Unreading Lear

by David P. Gontar (May 2014)

I. Lear

"Once upon a time, far away and long ago, there lived an old king with three daughters . . ."

It has been observed that in both its Folio and Quarto versions, *King Lear* bears features of a fairy tale. It has even been suggested that its archaic source is the tale of *The Goose Girl at the Well*. While the simplicity of nursery legend can render a symbolic form conceptually and emotionally accessible, there are drawbacks. The familiar folkloric theme of two wicked elder sisters taking advantage of a younger sibling lulls one into a mood of reduced scrutiny. For just an instant we occupy a world of innocent make-believe, only to have it dissolve and fade before our eyes in gut-wrenching tragedy. This scenario is not without consequences. For the fairy tale aura which suspends disbelief *ab ibitio* short circuits critical judgment. Too much tends to be taken for granted.

Consider the issue of Lear's "darker purpose." (I, i, 35) Why "dark"? What is darker here? Is it not prudent to make a donation *inter vivos*? Is not a coronation of sons-in-law arranged by the reigning monarch a matter for rejoicing? ("This crownet part between you." I, i, 139) The reason we don't know what he means by that locution is because we never felt the need to investigate it. We merely accept it in our wide-eyed innocence. If audiences and readers just embrace tragedy's premises as youngsters do the implausible tenets of bedtime stories, is valid criticism even possible?

Switch on the lights.

Do we not recall the anguish of King Richard II when he and Bolingbroke clutched either side of a single crown? (IV, i, 172- 179) Were those two able to rule jointly? Theirs is the sort of government Lear proposes.

Lear's avowed purpose is to make for a smooth administrative transition at his retirement and to prevent civil strife. (I ,i, 43-45) Yet there is no evidence that Britain has been afflicted in recent memory with dissension or discord. The text alludes to no uprisings or rebellions. One individual has ruled successfully. Now as he steps down he would secure the common weal and shield it from "future strife" by . . . *dividing* it into three parts, each to be ruled by a fractious son-in-law. As internal policy that is unthinkable. One doesn't take a

perfectly fine fiefdom that's been functioning well under a firm and conscientious monarch and chop it into three regions each under the control of an envious satrap – certainly not as a device for securing the blessings of domestic tranquility. Remember the travails of Rome under Octavius, Lepidus and Antony. Balkanization is precisely the opposite of order and cohesion, an incomprehensible and fatal blunder. It's pathological. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, then, the story of Lear's madness begins not with the flatteries of Regan and Goneril and Cordelia's silence, but earlier, in the context of the dramatic action, with the King's big bang, his act of wanton disruption of his own realm. Instead of preventing future quarrels, this bizarre fragmentation fairly guarantees them. The sovereign has taken leave of his senses. Yet no one protests the vivisection of the nation, no one except the Fool, whose protest comes too late. (I, iv, 140-147) As in *Sleeping Beauty*, everyone is dozing. Courtiers, theater goers, readers and our most astute literary critics all snore soundly as anarchy is ignited. Seeds of destruction are already germinating as oaths of love and fidelity are sworn. From the moment he sweeps onstage with his retinue Lear is wandering in infernal darkness.

Catastrophe is born not on the heath, then, but in privy chamber. And the way we respond to opening events colors our reading of the entire play, our reception and understanding of its characters. Though the world thinks so, Lear doesn't become "mad" at the discourtesies of Regan and Goneril. He's already laboring under mental and emotional thunderheads as he utters his first syllables onstage. Bedlam is there, and all the devils loose. So long as *King Lear* is viewed as the story of a lunacy induced by cruel, ungrateful daughters it is fatally misunderstood. Instead of diagnosing the patient, we form an alliance with him and attribute his "madness" *as he does* to mistreatment by his daughters (Cordelia included). Lear's insanity seems strangely infectious.

What is to be done? The defective product must be recalled, better late than never. Our reading must be scrapped. What *King Lear* demands of us is nothing less than a thorough purgation or scouring, an unreading of what we've been taught by misguided pundits and authorities, our eminent textual somnambulists and zombies. What follows are a few notes towards the demolition and reconstruction of this remarkable work of dramaturgy. Our aim to inoculate against any interpretation which turns out to be an extension of the dream itself.

This old man is not merely retiring, nor is his action a conventional donation or setting of a trust account. He is abdicating the throne. "We will divest us of both rule, interest of territory, cares of state . . . ." (I, i, 49-50) Speaking to Cornwall and Albany, he makes the performative utterance: "I do invest you jointly with my power, pre-eminence, and all the large effects that troop with majesty." (I, i, 130-131) With the disposal of Cordelia to the

King of France, it is finished. Lear is no longer King of Britain. But query, having divested himself of rule and invested Cornwall and Albany with all his territories – no longer King – by what authority does he banish the Earl of Kent? It would seem the cares of state still are his. How so? Has Lear gone gently into that good night of superannuation, or does he still cling stubbornly and unaccountably to the vestments of "authority"? (I, iv, 30) This issue becomes central and runs throughout the play, a play in which the only *King* of Britain is Lear. Yet his legal status and the nature and character of the regime following his seeming resignation are rarely if ever taken up by commentators. He remains, curiously, more "foul" than fish.

As for the apportionment of the kingdom, there is more that deserves our attention. The heirs' speeches and their father's bequests form a comic triptych reminiscent of the rigged casket game in *The Merchant of Venice*: each daughter must pronounce a *pro forma* expression of filial devotion, the most fulsome of which will win the grand prize. In other words, the "thirds" to be bestowed are not of the same measure. The grossest flatterer will emerge the victor. The outcome, however, is predetermined by Lear, who is known to favor Cordelia, the youngest. (I, i, 82-83; 1, i, 123; 1, i, 289) There is ambiguity in Lear's locution, "our largest bounty." (I, i, 52) Goneril bursts forth with the expected rhetoric and receives a large portion of land. Regan does the same and receives: "this ample third of our fair kingdom, no less in space, validity, and pleasure than that conferred on Goneril." (I, i, 80-83) For Cordelia, however, has been set aside "*a third* ***more opulent***" than what the elder siblings have received. (I, i, 86) Do we need to be hit over the head to apprehend this? Is this the sort of magnanimity reasonably calculated to avoid dissension and civil strife? It is pompous lunacy. For suppose that Cordelia fails to outshine her sisters in her praise and affection for the father? What then? Regan and Goneril have already been given smaller "thirds." If Cordelia's own verbiage does not outdo that of her rivals, she'll still have the largest portion and Lear will be covered in embarrassment. That is the risk he takes, a part of his "darker purpose."

There is something else, too. Lear and Cordelia are not strangers to one another. If she is his favorite he knows her well. This is his own child, after all. But her personality is quite unlike that of her sisters. Is not Cordelia Cordelia? Why then affect surprise and dismay when she responds as anyone familiar with her might expect? Is Kent surprised? Is the Fool? Not at all. What surprises them is Lear's reaction on hearing Cordelia's predictable modesty. The whole episode is a charade burdened by favoritism and short-sighted inequities. Calling disproportionate thirds "equal" was already courting disaster.

This brings us to confront directly the relationship of Lear and Cordelia, a topic gingerly sidestepped by standard literary criticism. The King is plainly a widower. Goneril and Regan

live with their husbands, Albany and Cornwall. It must be presumed that as late as the first scene Cordelia still resides in the patriarchal manse, without the intercessory ministrations of a mother. Given her subdued and Spartan demeanor, is their encounter in Scene 1 the first time Cordelia's simplicity and honesty would have been experienced by Lear? Impossible. Only received on the level of a fairy tale would his actions make the slightest sense. Transposed to real life we would need to re-think the whole matter. Additional information would help. When did Lear's wife die? How long has he been a single parent? No nurse is mentioned, as there is, say, in *Romeo and Juliet*. What's going on? Why would he expect *any* words from Cordelia out of keeping with what he has always heard from her? Moreover, it is important to ask, given her sober demeanor and Lear's importunacy, how in the world did *she* become his favorite? Favorite? Shouldn't that be Regan, who tells everybody within earshot that there is nothing whatsoever in life that gives her pleasure and satisfaction except her "dear highness' love"? (I, i, 69-76) Logically the truly beloved daughter should have been Regan. How would Cordelia have prevailed? What is implied in such a narrative?

As Bruno Bettelheim argued in 1976 in *The Uses of Enchantment* (Vintage, 2010), exposure to fairy tales, which treat many violent and upsetting themes, has a salutary and instructive effect on youngsters, allowing them to process in a safe way considerations that might cause distress if approached through a reality-based discourse. *Little Red Riding Hood*, for example, which involves a little girl's adventures with mother, grandparent, woodsman and a talking animal, touches in its symbolic depths the problematic motif of the good (nurturing) father versus the bad (threatening, sexually aggressive) one, allowing the infant imagination to achieve balance and integration through the resolution of the narrative. This may also be true of great works of art such as *King Lear* which are based in part on such pictorial materials. Get out the fluoroscope. Behind Lear's rage at Cordelia, then, can we not discern the outlines of an unhealthy propinquity of father and daughter? This has led to unidentified physical and emotional intimacies. As Elizabeth Archibald comments, "the great majority of literary incestuous fathers are rulers." (Archibald, 146) As Lear "crawl[s] toward death," he wishes to do so unburdened of the guilt those intimacies have occasioned. (I, i, 40-41) The mechanism for achieving this relief is two-fold: first, he will give to the child whose privacy and integrity he has invaded and whose psychic closure he has triggered an early and jumbo-sized inheritance capable of attracting the suitor of her choice, and second, her projected praise and thanks will serve as a token of the forgiveness he needs so badly. This is the rationale that lies in the "dark" recesses of the royal mind as it fashions the pageant of Lear's departure.

The theme of royal incest is familiar to Shakespeare scholars, and was discussed in some

detail in *Hamlet Made Simple and Other Essays*, New English Review Press, 2013.

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