
King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism

Author(s): Paul Delany

Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (May, 1977), pp. 429-440

Published by: [Modern Language Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461706>

Accessed: 15/03/2014 15:24

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PMLA*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism

MODERN CRITICISM of *King Lear* has emphasized that it is the most metaphysical of Shakespeare's tragedies. The main characters each have their own theory about their place in the world, the meaning of their experience, and the relation between man and the higher powers; the play's action is thus subjected to continuous philosophical scrutiny by those who take part in it. Critics have been much concerned with this intricate debate about human destiny, which is carried on through the play both explicitly and by the implications of dramatic action. Ultimately, it is argued, the play makes a "statement" about life, though there has been scant agreement on what the statement is. At one pole, Bradley and the neo-Christians have claimed that the play asserts the redemptive value of suffering; at the other, Jan Kott makes of it an absurdist drama about the *loss* of value that anticipates the modern apotheosis of the mode in the grotesque farces of Samuel Beckett.¹

It would be obtuse to deny the importance of this metaphysical preoccupation in *King Lear*; obviously the play does explore the universal significance of individual experiences of pain or loss. But critical discussion will remain unproductive and unresolvable so long as it limits the play's metaphysics to a separate and self-contained mode of discourse. We need to remember that the first quarto of *King Lear* (1608) calls it a "True Chronicle Historie" (i.e., a play based on matter from Holinshed or other early chronicles) and that it has much in common with Shakespeare's earlier works in the genre, especially the tetralogy that begins with *Richard II*. Its "philosophy" becomes clearer when approached by way of the contemporary meaning, for Shakespeare and his audience, of the political struggle that it dramatizes. My aim in this paper will be to present a reading of *King Lear* grounded on the premises of dialectical materialism and to suggest some implications for a general assessment of Shakespeare's political

outlook. In a single article I can only sketch the salient features of a complex historical situation; the close examination of the various divisions and crosscurrents within the class structure of Tudor England must be left to studies of wider scope.²

The analysis will take as its point of departure Marx's view of the English Renaissance as a transitional stage between the dominance of the feudal aristocracy and that of the commercial bourgeoisie, which consolidated its power over England's destiny in 1688. My concern will be with the effects of this transition on social and personal relations: that is, with shifts in consciousness that pertain to the cultural "superstructure" rather than to the direct results of changes in the mode of production. Since economic relations are readily quantifiable their evolution can be charted with some precision, even in earlier periods of history; but social relations, always more mixed and indefinite, adapt neither smoothly nor rapidly to economic change. It does not lie in our power to change our personalities overnight, except in rare instances of conversion; psychological conflict must therefore be endemic in a dynamic society. Traditional styles of relationship will be continuously undermined by the forces of change, but the personality structure appropriate for new kinds of social organization can evolve only gradually. By the time it has become "second nature," it will have been outmoded by further change. The resultant instability and uncertainty will be perceived differently by various social groups according to the effect of economic change on their fortunes: what are symptoms of decline for one class may be portents of liberation and fresh opportunity for another.

Shakespeare lived at a time when an uncertain balance had been struck in the transition from the feudal-aristocratic society of medieval England to the emergent bourgeois state. The aristocracy and the bourgeoisie were a rough

match for each other in power, cohesion, and self-confidence; each had its characteristic moral values and style of life, and each claimed that its own way constituted "human nature": the personality typical of a particular class was elevated to a norm that all mankind should recognize. *King Lear* pits these rival concepts of human nature against each other in sharp and mutually exclusive opposition. In such a conflict, one would expect Marx's sympathies to be given wholeheartedly to the historically progressive energies of the bourgeoisie; but his discussion of it in *The Communist Manifesto* is in fact strongly ambivalent:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash-payment." It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade.³

In this elegy for a dying culture Marx seems dismayed by the human costs of the breakup of the feudal order and appalled by the moral nihilism of those who destroyed it. Elsewhere, in more splenetic moods, he may delight in consigning some losing cause to the "rubbish heap of history"; but the achievement of feudalism he finds too appealing to be thus summarily dismissed. No matter how greedy, inefficient, and exploitive the feudal church and aristocracy may have been, their fervent idealism sustained man's sense of his own worth and of his right to his allotted place in the social hierarchy. The new order, however, having set up cash payment as the only measure of social obligation, ruthlessly attacks all customary bonds that impede the development of production and trade:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away,

all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

(*Manifesto*, p. 35)

In his appreciation of feudal values Marx revealed the chivalric idealism that still lingered from his adolescence and also, perhaps, his pride at having won the aristocratic Jenny von Westphal as his bride. His curiously nostalgic account of the decline of feudalism probably also reflects the influence of a man of kindred temperament, but opposite allegiance: Thomas Carlyle. *Past and Present* (1843) professes a devotion to the corporate society of medieval England and a horror of the moral vacuity of *laissez-faire* that are remarkably close in tone and diction to the analysis given five years later in *The Communist Manifesto*:

All this dire misery, therefore; all this of our poor Workhouse Workmen, of our Chartisms, Trades-strikes, Corn-Laws, Toryisms, and the general downbreak of *Laissez-faire* in these days,—may we not regard it as a voice from the dumb bosom of Nature, saying to us: Behold! Supply-and-demand is not the one Law of Nature; Cash-payment is not the sole nexus of man with man,—how far from it! Deep, far deeper than Supply-and-demand, are Laws, Obligations sacred as Man's Life itself: these also, if you will continue to do work, you shall now learn and obey.⁴

In *King Lear* Shakespeare displays a similar attachment to traditional and aristocratic values, combined with a distaste and fear of the acquisitive, unscrupulous bourgeois values (as they appear to him) that are taking their place. His view of the class conflict of his time is conditioned by that basic division in his temperament that is dramatized in his plays as the opposition of the Lion and the Fox.⁵ The Lion, or man of passion, Shakespeare usually represents as an aristocrat of the old style: noble, open, and generous, but flawed by his devotion to the formal ceremony and the quixotic gesture. His honorable simplicity ensures his defeat by the Fox, the cunning and ruthless devotee of Machiavellian *realpolitik*. In his history plays, Shakespeare inclines to a more skeptical view of the Lion's virtues. For the good of the kingdom, the rash and histrionic Lion must be supplanted by the

politic Fox: thus Bolingbroke prevails over Richard, Hal over Hotspur. But in the tragedies the Lion's credulity is intrinsic to his noble nature, whereas the Fox's cunning is savage and nihilistic: Othello is overthrown by Iago, Lear and Gloucester by Regan, Goneril, and Edmund.

The social meaning of this recurrent opposition of character types has already been explored by critics, though usually from the somewhat nostalgic viewpoint of Christian humanism. E. M. W. Tillyard, for example, defines the action of *Richard II* as the superseding of Richard's world of "medieval refinement" by the more realistic, modern-minded statesmanship of Bolingbroke.⁶ John F. Danby takes a similar approach to *King Lear*, attributing Lear's faith in "Benignant Nature" to the ordered medieval world view of Bacon and Hooker, while seeing in Edmund's "Malignant Nature" an anticipation of Hobbes's concept of primitive culture as a war of all against all. Danby's premises are neo-Christian rather than Marxist—he says the play "is at least as Christian as the *Divine Comedy*"⁷—but his analysis is based on the same class opposition in Elizabethan society that I have described above. So, where a Marxist might single out Edmund as typifying the new bourgeois ethic of irreverent, individualist acquisitiveness, Danby sees a person:

[who] is not a co-operative member of a grand community. . . . Edmund is the careerist on the make, the New Man laying a mine under the crumbling walls and patterned streets of an ageing society that thinks it can disregard him.

For the two Natures and two Reasons imply two societies. Edmund belongs to the new age of scientific inquiry and industrial development, of bureaucratic organization and social regimentation, the age of mining and merchant-venturing, of monopoly and Empire-making, the age of the sixteenth century and after: an age of competition, suspicion, glory. He hypostatizes those trends in man which guarantee success under the new conditions.

(pp. 45–46)

Edmund is determined to strike off all shackles that might inhibit the free play of his energies. He therefore denies the inherited medieval standards of Elizabethan society insofar as they assume (in Danby's words) "a co-operative, rea-

sonable decency in man, and respect for the whole as being greater than the part: 'God to be worshipped, parents to be honoured, others to be used by us as we ourselves would be by them'" (p. 46).

Danby's description of the dialectical opposition in *Lear* is useful and convincing, even if one does not share his idealization of medieval social values. Like many modern conservatives, he laments the shift of Western culture from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from organic community to atomistic state. Indeed, by the time he wrote *Lear* Shakespeare himself seems to have been of this party, though his adherence to it was qualified by the self-division that counts as an asset to the dramatist. Kenneth Burke has already pointed out this double vision in Shakespeare's treatment of social issues:

This "tragic ambiguity" whereby a growing trend is at once recommended and punished, is present also in Shakespeare's treatment of Macbeth, who represents the new bourgeois concepts of ambition in grotesque guise. In confronting the emergent capitalist standards, Shakespeare retained many conservative, feudal norms of value. The result, made by the incongruous juxtaposition of both conservative and revolutionary frames, was a "tragic ambiguity" whereby he gave expression to the rising trends, but gave them the forbidding connotations of criminality.⁸

II

I shall assume, therefore, that the opposition between the party of Lear and the party of Regan, Goneril, and Edmund is not merely a conflict between good and evil persons; it conveys also a social meaning that derives from the contemporary historical situation as Shakespeare understood it.⁹ However, the reflection of social reality in *Lear* is neither simple nor direct, and the Marxist critic who aspires to do more than simply proclaim his own sympathies must refine his methods of analysis to cope with the complexities of Shakespeare's dramatic representation of the underlying issues. An important complication in *Lear* derives from its setting in time: not in the England of Shakespeare but in an archaic, pre-Christian realm that mingles history and folklore. The play therefore omits such essential elements of the transition from feudalism to the mercantile economy as the great in-

crease in the use of money. The all-pervasive “cash nexus” of Marx and Carlyle is insignificant in *Lear*, since power is determined by one’s ability to command personal loyalty, and payments are made in kind rather than in cash.¹⁰ Edmund schemes for possession of Edgar’s land, not his money, and when Lear abdicates he divides land rather than liquid assets.

King Lear, then, represents the neocapitalist economy of the Renaissance, not directly, but rather through an exploration of the philosophical concepts and moral values that are typically associated with that economy. The most imaginative interpreter of such intellectual derivatives of the Renaissance economic transition has been Lucien Goldmann. He suggests that the Renaissance bourgeoisie, as it comes to equal or dominate the aristocracy economically, elaborates a corresponding rationalist doctrine of empirical individualism that supersedes the earlier Aristotelian and animist world views. The concepts of the organic community and the bounded universe are replaced by those of the reasonable individual and infinite space; the idea of social hierarchy yields to that of the collectivity of isolated, free, and equal individuals.¹¹ The tragic consciousness of the late Renaissance derives from a nostalgic sense of loss and division: it combines intellectual comprehension of the new rationalist position with a “radical refusal to accept this world as man’s only hope and only perspective” (p. 43). Lear and Gloucester, we observe, are racked by the contrast between their immediate perception of man as no more than a “poor, bare, forked animal” (III.iv.110) and their longing for intervention by the “justicers above,” who seem to have withdrawn their care for mankind. Their plight corresponds to that of the protagonist described by Lukacs in his “Metaphysics of Tragedy”:

he hopes that from the struggle of opposing forces will come a Divine judgment, a pronouncement of ultimate truth. But the world around him goes its own way, indifferent to both questions and answers. All things have become dumb and the combats distribute arbitrarily, with indifference, triumph, or defeat. The clear words of God’s judgment will never resound again in the march of destiny; it was their voice that awakened everything into life, now he must live alone, for himself; the voice of the judge has fallen silent for ever.¹²

That Lear and Gloucester suffer such a crisis of faith is evident; but it does not stem from purely intellectual doubts, since the opening scenes of the play show them in moods of senile complacency. Their crisis is the direct result of having their settled views of the cosmos and society challenged by Edmund, Regan, and Goneril. The challenge first arises in the recurrent explorations of the meaning of a *bond*. Lear’s party appeal to the traditional bonds—between parent and child, master and servant, lord and vassal—that knit together the elements of feudal society. So, for Gloucester, “the bond crack’d ’twixt son and father” (I.ii.113) is but one symptom of a general disorder: “in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason.” That he should blame it all on “late eclipses in the sun and moon” (I.ii.106) merely shows his ignorance of the real forces of change at work in the kingdom. There is a similarly ironic ignorance in Lear’s loss of insight and control in the division scene: he is seduced by Goneril’s rhetoric, which denies all order and limit in claiming to love him “Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty,” whereas he scorns Cordelia’s modest pledge to love him “According to [her] bond; no more nor less” (I.i.56, 93). For Edmund the word has an opposite meaning: the individual’s obligations to society he brushes aside as no more than “the plague of custom” (I.ii.3). His own views he slyly attributes to Edgar, in the forged letter, which complains of “an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffer’d” (I.ii.50). Casting off any allegiance to his actual rulers, whom he finds restrictive and arbitrary, he declares his fealty to the only superior that can accommodate his limitless ambition: “Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound” (I.ii.1–2). This “heroic vitalism”¹³ of Edmund’s looks back to Machiavelli, forward to such ideologies as *laissez-faire* and Social Darwinism. “Legitimacy” he derides as a principle that serves only to prop up a moribund status quo; he sets against it his vision of a society of achieved rather than ascribed status, where his restless opportunism could flourish unimpeded. To his mind, the social and natural orders would then be homologous, and would recognize only the one sovereignty of Nature herself. His ideas

scarcely differ in principle from the main line of development of bourgeois social theory over the next three centuries; but for Lear, and apparently for Shakespeare also, an open society such as Edmund envisions represents simply the triumph of crime.¹⁴

Edmund, Regan, and Goneril extend their political ruthlessness to the personal realm by espousing a strict and often brutal functionalism in social life; their opponents, on the other hand, are addicted to precedent and ceremony, whatever the cost in efficiency. The contrast is most evident in the struggle over Lear's claim to his retinue of a hundred knights.¹⁵ The text of the play leaves in question the actual qualities of these men. For Lear, naturally, they are "men of choice and rarest parts, / That all particulars of duty know," and an indispensable element of "all th' addition to a king" (I.iv.272-73; I.i.136). But Goneril hates them, for two reasons. First, they put in hazard the very sovereignty that she and her sister have just won. They "hourly carp and quarrel, breaking forth / In rank and not-to-be-endured riots" (I.iv.211-12), and so long as he is surrounded by such a menacing bodyguard Lear cannot be written off as a political force. Second, it offends her ascetic concern for domestic orderliness to be overrun by this band of ruffians:

Men so disorder'd, so debosh'd, and bold,
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn: epicurism and lust
Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel
Than a grac'd palace. (I.iv.250-54)

There is a tinge of puritanism in her distaste for the moral laxity of the ancien régime—a laxity made prominent at the very start of the play by Gloucester's lustful reminiscences. Like Philo in the opening scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, she sees the health of the state threatened by vice and luxury in high places. Of course, it is also true that Goneril's own later actions will be far more vicious than anything that might have passed muster in the mildly licentious atmosphere of Lear's court. As in the case of Malvolio, or of Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare mistrusts puritanical attitudes because he believes they conceal a hidden desire to indulge in what they most condemn.

Whether or not Lear's retainers are as trou-

blesome as Regan and Goneril claim will have little effect on the struggle over their fate, for, however they behave, Lear is as stubbornly committed to keeping them in his service as his daughters are to dismissing them. This conflict may be interpreted as a small-scale and symbolic representation of the long Tudor controversy over "maintenance": the right of a peer to support an armed and uniformed (liveried) body of retainers and be escorted by them in public.¹⁶ Such private armies were an implicit challenge to the power of the throne and to the civil order; the Tudor monarchs carried on a long struggle to restrict and finally abolish maintenance, a struggle that was part of their broad policy of limiting the claims of assertive aristocrats and subordinating their powers to the throne. The execution of Essex in 1601, after his abortive challenge to Elizabeth's authority, brought this conflict to a dramatic climax. By the end of the sixteenth century maintenance of a liveried retinue, especially in London, had become a token of an aristocrat's devotion to an archaic style of conspicuous consumption rather than a credible gesture of independence from central authority. But even as late as the 1570's the second Earl of Southampton (father of Shakespeare's patron) continued to affect a style of feudal autarchy in proceeding through the streets:

bravely attended and served by the best gentlemen of those countries wherein he lived; his muster roll never consisted of four lackeys and a coachman, but of a whole troop of at least an hundred well mounted gentlemen and yeomen; he was not known in the streets by guarded liveries but by gold chains; not by painted butterflies ever running as if some monster pursued them, but by tall goodly fellows that kept a constant pace both to guard his person and to admit any man to their Lord which had serious business.¹⁷

The contemporary commentator stresses not just the number but also the dignity and quality of Southampton's retinue. They are men of substance in their own right who yet are proud to be part of Southampton's household. In this they swim against the current, for at this time the great aristocratic households were shrinking, and the status of those who remained in them was declining. Even the richest peers could no longer afford to support hundreds of retainers, as they

had done in the Middle Ages, nor did they need them for local warfare; at the same time, young gentlemen were ceasing to consider it honorable to provide personal service to an aristocrat. By the mid-eighteenth century, Lawrence Stone observes, domestic service had acquired the social stigma that it still bears, so that "it was generally accepted that 'a livery suit may indeed fitly be called a badge of servility'" (p. 214). Where the feudal ethic had exalted service to a superior as the most honorable of human bonds, the bourgeois era regarded it as an intrinsic violation of individual dignity.¹⁸

Around 1600 these contradictory notions of service were both still current; they are evident in the instinctive hostility between Kent and Oswald. Though Kent is an earl in his own right, when cast out of favor he feels it most honorable to serve Lear still, as a poor but honest subject who tells the King that he recognizes "that in your countenance which I would fain call master" (I.iv.30).¹⁹ But because the choice is his own he retains his integrity and status. He despises Oswald as a jumped-up "eater of broken meats" who must be "super-serviceable" to his mistress' vices because he is no more than a parasite. The bitterest pill, for Kent, is that Oswald can claim the prerogatives of a gentleman despite his lack of birth or breeding, merely by pandering to Regan: "That such a slave as this should wear a sword, / Who wears no honesty" (II.ii.73–74). Kent's outrage is that of a member of a hereditary class that sees its privileges devalued and its ideals of loyalty superseded.

The argument over "service" in the play, therefore, mingles issues of status, power, and economics. The last of these is brought out in Regan's distaste for the sheer wastefulness of Lear's entourage²⁰ and the bad example they set—she suggests that it is the influence of the "riotous knights" that has incited Edgar to depose his father, in the hope of enjoying "th' expense and waste of his revenues" (II.i.100). We see here another aspect of Shakespeare's characteristic opposition of the man of passion to the man of calculation: the former spends freely, if not always wisely, whereas the latter husbands his financial resources in the same manner as his emotional ones. In the *Richard II* tetralogy a balance is finally struck on the side of the savers. Richard's squandering of England's wealth jus-

tifies his overthrow by the more prudent Bolingbroke; later in the cycle Falstaff must be dismissed lest Bolingbroke's "unthrifty son" appear to be another wastrel monarch. In Sonnet 94 Shakespeare passes an enigmatic judgment on the underlying issue of personal temperament: he gives credit to the men of restraint who "husband nature's riches from expense," but his praise is tinged with mistrust. Elsewhere in the sequence he continually exhorts his aristocratic "lovely boy" to give himself more freely in emotional relationships and to become a father so that he will not have lived only for himself.

One can trace this debate back to the medieval poem "Winnere and Wastoure," and beyond, but for Shakespeare it is far more than a mere literary trope. It reflects his personal distillation of the historical dialectic defined earlier in this paper: the opposition between a feudal-aristocratic ethic that promotes display, generosity and conspicuous consumption, and a bourgeois ethic that values thrift because it promotes the accumulation rather than the dissipation of capital. Though in his personal life Shakespeare was a prudent saver and investor, he seems to have admired the more dashing aristocratic style of expenditure; certainly when he criticized it he did so only halfheartedly, whereas he is venomous in his portrayals of the usurer Shylock, and of Regan and Goneril. Not only does he imply that financial and emotional meanness are but two aspects of an identical underlying disposition, he also associates these traits with a murderous callousness toward man's actual necessities of subsistence. This attitude is eloquently expressed in Lear's outburst when told that there is no economic need for him to have any servants of his own:

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.iv.266–69)

He then lapses into incoherent rage and goes out into the storm rather than submit to being dependent on his daughters' household. Though the moving quality of his plea has often been praised, it is really a debater's point. His daughters are only proposing, as they have done before in the argument over his retinue, to apply a standard of economic rationality to Lear's ex-

penses; whereas it is precisely the idea that he should be “reasonable” in his expectations that drives him mad. He cannot bear that his royal dignity should be measured by the scale of the countinghouse.²¹ But the Fool well knows the difference between a beggar’s life and that of a court dependent, even if his master does not.

III

When Lear goes to the heath, the argument over how the kingdom should be managed ceases to be such a pressing issue. In the brute struggle for power that ensues, long-run policy becomes irrelevant. Lear and Gloucester, suddenly cast on their own resources, must make their agonized passage through the lower depths of their country and of their own consciousness. Under the stress of this journey they state a social doctrine that may seem to contradict the thesis of this paper about the play’s fundamental oppositions and that therefore requires careful examination.

We have, first, parallel expressions of regret by Lear and Gloucester for their previous callousness toward the poor. When Lear is exposed to the storm, he realizes for the first time what “poor naked wretches” must ordinarily suffer from the elements:

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.iv.32–36)

Gloucester, later, gives his purse to Poor Tom and takes comfort that his own suicidal misery may at least benefit a humble beggar:

Here, take this purse, thou whom the heav'ns'
 plagues
Have humbled to all strokes: that I am
 wretched
Makes thee the happier: Heavens, deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your power
 quickly;
So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough. (IV.i.64–71)

Certainly such sentiments mark an advance from Lear’s previous egocentric outburst about “Reason not the need”; he and Gloucester now see that so long as the poor are hungry and cold the self-indulgence of the rich is an offense against divine justice. Nevertheless, they still view social inequality from the traditional perspective of Christian charity, with its ideal of an organic, hierarchical state in which all are linked together in brotherly love. The remedy for the sufferings of the poor is that the rich should treat them better, not that they should demand redress of their own initiative. So long as they remain the “deserving poor”—long-suffering peasants or devoted menials—Shakespeare usually presents them sympathetically; but if they should resort to direct action on their own behalf they mutate into that old standby the mindlessly destructive Shakespearean mob. The underlying bias is the classic syndrome of “Tory radicalism,” wherein the highest and lowest orders of society—aristocracy and peasants—are exhorted to unite against the middle.²² Though at best the aims of this party may be humanistic and its commitment to social justice genuine, it argues from quite different premises than those of either bourgeois or socialist revolutionaries.

In his second great mad scene Lear progresses to a much more radical critique of the social hierarchy, when he muses on the example of a hungry beggar being driven off by a farmer’s dog:

There thou might'st behold
The great image of Authority:
A dog's obey'd in office.
Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand!
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine
 own back;
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind
For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer
 hangs the cozener.
Thorough tatter'd clothes small vices do
 appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin
 with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
None does offend, none, I say, none; I'll able
 'em: (IV.vi.159–70)

Passages like this have been cited by Soviet critics to support their view of Shakespeare as a

“Writer of the People,” a progressive artist “whose work embodies the revolutionary essence of the Renaissance.”²³ But Lear’s contempt for Authority requires closer examination. First, it is not just logic-chopping to note that he is at this point intermittently mad; the Elizabethan stage madman was expected to make pungent criticisms of the way of the world, but this did not mean that the audience expected society to be reordered in accordance with the madman’s insights. Still, Lear presents a bitter and cogent indictment of the powers that be: the judges are themselves criminals at heart, and they apply a double standard to rich and poor, since sin ceases to be sin when plated with gold. He reacts, in part, as a Christian radical. The beadle who lusts after the whore he punishes recalls the gospel story of the woman taken in adultery, and Lear takes a Christian view of political corruption both in concluding that where all offend, none offends, and in recommending to Gloucester that “Thou must be patient” (iv.vi.180). But another equally logical response alternates with Christian resignation in Lear’s mind, to steal upon his enemies and “kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!” (iv.vi.189). Soviet critics applaud the trenchant cynicism of Lear’s social analysis, but fail to see that he draws no conclusions that deserve to be called progressive; he merely vacillates between saying “resist not evil” and reveling in the prospect of a war of all against all. Indeed, if he had any rational scheme of social reconstruction there would be less occasion for him to rave at the prevalence of injustice. That in coming to know himself he has become incompetent to resume power is, ironically, a large part of his tragedy; that he will not even be allowed to retire from office unmolested is what completes it.

The last movement of the play begins with Lear’s vision of himself and Cordelia becoming “Gods’ spies”; now, like Leir in the *True Chronicle*, he wants only to lead a life of religious meditation, caring nothing for the kingdom that Edmund has won. After he and Cordelia are led away, the triple call of the trumpet that brings Edgar to trial by combat with Edmund leads us to expect a secular last judgment, in which traditional moral values and chivalric decorum will be reasserted. But any consolation we may draw from Edgar’s victory is swept away in its dread-

ful sequel. In the shadow of this loss, Edgar’s accession to the throne seems only a partial restoration of order—as compared, say, with the ending of *The Tempest*, where the old ruler and his daughter are reinvested with full power and fertility. Kent’s prescience that he will soon die and the haziness of England’s future under Edgar confirm that although Edmund, Regan, and Goneril lie dead they have succeeded in their original aim of tearing down the old order they so much despised.

IV

How does a Marxist interpretation of *King Lear* affect its status as a tragedy? George Steiner, in *The Death of Tragedy*, claims that “the Marxist world view, even more explicitly than the Christian, admits of error, anguish, and temporary defeat, but not of ultimate tragedy.”²⁴ A progressive and determinist theory of history, he says, cannot accommodate the classic tragic situation of a noble hero overcome by a blind and malignant fate; and he quotes Marx’s dictum that “Necessity is blind only in so far as it is not understood” (p. 4). Steiner’s scheme, however, does not do justice to the complexity of the issue. It is true that Stalin’s directives on “Socialist Realism” called for one-dimensional proletarian heroes and happy endings; but Roland Barthes has argued convincingly that such literary dogmas incorporated the norms of petit-bourgeois popular writing, instead of seeking to express a genuinely dialectic sense of reality.²⁵ So far as Marx’s denial of “blind necessity” is concerned, Steiner fails to distinguish between the Marxist (or any other) theory of history, which is based on a *retrospective analysis* of events, and the way in which people experience those events *as they happen*. Though Oedipus grapples blindly with his fate, the audience does not share his blindness—and the tragic effect is created by just this disparity.

Marx himself had a definite theory of tragedy; though not fully developed, it was a sophisticated one based on a deep knowledge and appreciation of the whole Western literary tradition (each year, for example, he read through Aeschylus in the original). He saw the essence of tragedy as a disharmony or disproportion between the hero’s ambitions and the time in which

he lives. His main application of this scheme occurs in comments on the tragedy *Franz von Sickingen*, which was written by his comrade Ferdinand Lassalle in 1859. The “tragic conflict” of the play, according to Engels, was that between “the historically necessary postulate”—the liberation of the German peasantry—and “the practical impossibility of its realization” by von Sickingen, who in 1522–23 led a revolt of the German knights against the higher nobility.²⁶ Without going into the details of Marx’s analysis of von Sickingen’s fate, we may simply note that in his terms the play counts as a “progressive” tragedy, wherein the hero takes up the cause of a particular class *too soon*, that is, before historical conditions offer any possibility that the cause will prevail. What is more surprising is that Marx also admitted the validity of the opposite kind of tragedy: one in which a class (or individuals representing it) fails to recognize that the time has come when it must yield to those whom history has brought forward to supersede it. The relevant passage, from an article of 1843 criticizing Hegel’s philosophy of law, is noteworthy for its free movement between the concepts of history as literature and literature as history:

The history of the *Ancien Régime* [i.e., in eighteenth-century France] was *tragic* so long as it was the established power in the world, while freedom on the other hand was a personal notion—in short, so long as it believed and had to believe in its own validity. As long as the *Ancien Régime* as an existing world order struggled against a world that was just coming into being, there was on its side a historical but not a personal error. Its downfall was therefore tragic. . . .

The modern *Ancien Régime* [i.e., the rule of Frederick William IV of Prussia] is merely the *comedian* in a world whose *real heroes* are dead. History is thorough and goes through many phases as it conducts an old form to the grave. The final phase of a world-historical form is *comedy*. The Greek gods, already tragically and mortally wounded in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, had to die again comically in Lucian’s dialogues. Why this course of history? So that mankind may part from its past *happily*.²⁷

When the weakness of a declining class becomes evident to all, the appropriate tone for literary representation of its experience will fall in the range between pathos and comedy: for example,

Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* or *Don Quixote*—which Marx greatly admired as “the epic of a dying-out chivalry whose virtues were ridiculed and scoffed at in the emerging bourgeois world.”²⁸ But in *King Lear* we have a tragic hero who is at first utterly confident of his own “validity” and correspondingly unconscious of how badly he had managed the destiny of his country. He is even more out of touch with reality than his historical counterpart Richard II; but in that play the rising man, Bolingbroke, is moved by a genuine grievance and by a deep concern for the condition of England. In *Lear*, however, Edmund embodies no hope of the future, but only the most destructive aspects of the new era of bourgeois transformation. Though *Lear* has let the garden of England run to seed, it is clear that Edmund, Regan, and Goneril have no interest in restoring it to its proper condition. The struggle between the old order and the new is therefore bound to be a tragic one, whose outcome is too dark and bloody to be redeemed by the rapidly moralistic Edgar.

V

I shall conclude with a few general comments on the sources and implications of Shakespeare’s class loyalties, in the hope that my analysis of *King Lear* may make some contribution to a Marxist interpretation of its author’s whole career. His origins were in the provincial bourgeoisie; at the time of his birth his father was prosperous and respected, though he later suffered financial reverses and lost status in Stratford—a childhood experience similar to the early social humiliations of Dickens and Joyce. By moving to London, perhaps because of an imprudent marriage, Shakespeare distanced himself from his class birthright; and by making a career in the theater he joined himself to an institution whose status and prosperity depended on aristocratic patrons, since it was under attack by the London bourgeoisie, already deeply tinged with puritan mistrust of the stage. The Ovidian hedonism of his first published works (*Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*) and their dedication to the Earl of Southampton established a commitment to aristocratic styles and values that remained prominent throughout his literary career. Yet, as economic man,

Shakespeare was a shrewd and cautious bourgeois investor, mainly in real estate. He steadily improved his financial position and eventually gained the right to call himself "Gent.," despite having got his start as an actor, a socially dubious profession (see Sonnet 111). Like Oswald he acquired a sword, the appurtenance of a gentleman.²⁹ His monetary success as a playwright reflected his sensitivity to the tastes of a mass audience: his aristocratic predilections never became so extreme as to make him a self-consciously opaque and elitist writer like Chapman.

The apparent inconsistency between Shakespeare's values as a writer and those reflected in his personal business may perhaps be resolved by considering his orientation toward the audience of Elizabethan theater. At the start of his career the success of *Tamburlaine the Great* and *The Spanish Tragedy* gave a clear indication of audience taste: it wanted dramatic characters to be noble, magniloquent, and exotic, the very opposite qualities to the thrift and calculation that were the bywords of the mercantile bourgeoisie. The hero must display his personality in large and lavish gesture, even at the risk of being pulled down from his eminence by lesser men; so Shakespeare usually made him some kind of aristocrat. This seems to have been in part a personal trait: he surely attributed special qualities of glamour and seductiveness to the well-born, a susceptibility most clearly revealed in his quasi-sexual infatuation with the "lovely boy" of the sonnets. But his private inclinations were complementary to his artistic aims, for only aristocratic dignity and grandiloquence could provide adequate correlatives to the intensity of inner passion that he wished to show forth on the stage—as D. H. Lawrence has already observed:

I think it is a final criticism against *Madame Bovary* that people such as Emma Bovary and her husband Charles simply are too insignificant to carry the full weight of Gustave Flaubert's sense of tragedy. Emma and Charles Bovary are a couple of little people. Gustave Flaubert is not a little person. But, because he is a realist and does not believe in "heroes," Flaubert insists on pouring his own deep and bitter tragic consciousness into the little skins of the country doctor and his uneasy wife. . . .

The great tragic soul of Shakespeare borrows the

bodies of kings and princes—not out of snobbism, but out of natural affinity. You can't put a great soul into a commonplace person.³⁰

Unable to foresee the future monuments of bourgeois art, Shakespeare was concerned to uphold, and to perfect, the established grand style of innate authority and emotional display. For those attached to the old order the shift to a new mode of social organization will always seem to bring with it a dilution or demeaning of personal relations; and, indeed, there will be an inevitable time lag before the network of human connections in the new order can become as intricate and laden with historical significance as it had been under the old. Moreover, radical innovations in literary genre will usually be required to accommodate the full expression of the new sensibility. The close explorations of inner life that are the special achievements of the early bourgeois era, such as Pepys' *Diary*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Clarissa*, could never be represented on the stage: their relentless introspection, their minute examination of psychological detail, can make a gradual impression only on the consciousness of a persistent and solitary reader, not on that of a vibrant mass audience.

As a man of the theater, Shakespeare was inclined to attribute meanness of stature to such introverted and calculating bourgeois types; yet at the same time he recognized their contribution to the new and effective style of power in his age. In the earlier stages of his career, especially in the history plays, he was inclined to accept the Tudor compromise as the best guarantee of both England's grandeur and its prosperity: Hal, by the end of *II Henry IV*, has come to synthesize the best qualities of the old England and the new, so that he can take the throne as an ideal ruler who heals his country's divisions. He is capable of dispassionate political calculation, but also of warlike vigor—as in his defeat of Hotspur—and of simple good humor with his boon companions of the tavern. Many critics, it is true, have proved reluctant to accept this ideal Hal, the benevolent Machiavel with the common touch; he fails to win our affection, they argue, because Shakespeare is, at heart, of Falstaff's party. Whatever the truth of this question, it seems evident that in his later tragedies—*Othello* (1604) and those following—Shake-

spere no longer envisions any union of the Lion and the Fox, but only their instinctive opposition to each other. The aristocratic protagonist is undermined by a naïve confidence in the potency of his magnanimous imaginings; becoming more histrionic as he loses touch with the realities of power, he is finally reduced, like Lear, Antony, and Coriolanus, to a solipsistic willfulness as superb as it is ineffectual. Meanwhile his emotionally frigid opponent, master of the situation and of himself, entangles his victim in the coils of his own excess.

This, then, is the basic mode in which Shakespeare apprehends the crisis of the aristocracy in his time and the decline of feudal-heroic values.

Notes

¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1905); Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1967). Apart from specific works cited later, I shall make no effort to survey the vast body of writings about the play. Citations of *King Lear* will be to the revised Arden Edition by Kenneth Muir (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957).

² The following would make good starting points for the Marxist interpretation of Shakespeare and his time (though I am not always in agreement with them): Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1957); *Shakespeare in His Time and Ours* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968); Arnold Kettle, ed., *Shakespeare in a Changing World* (New York: International, 1964); Roman Samarin and Alexander Nikol'yukin, eds., *Shakespeare in the Soviet Union* (Moscow: Progress, 1966).

³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848; rpt. Moscow: Progress, 1971), pp. 34–35.

⁴ *Past and Present* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1843), pp. 250–51.

⁵ The seminal, though eccentric, treatment of this theme is by Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: Barnes & Noble, n.d.).

⁶ *Shakespeare's History Plays* (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 278–99.

⁷ *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), p. 205.

⁸ *Attitudes toward History* (Los Altos, Calif.: Hermes, 1959), p. 29.

⁹ After a previous version of this paper was completed, my attention was drawn to Rosalie Colie's "Reason and Need: *King Lear* and the 'Crisis' of the Aristocracy," in *Some Facets of King Lear: Essays in Prismatic Criticism*, ed. R. Colie and F. T. Flahiff (Toronto & Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1974). The late Colie

Unable to reconcile himself with the emerging bourgeois forces, he either associates their predominance with the tragic decay of the old order or else opposes to them a mystical countervailing force: Cordelia's redemptive grace, the patriarchal magic of Prospero. His art may indeed still embody a "life-affirming humanism," as the Soviet critic Anisimov claims;³¹ but, in the later plays, at least, it is neither an optimistic nor a progressive humanism—rather one whose essence is nostalgia, whose glory is that of the setting sun.

Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, Canada

analyzes the play's social oppositions along lines similar to mine; she draws illustrations, as I do, from Lawrence Stone's magisterial *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1558–1641* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965). Our conclusions, however, differ radically in that she views Shakespeare as taking an evenhanded, detached stance toward the social struggles of his time: "Like Shakespeare's other great plays," she observes, "*King Lear* deals in problems and problematics: neither way of life is sanctified, neither is regarded as an unqualified success" (p. 196).

¹⁰ There are minor, anachronistic exceptions, such as Kent's denunciation of Oswald as a "hundred-pound . . . knave" (II.ii.15). Marx's famous disquisition on "The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society" takes the form of a commentary on Timon's address to gold as the "common whore of mankind" (*Tim. Ath.* IV.iii.42): *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International, 1964), pp. 165–69.

¹¹ Goldman, *Le Dieu caché: Etude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), pp. 35–38. Quotations from this work are in my own translation.

¹² Georg Lukacs, *Die Seele und die Formen* (Berlin: Fleischel, 1911), p. 332; quoted in Goldman, p. 45.

¹³ I borrow this apt term from Eric Bentley's *A Century of Hero-Worship* (Boston: Beacon, 1957), where it defines the tradition of Carlyle, Nietzsche, Shaw, and D. H. Lawrence.

¹⁴ This point has already been touched on by Edwin Muir in his brief but suggestive study *The Politics of King Lear* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1947), p. 19. On the later development and legitimization of Edmund's opportunistic premises, see the standard treatment by C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

¹⁵ The issue of Lear's retinue is apparently Shakespeare's invention; in his probable major source, the anonymous 1605 work *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, ed. Sidney Lee (London: Chatto & Windus,

1909), Leir lives unaccompanied in religious retirement with Gonorill.

¹⁶ My account of maintenance is based on Lawrence Stone, pp. 201–17, and sources there cited.

¹⁷ Gervase Markham, *Honour in His Perfection* (London, 1624), p. 20; quoted in Stone, p. 214. “Guarded liveries”: frilly, overornate costumes. “Painted butterflies”: cf. Lear’s reference to “gilded butterflies” (v.iii.13). The spendthrift seventeenth Earl of Oxford, a contemporary of Southampton’s, also sported a retinue of “100 tall yeomen in livery” (Stone, p. 211).

¹⁸ Goneril’s use of the word implies a further contrast between service as recognition of a legitimate authority and as mere opportunism: “To thee [i.e., Edmund] a woman’s services are due: / My Fool usurps my body” (iv.ii.27–28). She wishes to serve (in more senses than one) the virile Edmund, rather than her squeamish lawful husband.

¹⁹ Cf. Orlando’s praise of Adam, the old servant in *As You Like It*, who serves “for duty, not for need” (ii.iii.58).

²⁰ Shakespeare reverses the situation in *The True Chronicle History*, where Leir irritates Gonorill by criticizing her spendthrift tastes in food and clothing.

²¹ Cf. the argument of the like-minded Troilus against any abatement of Priam’s absolutism: “Weigh you the worth and honour of a king, / So great as our dread father, in a scale / Of common ounces? Will you with counters sum / The past-proportion of his infinite?” (*T&C* ii.ii.26–29).

²² In English political history, such coalitions have often been based on an alleged community of rural

interests against urban commercialism or, later, against manufacturers. This was the basic division of forces in the Civil War: the more economically developed South-eastern part of England for Parliament, the more archaic and feudal North and West for the King.

²³ Phrases by Maxim Gorky and Alexander Anikst: *Shakespeare in the Soviet Union*, pp. 12, 113. Compare Swinburne’s comment: “A poet of revolution he is not, as none of his country in that generation could have been: but . . . the author of *King Lear* avowed himself in the only good and rational sense of the words a spiritual if not a political democrat and socialist” (*A Study of Shakespeare*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1902, p. 175).

²⁴ *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1963), p. 342.

²⁵ *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), section on “Écriture et révolution.”

²⁶ Engels, letter to Lassalle of 18 May 1859; quoted in Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* (St. Louis: Telos, 1973), p. 110. Marx’s analysis of the play, which is similar to Engels’, is given in a letter to Lassalle of 19 April 1859.

²⁷ “Toward the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Loyd Easton and Kurt Gaddat (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1967), pp. 253–54.

²⁸ Baxandall and Morawski, p. 150.

²⁹ It is listed among the bequests in his will.

³⁰ *Phoenix* (London: Heinemann, 1936), p. 226.

³¹ *Shakespeare in the Soviet Union*, p. 140.