to know them otherwise than as means of his sufferings and aggravations of his daughters (p. 340).

What is this refusal but a denial of the impact of Lear's character and his actions upon his ungrateful daughters?

The idealization of Lear is nowhere more fervently expressed than in Kitteridge **(1940)**,

But in Shakespeare Lear becomes colossal. His character defies analysis because it needs none. He is a man; he is a father; he is a king – and he is old. That is the whole account.

And there is attendant upon this idealization the inevitable derogation of the daughters, even of Cordelia.

Eminent critics have done their best to reconcile Cordelia's character with her refusal to compete with her sister's lies by speaking the truth her father longs to hear. ... If Shakespeare had changed the tale here, his tragedy would have come to a happy ending in the first act.

Once this idealization is modified, Goneril and

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Regan are able to assume human proportions as women, daughters and sisters made evil by jealous rage, hatred and sado-masochistic sexual desires. At the same time, Lear's contribution to their violence is brought into view. Our pity is mingled with fear. Goneril and Regan can take their place with Lady Macbeth as part of Shakespeare's struggle to articulate the origin and nature of evil in women. Seen and understood in this way, *King Lear* assumes its pride of place as a great artistic achievement and a profound evocation of the tragedy of family life.

SUMMARY

The author reviews the works that have been written on Shakespeare's *King Lear* both from the literary critics and from a psychoanalytic standpoint. He proposes that Lear is more of a villain than has been appreciated, his villainy arising from narcissism and from sadism. It is possible that Lear's villainy may have been overlooked because of a tendency to idealize the King and Father and to deny some features of father–daughter relationships. The opening scene of the play, in which Lear sets out to divide his kingdom among his daughters, is an essential feature of the play, not simply the *deus ex machina* that Coleridge and others have proposed. The scene establishes Lear as the narcissistic and sadistic father making unnatural demands upon his daughters. Lear's daughters are better understood as persons with human weaknesses, rather than as symbols, and the play can best be experienced as the tragic dilemma of a family rather than an expression of broader processes.

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