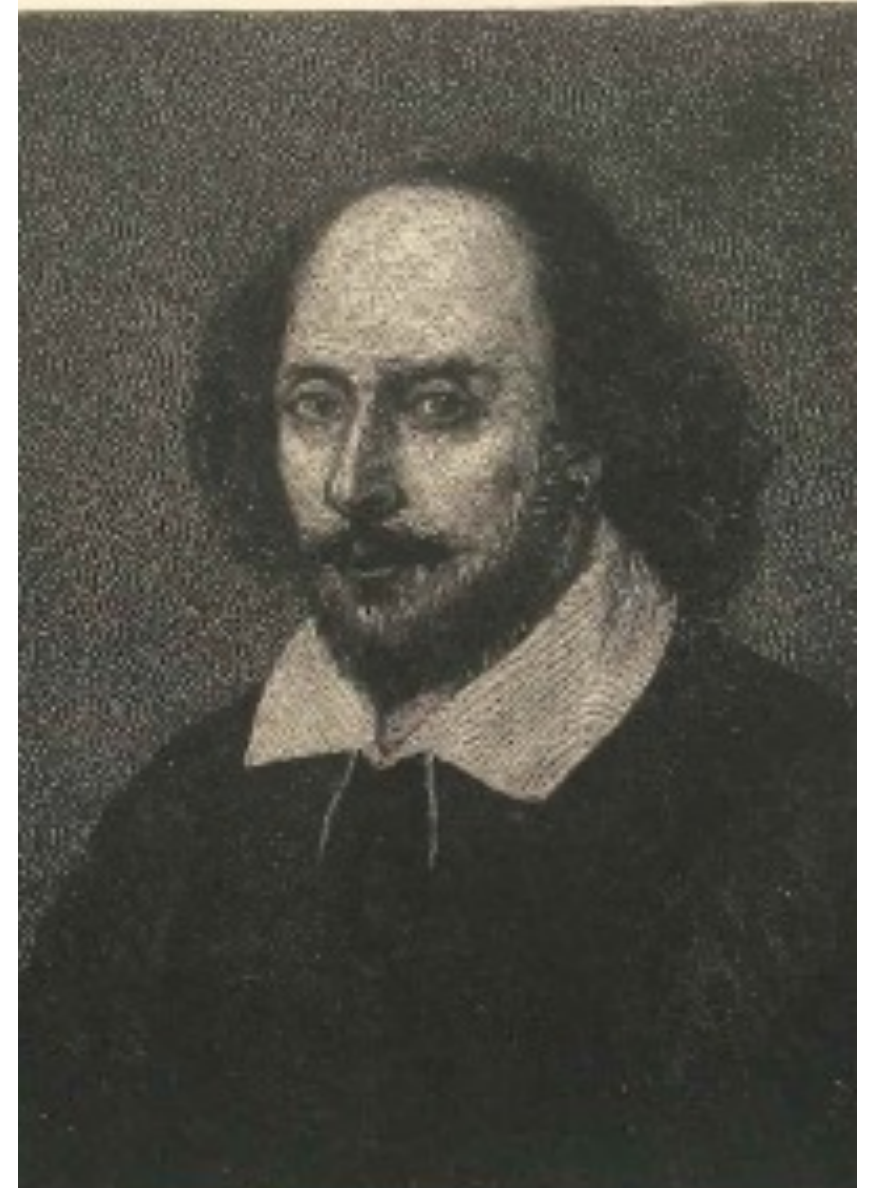


*William Shakespeare's  
King Lear:  
The Nothingness of  
Forgiveness*



VANDERBILT OSHER  
LIFELONG LEARNING INSTITUTE- Fall 2023

**READING SHAKESPEARE WITH FILM**  
Russ Heldman – heldman.russ@gmail.com  
*(The Complete Pelican Shakespeare, Eds. 2002; 1997)*

October 17, 2023 (“The Nothingness of Forgiveness”) **King Lear** (*circa 1606*)

Film: Peter Brook – Paul Scofield (1970)

Film: Trevor Nunn / Chris Hunt – Ian McKellen (2008)

Clips from:

Act I, Scene 1

Pages:

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Act III, Scene 2, lines 1 – 26

12-13

Act III, Scene 4, lines 28 – 103

14

Act IV, Scene 6, lines 92 – 199

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Act IV, Scene 7, lines 44 – 84

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Act V, Scene 3, lines 1 – 37

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Act V, Scene 3, lines 258 – 327

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“This is Shakespeare” Emma Smith

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”Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human” Harold Bloom

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“Shakespeare and The Nature of Man” Theodore Spencer

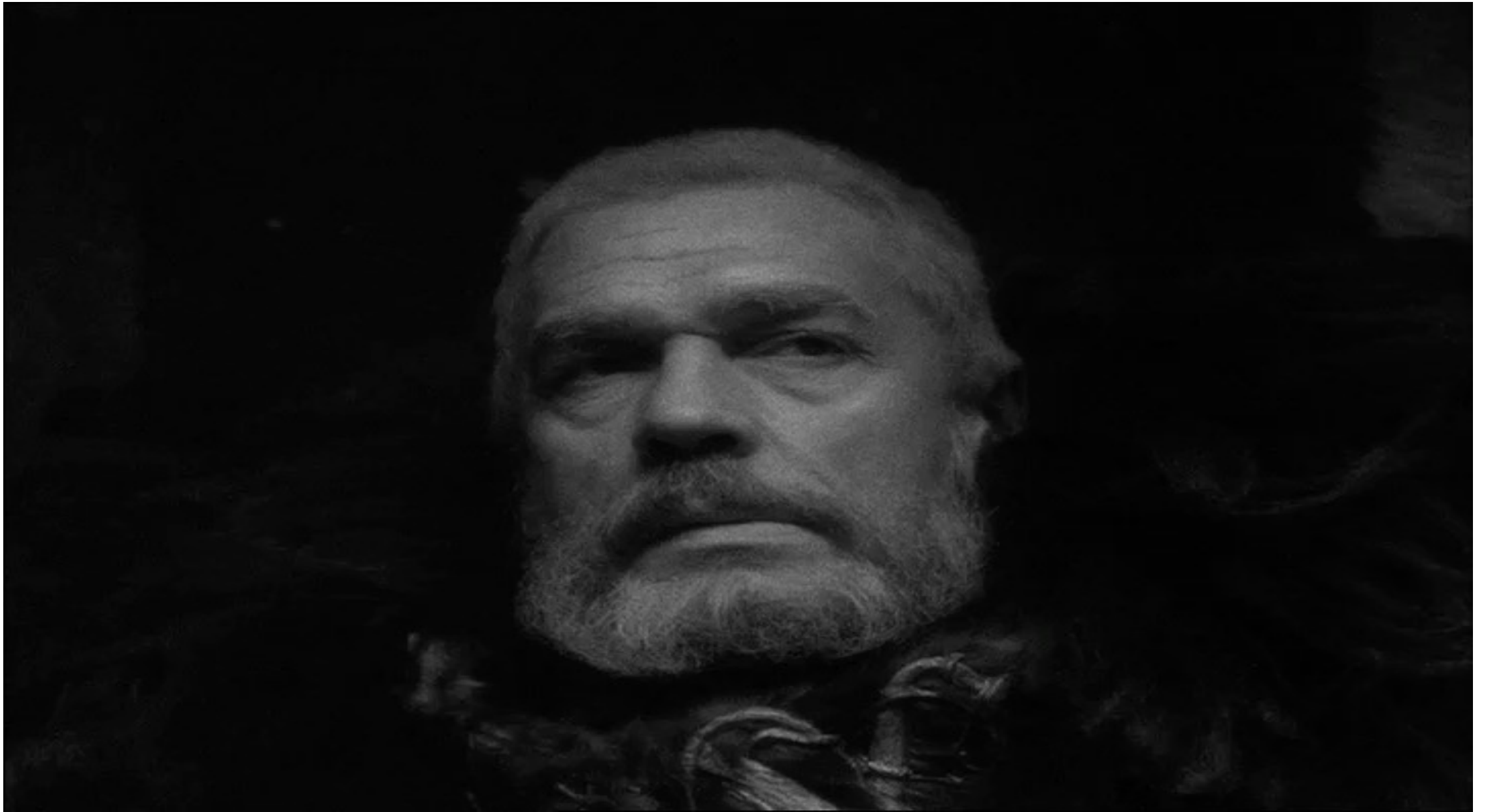
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“The Meaning of Shakespeare” Vol 2 Harold Goddard

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“Cordelia’s Farewell”  
Edwin Austin Abbey



**King Lear**  
**Act I. 1**

LEAR: Know that we have divided  
In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent 38  
To shake all cares and business from our age,  
Conferring them on younger strengths while we  
Unburdened crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall  
And you, our no less loving son of Albany,  
We have this hour a constant will to publish 43  
Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife 44  
May be prevented now.  
The princes, France and Burgundy,  
Great rivals in our youngest daughters' love,  
here are to be answered. Tell me, my  
Daughters —  
Which of you shall we say doth love us most,  
Goneril, our eldest born, speak first. 53

GONERIL: Sir, I love you more that word can wield the 55  
matter, 56  
Dearer than eyesight, space, or liberty,  
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,  
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;  
As much as child e'er loved, or father found;  
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable. 60  
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

LEAR: Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,  
We make thee lady. To thine and Albany's issues 66  
Be this perpetual. — What says our second daughter, 67  
Our dearest Regan, wife of Cornwall?

REGAN: I am made of that self-mettle as my sister  
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart 70  
I find she names my very deed of love; 71  
Only she comes to short, that I profess  
Myself an enemy to all other joys  
Which the most precious square of sense 74  
possesses. And find I am alone felicitate 75  
In your dear Highness' love.

LEAR: To thee and thine hereditary ever  
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,  
No less in space, validity, and pleasure 81  
Than that conferred on Goneril. — Now, our joy,  
Although our last and least, to whose young love 83  
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy 84  
Strive to be interest, what can you say to draw 85  
A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak.

CORDELIA: Nothing, my lord.

LEAR: Nothing?

CORDELIA: Nothing.

LEAR: Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

CORDELIA: I love your Majesty  
According to my bond, no more nor less.

93

LEAR: But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA: Ay, my good lord.

LEAR: So young and so untender?

CORDELIA: So you, my lord, and true.

LEAR: Let it be so. Thy truth, then, by thy dower,  
For by the sacred radiance of the sun,  
Thy mysteries of Hecate and the night, 110  
By all the operation of the orbs 111  
From whom we do exist and cease to be,  
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
And as a stranger to my heart and me  
Hold thee from this forever. 116  
Come not between the dragon and his wrath. 122  
Cornwall and Albany,  
With my two daughters' dowers digest the third.  
I do invest you jointly with my power,  
Preeminence, and all the large effects 131  
That troop with majesty. Ourself by monthly course, 132  
With reservation of an hundred knights  
By you to be sustained, 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.



KENT: Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?  
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,

LEAR: The bow is bent and drawn. Make from the shaft. 143

KENT: Let it fall. 144

LEAR: Kent, on thy life, no more.

KENT: My life I never held but as a pawn 155  
To wage against thine enemies. 156

LEAR: Out of my sight!

KENT: See better, Lear. 158

LEAR: Now, by Apollo —

KENT: Now, by Apollo, king,  
I'll tell thee thou does evil.

LEAR: Take thy reward. 172

Turn thy hated back upon our kingdom;  
If thy banished trunk be found in our dominion, 177  
The moment is thy death.

Better thou hadst not been born 233  
Than not t' have pleased me better. 234

FRANCE: Be it lawful  
I take up what's cast away.  
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon.  
Thy dow'rless daughter, King, is Queen of France.

LEAR: Thou hast her France;  
Let her be thine; for we have no such daughter  
Nor shall ever see that face of hers again.  
Therefore be gone  
Without our grace, our love, our benison.



Lear. "Thou hast her, France; let her be thine; for we  
Have no such daughter: nor shall ever see  
That face of hers again.—Therefore be gone  
Without our grace, our love, our benison.—"

King Lear. Act I. Scene I.



Leont. "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout  
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!"

King Lear. Act 3, Scene 2.

Page 60.

King Lear  
Act III. 2

LEAR: Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks. Rage, blow.  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.  
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
Singe my white head. And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,  
Crack Nature's moulds, all germains spill at once,  
That makes ingrateful man .

2

3

4

8

FOOL: O nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better  
Than this rain-water out o' door. Good nuncle, in ; ask  
Thy daughters blessing. Here's a night pities neither  
Wise men nor fools.

10

LEAR: Rumble thy bellyful. Spit, fire. Spout, rain.  
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters  
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness. 16  
I never gave you kingdom, called you children;  
You owe me no subscription. The left fall 18  
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,  
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man. 19  
But yet I call you servile ministers, 21  
That will with two pernicious daughters join  
Your high-engendered battles' gainst a head 23  
So old and white as this. O, ho! 'tis foul.

FOOL: He that has a house to put 's head in has a good headpiece

LEAR: Close pent-up guilts 57  
Rive your concealing continents and cry 58  
These dreadful summoners grace. **I am a man** 59  
**More sinned against than sinning.**

King Lear  
Act III. 4

FOOL: This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

EDGARD: Take heed o' th' foul fiend; obey thy parents;  
Keep thy words' justice; swear not; commit not with 77  
Man's sworn spouse; set not thy sweet heart on proud  
Array. Tom's acold.

LEAR: What hast thou been?

EDGAR:  
False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox 88  
In stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey.  
Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray 90  
Thy poor heart to woman. And defy the foul fiend. Still through  
The hawthorn blows the cold wind.

LEAR: Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy 96  
Uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no

More than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the 98  
Worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool,

The cat no perfume. **Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated,** 100

**Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no** 101

**More but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art** 102

**Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.** 103

King Lear  
Act IV. 6

EDGAR:  
Bear free and patient thoughts. 80  
*Enter Lear [mad, bedecked with weeds].*  
But who comes here?  
The safer sense will ne'er accommodate 81  
His master thus. 82

LEAR: No, they cannot touch me for coming; I am the 83  
King himself.

EDGAR:  
**O thou side-piercing sight!**

LEAR:  
**Nature's above the art in that respect.** There's your 86  
press money. That fellow handles his bow like a 87  
crow-keeper. Draw me a clothier's yard. Look, look, a mouse! 88  
Peace, peace; this piece of toasted cheese will do't.  
There's my gauntlet; I'll prove it on a giant. Bring up 90  
The brown bills. O, well flown, bird. I' th' clout, I' th' 91  
Clout-hewgh! 92  
Give the word.

EDGAR:  
Sweet marjoram. 93

LEAR:  
Pass.

GLOUCESTER:  
I know that voice.

LEAR:  
Ha! Goneril with a white beard? They flattered me  
Like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard 97  
Ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to 98  
Everything that I said! 'Ay' and 'no' too was no good 99  
Divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the  
Wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not  
Peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt  
'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words. They  
Told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie – I am not ague-proof. 104

GLOUCESTER:  
The trick of that voice I do well remember. 105  
Is't not the King?



LEAR:  
Ay, every inch a king.  
When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.  
I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?  
Adultery? 108  
Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery? No.  
Then wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly  
Does lecher in my sight. 112  
Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son  
Was kinder to his father than my daughters  
Got' tween the lawful sheets. 115  
To't, the luxury, pell-mell, for I lack soldiers. 116  
Behold yond simp'ring dame,  
Whose face between her forks presages snow, 118  
That minces virtue, and does shake the head 119  
To hear of pleasure's name. 120  
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't 121  
With a more riotous appetite.  
Down from the waist they are Centaurs, 123  
Though women all above.  
But to the girdle do the gods inherit, 125  
Beneath is all the fiend's.  
There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous  
Pit; burning, scalding, stench, consumption. Fie, fie  
Fie! Pah, pah! Give me an ounce of civet; good 129  
Apothecary, sweeten my imagination! There's money for thee.

GLOUCESTER:  
O, let me kiss that hand.

LEAR:  
Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality. 132

GLOUCESTER:  
O ruined piece of nature; this great world 133  
Shall so wear out to naught. Dost thou know me?

LEAR:  
I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou  
Squiny at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not 136  
Love. Read thou this challenge; mark but the penning of it.

GLOUCESTER:  
Were all thy letters suns, I could not see.

EDGAR: *[aside]*  
I would not take this from report – it is, 139  
And my heart breaks at it.

LEAR:  
Read.

GLOUCESTER:  
What, with the case of eyes? 142

LEAR:  
O, ho, are you there with me? No, eyes in your head, 143  
Nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy  
Case, your purse in a light; **yet you see how this world** 145  
**Goes.**

GLOUCESTER:  
**I see it feelingly.**

LEAR:

What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes  
With no eyes. Look with thine ears. See who yond justice  
Rails upon yond simple thief. Hark in thine ear: change  
Places and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is  
The thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

150

151

GLOUCESTER:

Ay, sir.

LEAR:

And the creature run from the cur. There thou  
Mightst behold the great image of authority – a dog's  
Obeyed in office.  
Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!  
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thy own back.  
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind  
For which thou whip'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.  
Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurless breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it.  
None does offend, none – I say none! I'll able'em.  
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power  
To seal th' accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes  
And, like a scurvy politician, seem.  
To see the things thou dost not. Now, now, now, now!  
Pull off my boots, Harder, harder! So.

155

157

159

160

161

163

164

165

166

168

EDGAR:  
O, matter and impertinency mixed;  
Reason in madness. 171

LEAR:  
If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.  
I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester.  
Thou must be patient. We came crying hither;  
Thou know'st, the first time that we smell the air.  
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark.

GLOUCESTER:  
Alack, alack the day.

LEAR:  
When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools. — This' a good block. 180  
It were a delicate stratagem to shoe 181  
A troop of horse with felt. I'll put't in proof, 182  
And when I have stol'n upon these son-in-laws,  
Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!  
*Enter a Gentleman [with Attendants].*

GENTLEMAN:  
O, here he is! Lay hand upon him. — Sir.  
Your most dear daughter —

LEAR:  
No rescue? What, a prisoner? I am even  
The natural fool of fortune. Use me well; 188  
You shall have ransom. Let me have surgeons;  
I am cut to th' brains. 190

GENTLEMAN:  
You shall have anything.

LEAR:  
No seconds? All myself?  
Why, this would make a man a man of salt, 192  
To use his eyes for garden waterpots,  
[Ay, and laying autumn's dust.] I will die bravely,  
Like a smug bridegroom. What, I will be jovial! 195  
Come, come, I am a king; masters, know you that?

GENTLEMAN:  
You are a royal one, and we obey you.

LEAR:  
Then there's life in't. Come, and you get it, you shall 198  
Get it by running. Sa, sa, sa, sa! 199  
*Exit [running, followed by Attendants].*

GENTLEMAN:  
A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,  
Past speaking of in a king. **Thou hast one daughter** 202  
**Who redeems Nature from the general curse**  
**Which twain have brought her to.** 203

EDGAR:  
Hail, gentle sire.

GENTLEMAN:  
Sir, speed you. What's your will? 204

EDGAR:  
Do you hear aught, sir, of a battle toward? 205

GENTLEMAN:

Most sure and vulgar. Every one hears that  
Which can distinguish sound.

206

EDGAR:

But, by your favor,  
How near's the other army?

GENTLEMAN:

Near and on speedy foot. The main descry  
Stands on the hourly thought.

209

EDGAR:

I thank you, sir. That's all.

GENTLEMAN:

Though that the Queen on special cause is here,  
Her arm is moved on.

EDGAR:

I thank you, sir. *Exit [Gentleman]*

GLOUCESTER:

You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;  
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again  
To die before you please.

214

EDGAR:  
Well pray you, father.

GLOUCESTER:  
Now, good sir, what are you?

EDGAR:  
A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows, 217  
Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows, 218  
Am pregnant to good pity. Give me your hand; 219  
I'll lead you to some biding. 220

GLOUCESTER:  
Hearty thanks.  
The bounty and the benison of heaven 221  
To boot, and boot.

But before coming to that, we must say a word about Cordelia. The extraordinary vividness of her portrayal, considering the brevity of her role, has often been commented on. The beauty of her nature-its sincerity and its combined strength and tenderness-goes far toward explaining the clarity of impression. But it is the fact that never for an instant do we forget her that compensates for the infrequency of her physical presence. Shakespeare sees to this in several ways. The antithesis with her sisters, to begin with, brings her to mind whenever they are on the stage. His sense of guilt with regard to her keeps her perpetually in Lear's memory-and so in ours. And the Fool's love for her, both on its own account and because he is forever insinuating thoughts of her into the King's mind, works the same way. Kent, too, makes his contribution.

Harold Goddard  
"The Meaning of Shakespeare"  
Vol. II, P.155





# King Lear

## Act IV. 7

CORDELIA: How does my royal lord? How fares your Majesty?

LEAR: You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave.

Thou are a soul in bliss; but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead.

47

CORDELIA: Sir, do you know me?

LEAR: You are a spirit, I know. When did you die?

CORDELIA: Still far wide!

50

DOCTOR: He's scarce awake. Let him alone a while.

LEAR: Where have I been? Where am I?

KENT: In your own kingdom, sir.

LEAR: Pray, do not mock me.  
I am a very foolish fond old man,  
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;  
And, to deal plainly,  
I fear that I am not in my perfect mind.  
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;  
But I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant  
What place this is; all the skill I have  
Remembers not these garments; nor do I know  
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;  
For as I am a man, I think this lady  
To be my child Cordelia.

60

CORDELIA: And so I am! I am!

70

LEAR: Be your tears wet? Yes, faith.  
I know you do not love me; for your sisters  
Have (as I do remember) done me wrong.  
You have some cause, they have not.

CORDELIA: **No cause, no cause.**

LEAR: You must bear with me.  
Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish.



King Lear  
Act V. 3

CORDELIA: \_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'th' cage.

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down

10

And ask of thee forgiveness. And so we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

12

At gilded butterflies, and we'll hear poor rogues

Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too —

Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out —

And take upon us the mystery of things

16

As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,

17

In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones

18

That ebb and flow by the moon.

EDMUND: Take them away.

LEAR: Have I caught thee

He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven

And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes.

The goodyears shall devour them, flesh and fell,

Ere they shall make us weep!

EDMUND: Take them away!

LEAR: We'll see 'em starved first.



# King Lear Act V. 3

LEAR: How, howl, how! O, you are a man of stones.  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever.  
I know when one is dead, and when one lives.  
She's dead as earth.

LEAR: **This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so,  
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows  
That ever have I felt.** 263  
264

KENT: Is this the promised end?

EDGAR: Or image of that horror? 265

LEAR: A plague upon your murders, traitors all;  
I might have saved her; now she's gone forever.  
Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little.  
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,  
Gentle, and low — an excellent thing in woman.  
I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.  
Did I not, fellow?  
Who are you?  
Mine eyes are not o' th' best, I'll tell you straight. 280  
Are you not Kent? 281



KING LEAR AND CORNELIA.

Lear. "Lend me a looking glass;  
If that her breath will mist or stain the glass,  
Why, then she lives."

King Lear. Act 5, Scene 3.

KENT: The same, your servant Kent.	284
LEAR: He's dead and rotten.	
KENT: No, my good lord; I am the very man.	
LEAR: I'll see that straight.	288
KENT: That from your first of difference and decay Have followed your sad steps.	289
LEAR: You are welcome hither.	
KENT: Nor no man else.	291
LEAR: And my poor fool is hanged: no, no, no life? Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more, Never, never, never, never, never. O, do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips, Look there, look there --	306



EDGAR: Look up, my lord.

KENT: Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him

314

That would upon the rack of this world

315

Stretch him out longer.

ALBANY: Friends of my soul, you twain

Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.

KENT: I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.

My master calls me; I must not say no.

**EDGAR: The weight of this sad time we must obey.**

**324**

**Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.**

**The oldest hath borne most; we that are young**

**Shall never see so much, nor live so long.**

## “This is Shakespeare”

Emma Smith

(pages 225-227)

The earliest sustained critical response to Shakespeare come when his plays are adapted to the newly restored theatres after 1660 (the London theatres had been shut during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, and were reopened when Charles II returned from France to take up the throne). The Restoration period saw a number of Shakespeare plays reworked to suit the linguistic, structural and moral taste of the new age. What happened to *King Lear* in this dispensation is famous and exemplary. Nahum Tate, Irish poet dramatist, and later Poet Laureate, rewrote the play in 1681 as *The History of King Lear*. Shorter and more cheerful than Shakespeare's, this version notably reworks the ending of *King Lear*. Tate leaves a chastened but restored Lear and Gloucester alive at the end, men who have learned from their experiences of doubting those who truly love them. The two faithful children of these parallel fathers, Cordelia and Edgar, are married. Tate concludes with Lear's invitation to 'pass our short reserves of Time / In calm Reflections on our Fortunes past, / Cheer'd with relation of the prosperous Reign / Of this celestial Pair'. It's easy in hindsight to see that these alterations are partly motivated by aesthetic taste and partly by politics. Tate explained that he had alighted on 'one Expedient to rectifie what was wanting in the Regularity of Probability of the Tale, which was to run through the whole a Love betwixt Edgar and Cordelia'. This also 'necessarily threw me on making the Tale conclude in a Success to the innocent distrest Person': this new narrative thus conforms to artistic norms of 'regularity' and to moral norms about how 'innocent' characters should be treated. The theme of the king restored to his throne is clearly a major topical theme for Tate, writing in the restored monarchy of Charles II's reign (seeing how Restoration authors routinely rewrote Shakespeare clarifies that his plays are much more interested in dethroning than restoring kings). Although it's become a parodic byword for flat-footed historical adaptations of Shakespeare, Tate's *The History of King Lear*, like all adaptations, is also a revealing form of criticism. He's engaged in a more confident or extreme version of what we all do when we read: rewriting the text as we engage with it.

Implicit in Tate's reworking is the idea that Shakespeare's original ending, in which Lear bears on stage the body of Cordelia and, heartbroken, dies at her side, is unbearable. His amelioration of that conclusion gained its critical stamp of approval when it was quoted by Samuel Johnson in the General Introduction to his important 1765 edition of Shakespeare's plays. Johnson is also offended by Shakespeare's conclusion, in which 'has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles'. He therefore endorses Nahum Tate's century-old adaptation: 'the public has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add any thing to the general sufferage, I might relate, that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor.' For Johnson, and for the public, Tate's version was preferable to Shakespeare's, because it ameliorated the shock of the ending. Johnson firmly locates his objection to Shakespeare's *Lear* in the figure of the martyred Cordelia, arguing that Shakespeare has overstepped the boundaries of artistic and ethical expectation, boundaries reinstated by Tate's reworking. To be 'so shocked' by Cordelia's death is, for Johnson, a reason to abjure the play. For eighteenth-century tastes, Shakespeare's play was too unwarrantedly cruel, contrary to ideas of justice, artistic pleasure and historical accuracy. The answer to that old chestnut: 'Why does tragedy give pleasure?' is, in this case – actually, it doesn't, so let's rewrite it so that it can.

Inevitably, Dr Johnson's discomfort at Shakespeare's *King Lear* was on precisely the grounds that the next generation found so electrifying. Neoclassical preoccupations with 'regularity' and 'probability' and the moral obligation to reward virtue and punish vice were swept away by the Romantic embrace of emotional extremity as a version of the sublime. As Edmund Burke wrote in his 1757 treatise on aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime*, 'whatever is in any sort of terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'. That shock that was so unwelcome to Johnson on reading the end of *King Lear* is here elevated into a state of philosophical and physiological fulfilment; the job of great art is to approach that excess of feeling through its encounter with 'terrible objects'. Burke observes that 'there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity'. While the theatre retained its preference for Tate's revisionist *Lear*, Romantic readers began to rediscover the delicious terrors of Shakespeare's original.

## “Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human”

Harold Bloom  
(pages 477- 478)

Presumably Shakespeare was read aloud to from the Bishop’s Bible in his youth, and later read the Geneva Bible for himself in his maturity. Since he wrote *King Lear* as a servant of King James I, who had the reputation of being the wisest fool in Christendom, perhaps Shakespeare’s conception of Lear was influenced by James’s particular admiration for Solomon, wisest of kings. I admit that not many among us instantly associate Solomon and Lear, but there is crucial textual evidence that Shakespeare himself made the association, by having Lear allude to the following great passage in the Wisdom of Solomon, 7: 1-6.

I Myself am also mortal and a man like all other, and am come of him that was first made of the earth.  
And in my mothers womb was I facioned to be flesh in ten months: I was broght together into blood of the sede of man, and by the pleasure that cometh with slepe.  
And when I was borne, I received the comune aire, and fel upon the earth, which is of like nature, crying & weping at the first as all other do.

I was nourished in swaddling clothes, and with cares.  
For there is no King that had anie other beginning of birth.  
All men then have one entrance unto life, and a like going out.

[*Geneva Bible*]

That is the unmistakable text echoed in Lear’s shattering sermon to Gloucester:

*Lear.* If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes;  
I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester;  
Thou must be patient; we came crying hither:  
Thou know’st the first time that we smell the air  
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee: mark.  
*[Lear takes off his crown of weeds and flowers].*

*Glou.* Alack, alack the day!

*Lear.* When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools

[ IV. vi. 174-81]

## “Shakespeare and The Nature of Man”

Theodore Spencer  
(pages 149-152)

As we have seen, Shakespeare uses his consciousness of the difference between appearance and reality in many places and in many connections throughout the play; it is particularly striking in relation to what happens to Lear himself. He begins with all the assurance of long-established authority, his speeches are nearly all imperatives, but one by one his pretensions are stripped away. He gives away his power, his hundred knights are cut to fifty, to twenty-five, to ten, to five--until Regan’s “What need one?” drives him to the verge of madness:

O! reason not the need; our basest beggars  
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:  
Allow not nature more than nature needs,  
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s.

(ii, 4,267)

And on the bare heath life does become as “cheap as beast’s.” For when he sees the disguised Edgar, as the storm still thunders, Lear finds out what man is really like, and he starts to tear off even the covering of his garments:

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here’s three on’s are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come; unbutton here. (iii.4,105)

This stripping off of layers of appearance to arrive at the bare truth is the final and tragic expression of that common Shakespearean theme which derides all affectation, as Berowne derides it, which questions the validity of ceremony, as Henry V questions it, and which tries to describe man as he really is. Lear's description is a terrible one, but even in this play, dark as it is, it is not the whole answer. **The movement is not all downward, there is a counter-movement upward. Lear himself is not merely stripped, he is purged, and hence there is a possibility of redemption.** The storm makes him think, for the first time in his eighty years, of what happens to "poor naked wretches" in "seasons such as these":

O! I have ta'en

Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just.

(iii, 4,32)

And thoughts of this kind make possible his later recovery into love.

But if we are to understand the full dramatic force of the scenes on the heath, we must imagine their effect in the theater, for in spite of Lamb's remarks, Shakespeare obviously thought of the play in practical dramatic terms; it is as wrong to think of *King Lear* apart from *a stage as it is to think Ninth Symphony a part from* an orchestra. And these particular scenes should be imagined in relation to the opening of the play; the contrast of visual impression, the contrast in *tableau*, must be as concretely perceived by the eye as the contrast of rhythm and word are heard by the ear. In the opening scene Lear is surrounded by his court: a page holds the gold crown on a velvet cushion, the King of France, the Duke of Burgundy and a crowd of brilliantly dressed courtiers all wait upon his imperious commands. But in the heath scenes his only companions are a fool and a madman. Kent and Gloucester may be looking out for him, but one is in disguise and the other is in disgrace; on the heath it is to the "bitter Fool" and the "loop'd and window'd raggedness" of Edgar that Lear must turn for companionship.

There the king *is* but as the beggar.

We see him reduced to relying on the lowest dregs of human nature, his mind in pieces, trying to get to reality by stripping off his clothes.

Never before or since has there been such dramatic writing as this. In presenting man's nature as below any rational level, Shakespeare's control of poetic and dramatic counterpoint enables him as it were to transcend man's nature. Though Lear, Edgar and the Fool are human beings in whom we can believe, what Shakespeare makes them say is beyond normal human speech, and we are in a world where comedy and tragedy are the same. The real madness of Lear, the assumed madness of Edgar, the half-madness of the Fool all play against one another to make out of chaos an almost incredible harmony. These scenes suggest the technique of music as well as the technique of drama, the use of a dramatic orchestration so broad that it stretches our comprehension as no drama had stretched it before. It would have been impossible to foretell that the tradition of the morality play, and the tradition represented by *Gorboduc*, could ever be used and transcended as Shakespeare transcends it in *King Lear*.

Of course everything is not evil in *King Lear*; Kent, Edgar and, above all, Cordelia are, as good characters, very sharply set against the evil of Goneril, Regan and Edmund. And yet, be it noticed, in the world of *Lear*, goodness has *to hide*. Cordelia is banished, Kent has to disguise himself, Edgar not merely pretends to be mad, but unnecessarily conceals himself from his father in several other ways. And evil seems to conquer crushingly when Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms.

But if we look more closely at this last scene, we shall find that for Lear himself, evil does not conquer after all. For in spite of what he says--

I know when one is dead, and when one lives;  
She's dead as earth —

Lear cannot believe that this is the reality. He asks for a looking glass, he think that the feather he holds in his trembling hand is stirred by Cordelia's breath. Three times he alternates between believing that the reality is death and believing that the reality is life. The audience knows it is death, but Lear does not. For though, at the very end, he may say

No, no, no life!

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!

He suddenly cries out, before he dies,

Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips  
Look there, look there!

In his own mind she lives; and it is the discovery that Cordelia is alive, that life is the reality under the appearance, that the reality is *good*— it is this that breaks his heart at last. As A.C. Bradley says, “it seems almost beyond question that any actor is false to the text who does not attempt to express, in Lear's last accents and gestures and look, an unbearable *joy*.”



## The Meaning of Shakespeare”

### Vol 2

Harold Goddard

(pages 155-162)

But before coming to that, we must say a word about Cordelia. The extraordinary vividness of her portrayal, considering the brevity of her role, has often been commented on. The beauty of her nature-its sincerity and its combined strength and tenderness-goes far toward explaining the clarity of impression. But it is the fact that never for an instant do we forget her that compensates for the infrequency of her physical presence. Shakespeare sees to this in several ways. The antithesis with her sisters, to begin with, brings her to mind whenever they are on the stage. His sense of guilt with regard to her keeps her perpetually in Lear’s memory--and so in ours. And the Fool’s love for her, both on its own account and because he is forever insinuating thoughts of her into the King’s mind, works the same way. Kent, too, makes his contribution. The best verbal embodiment I can think of for what Shakespeare’s magic gradually turns Cordelia into in our imaginations is that starry phrase of Emily Dickenson’s: *Bright Absentee*. *Bright Absentee*: that is exactly what Cordelia is during most of the play, and the phrase is doubly appropriate when we remember that the Cordelia--like New England poetess employed it to express a not less spiritual love than Cordelia’s of a younger woman for an older man.

Now the fact and the success of this method of characterizing Cordelia generally felt, I believe, but what is not recognized is that Shakespeare used it not just because it fitted the plot and was effective, but for a minutely specific reason. The last scene of this fourth act, the most tenderly pathetic in the play, begins to apprise us of what that reason is.

The place is a tent in the French camp. Lear is brought in asleep, and we hear and see administered the two of all the medicines in the world that in addition to sleep itself can bring back his sanity, if any can: music and Cordelia's kiss. The King gives signs of returning consciousness. "He wakes." Says Cordelia to the Doctor, "speak to him." But like most of Shakespeare's physicians, this one has psychological insight as well as physiological skill, [ see Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 1] as his use of music as a healer has already hinted. "Madam, do you 'tis fittest." He replies to Cordelia. Whereupon, with a wisdom equal to his, she addressed her father by his former title, seeking thereby to preserve his mental continuity:

How does my royal lord? How fares your majesty?

But Lear believes he has awakened in hell and is gazing across a great gulf toward one in heaven:

LEAR: You do me wrong to take me out o' the gave:

Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead.

COR:

Sir, do you know me?

LEAR: You are a spirit, I know. When did you die?

Lear is "still, still, far wide!" as Cordelia expresses it under her breath. Yet in another sense, as it befits Cordelia alone not to know, Lear was never before so near the mark. Cordelia, *we* know. *is* a spirit, and, in that shining line, Shakespeare harvests the promise of four full acts which have been subtly contrived to convince us of the same truth. That which without being apprehensible to the senses is nevertheless undeniably present is a spirit--and that Cordelia has been through most of the play. Now she becomes *visibly* that to Lear, and we, as readers or spectators, must be able to enter into the old man's vision, or the effect is lost. Shakespeare has abundantly seen to it that we shall be able. Here is that unknown something that is indeed "dearer than eyesight"--something that is related to eyesight as eyesight it to blindness.

It is a pity to skip even one line of this transcendent scene. But we must. What a descent from king and warrior to this very foolish fond old man, fourscore and upward, who senses that he is not in his perfect mind! But what an ascent--what a perfect mind in comparison! He begins to realized vaguely that he is still on earth:

LEAR: Do not laugh at me;  
For, as I am a man, I thing this lady  
To be my child Cordelia

COR: And so I am, I am.

LEAR: Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.  
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.  
I know you do not love me; for your sisters  
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:  
You have some cause, they have not.

“No cause, no cause,” replies Cordelia: a divine lie that will shine forever beside the one Desdemona uttered with her last breath. “Am I in France?” Lear asks at last, coming back to earth. “In your own kingdom, sir,” Kent replies, meaning England, of course; but we know that Shakespeare means also that Lear is now in a kingdom not of this earth. And in a moment more the scene closes--and the act. It would seem as if poetry could go no further, and yet it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that this scene is nothing in comparison with what Shakespeare still has in store for us in the scene to which this one specifically leads up.

## X

The event which determines everything else in the last act is the battle between the British and the French. But what a battle! Except for the quick passage of the French forces over the stage, with an alarum and retreat, it all takes place behind the scenes and exactly one line of the text is devoted to the account of it:

King Lear hath lost, he and his daughter ta'en.

The brevity of it is a measure of how insignificant the mere clash of arms becomes in comparison with the moral convulsion that is its cause, and the strife between and within the human beings who are its agents. Shakespeare is here tracking Force into its agents. Shakespeare is here tracking Force into its inmost lair. To have stressed the merely military would have thrown his whole drama out of focus. Cordelia, for all her heroic strength, is no Joan of Arc, and it would have blotted our image of her to have spotted it with blood. Instead, we remember the final lines of *King John*, and, forgetting entirely that France is invading England, think only of the battle between love and treason. Even Albany, in effect fights on the other side. His hand is compelled to defend his land against the invader, but his heart is with King:

Where I could not be honest  
I never yet was valiant.

*Ubi honestas, ibi patria.*

Lear and Cordelia are led in captive. But for him, she would be ready to “out-frown false Fortune’s frown,” and, as it is, she is willing to confront her captors. But all that he begs is to spend the rest of his life with her in prison. That will be paradise enough and the words in which he tastes that joy in imagination are one of the crests of all poetry. Shakespeare in the course of his life had many times paid his ironic respects to worldly greatness and temporal power, but it may be doubted whether he ever did it more crushingly than in the last lines of this daydream of a broken old king who had himself so recently been one of “the great.” Lear’s words are elicited by Cordelia’s glorious challenge to Fortune, which exhibits her at the opposite pole from Hamlet with his weak attempt to rationalize Fate into the “divinity that shapes our ends.” Cordelia will be fooled by no such verbal self-deception. “For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” Cordelia’s ringing sentences are the very stuff into which the pugnacity of the race ought to be sublimated:

COR:                   We are not the first  
Who with best meaning have incurr’d the worst.  
For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down;  
Myself could else out-frown false Fortune’s frown.  
Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?

LEAR:               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; and we’ll talk with them too,  
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out;  
And take upon’s the mystery of things,  
As if we were God’s spies, *and we’ll wear out,  
In a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones  
That ebb and flow by the moon.*

Even Shakespeare seldom concentrated thought as he did in those last lines. “That ebb and flow be the moon”: what indeed is the rise and fall of the mighty but just that, the meaningless coming in and going out of a tide, never registering any gain, forever canceling itself out to all eternity? And who are these mighty: “Packs and sects of great ones.” Into those half-dozen words, the poet condenses his condemnation of three of the forces he most detests: (1) the mob, which is nothing but the human counterpart of the pack; (2) the spirit which, in opposition to the one that makes the whole world kin, puts its own sect or party above humanity; and (3) “greatness,” or worldly place and power. Under each or any of these dispensations the harmony man dreams of is denied. The mob is its destroyer. The sect or party is its defier. Power is its counterfeiter. And the extremes meet, for power rests on the conquest and subservience of the mob. In the face of such might, what can the imprisoned spirits of tenderness and beauty do? “We’ll wear out . . .” And it does indeed sometimes seem as if all they can do is to wear it out with patience, even as the weak ancestors of man outwore, by outlasting, the dynasties of now extinct “great ones,” the mastodons and saber-toothed tigers that dominated the earth in an earlier geologic age.

## Emily Dickinson

### I Tend My Flowers For Thee

I tend my flowers for thee  
Bright Absentee!  
My Fuchsia's Coral Seems  
Rip while the Sower dreams

Geraniums tint and spot  
Low Daisies dot.  
My Cactus splits her Beard  
To show her throat

Carnations tip their spice  
And Bees pick up  
A Hyacinth I hid  
Puts out a Ruffled Head  
And odors fall  
From flasks so small  
You marvel how they held

Globe Roses break their satin glake  
Upon my garden floor  
Yet thou not there  
I had a life they bore

Thy flower be gay  
Her Lord away!  
It ill becometh me  
I'll dwell in Calyx Gray  
How modestly always  
Thy Daisy  
Draped for thee!