

# The endings of King Lear

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## The Endings of *King Lear*

Peter Halter

Working within certain conventions allows a dramatist to construct a world which for us, the audience, is re-cognizable. We know what to expect, and, if we are confronted with the dark world of tragedy, we can anticipate the inevitable catastrophic ending and thus prepare ourselves for it, be ready, as it were, when it comes. Even the world of tragedy is, then, with and within its conventions, a familiar world, the very opposite of the uncanny, and what is familiar to us is what we can live with, difficult or shocking as it may be at times. Thus the ending of *Othello*, for instance, is terrible and yet contained within an order, a form, a pace and rhythm which are all part of a convention of tragic inevitability. This inevitability has its own appropriateness, its inner necessity, which, each time we witness it and participate in it, we find both terrible and unavoidable. We know this tragic ending must come, and it does come; and when it comes, we are ready for it, bear it, suffer it.

All of this can also be said, in a manner, about the ending of *King Lear*, and yet it does not do justice to the shattering experience of Shakespeare's darkest tragedy. *King Lear*, I would suggest, is as terrifying as it is because Shakespeare breaks with some of the major conventions of the closing scenes of tragedy. He undermines its form so as to let it fall apart in ways that affect not only tragic inevitability but also point to a rift that runs through the drama as a whole. In a more conventional drama, tragic inevitability is related to a unity of thinking and feeling which is the result of an attempt to establish an underlying coherent vision, and it may well be the (apparent) coherence of this vision which makes the world portrayed, dark as it is, bearable. In *King Lear*, the dissolution of form in the final act signals the dissolution of a single unified vision, and it is the very absence of this coherent vision which is so hard to bear.

But let us have a closer look at the manner in which Shakespeare undermines coherence in the final act. Frank Kermode, for one, has eloquently written about it in *The Sense of an Ending*. "In *King Lear*," he says,

everything tends toward a conclusion that does not occur; even personal death, for Lear, is terribly delayed. Beyond the apparent worst there is a worse suffering, and when the end comes it is not only more appalling than anybody expected, but a mere image of that horror, not the thing itself. The end is now a matter of immanence; tragedy assumes the figurations of apocalypse, of death and judgement, heaven and hell; but the world goes forward in the hands of exhausted survivors. Edgar haplessly assumes the dignity; only the king's body is at rest. (82)

Dissolution at the end of *King Lear* thus means that the conclusion occurs and yet does not occur, that when we feel that the worst is over it only begins to happen, and our energies for anticipating, and bracing against, the nadir are all spent when it dawns on us that, as Kermode says, "beyond the apparent worst there is a worse suffering."

This ending beyond the ending, the second ending, seems indeed apocalyptic — "Is this the promised end?" asks Kent — and yet, paradoxically, it would be easier to accept it if it did not coexist with the other ending which signals that the world *does* go "forward in the hands of exhausted survivors." An apocalyptic ending coexists with a protracted suffering, and this is, among other things, what I mean by dissolution of form: the world at the end of *King Lear* both ends with a bang and goes on with a whimper.

Now we could ask whether the ending of *King Lear* is indeed so very different from that of other tragedies of Shakespeare, or whether we do not find in all of them variants of the coexistence of a catastrophic ending with a somewhat lame affirmation of continuity by some more or less hapless survivors. The answer to that would be that in *King Lear* the very last words spoken by one of the survivors — Edgar in the Folio text and Albany in the Quarto — are in themselves a subdued echo of the hope for a new beginning expressed previously in a much more confident and assertive way by both Edgar and Albany. The last words of the play thus foreground and ironically subvert the very nature of the conventional affirmation of continuity:

(V.iii.323–26)<sup>1</sup>

You lords and noble friends, know our intent;  
What comfort to this great decay may come  
Shall be appli'd: for us, we will resign,  
During the life of this old Majesty,  
To him our absolute power:           *[To Edgar and Kent]*  
  you, to your rights

With boot and such addition as your honours  
Have more than merited. All friends shall taste  
The wages of their virtue, and all foes  
The cup of their deservings. O! see, see! (V.iii.296—304)

<sup>1</sup> Although I believe that the independent integrity of the Quarto and Folio texts of *King Lear* has been established by the research of Michael J. Warren, Steven Urkowitz and Gary Taylor, all references to *King Lear* in this essay are to the [New] Arden edition, edited by Kenneth Muir. The decision for the Arden edition is based on the fact that the main thrust of my essay is not essentially affected by the choice of the text and that therefore it seemed appropriate to use the standard conflation of the two *Lear* texts with which playgoers are familiar and which was used by all the scholars referred to in my own essay.

all the characteristics of a ceremonial closing address. . . . Following the strict pattern of the other endings of tragedies, this speech, proclaimed by the man in authority, Albany, consciously re-establishes formal order. Lear will be restored. The good will be rewarded, the offenders punished, just as the Duke, for example, announces at the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*: "Some shall be pardoned, and some punished." . . . But the cadence with which Albany is trying to end the tragic events of *King Lear* turns out to be false, or more accurately, "interrupted". . . . With its usual formula of just distribution of reward and punishment, the speech apparently is moving toward its clinching couplet:

All friends shall taste  
The wages of their virtue, and all foes  
The cup of their deservings [bitter woes]

We may well imagine both Albany's and the audience's shock, then, to behold a sudden change passing over the features of Lear, so that Albany must break off just at the expected couplet:

The cup of their deservings . . . O see, see! (262—64)

Shaw is not the only critic to notice that Albany's hope of bringing some "comfort to this great decay" by restoring "absolute power" to Lear is utterly futile if not ridiculous at this point. Lear in fact is about to speak his very last moving lines:

And my poor fool is hang'd! 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!  
Pray you, undo this button: thank you, Sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,  
Look there, look there! [*Dies*]

(V.iii.307—11)

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The manner in which here the course of events dramatically interrupts, and caustically comments upon, the futile attempts at bringing some "comfort to this great decay" is not only part of the structure of the dénouement but can be observed throughout the play: on the one hand we have the ever

renewed efforts to hold up the conviction that there must be a humanly perceptible moral order with gods who are just and will in good time punish the bad and reward those who are virtuous, and on the other, a sequence of events which time and again devastates or ridicules those who believe in a morally ordered universe. With cruel regularity such a belief, as soon as it is expressed, is undercut by an even crueller event, shocking both in itself and as a mockery of the divine justice affirmed only seconds before.

An example of this basic structural device is the scene of Gloucester's blinding. As Cornwall ties his arms to the chair and Regan tears at his beard, Gloucester invokes the "kind gods" and says that he shall witness how the gods will punish such evil children as Goneril and Regan: "I shall see / The winged vengeance overtake such children." Cornwall's answer is:

See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.  
Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot. (III.vii.65–66)

Not only is Gloucester's invocation of the gods cruelly mocked by Cornwall; one could even argue that it is Gloucester's very words and the belief they express which puts the horrifying idea of blinding his enemy into Cornwall's head.

The same contrast between an appeal to a divine order and a subsequent event which functions as an ironic commentary can be found in the fourth act, in the scene in which Albany learns about the blinding of Gloucester. Hearing that Cornwall has been wounded by a servant who attacked him while he was torturing Gloucester, Albany exclaims:

This shows you are above,  
You justicers, that these our nether crimes  
So speedily can venge!

And he adds the question: "But, O poor Gloucester! / Lost he his other eye?" to which the messenger responds: "Both, both, my lord" (IV.ii.78–82). For us, the audience, the question is absurd. Once again the invocation of divine justice is subverted the very moment it occurs.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Matchett 190: "Every time Shakespeare raises our hopes, he pulls the rug out from under us. This is the rhythm of *King Lear*, and it remains consistently so to the end of the play; but the very repetitiveness of this rhythm would keep a new

This pattern of affirmation and ironic undercutting is part of a fundamental opposition in the play between order and chaos, hope and despair, an opposition also between those characters who never give up their attempts at finding a deeper meaning, and those other characters, above all Lear himself, who are destroyed in mind and body by a universe which seems governed by cruelty and chaos only. It is an antithesis which can be observed throughout the drama on several levels, until it finds its climactic expression in the long final scene. It undermines all efforts to reach a coherent unified vision, to the point where, as John D. Rosenberg says, the drama "labors under a burden of disorder, which risks the maximum of dramatic and moral chaos, because it possesses only that order which systematically destroys the gropings of the characters to impose a rational pattern upon their experiences" (139).

Rosenberg pushes this reading of the play to the point where the entire drama becomes an indictment against the characters who try to justify the ways of the gods because, according to Rosenberg, they all come up with shallow or even "shocking equations of crime and punishment." "Empty *Lear* of its moral ambiguity, circumscribe its terrors with platitudes, and it becomes not sublime but diabolical. Imposing a pattern of crime and punishment upon the play violates the whole spirit of Shakespearean drama" (139).

I myself would argue that the play suggests that one may well understand the need for those characters to hold on to a notion of divine justice but that the drama contains ample evidence of the fact that their attempts are often questionable or downright futile, crushed as they are again and again by new and even more terrifying events.

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Looking at the characters in *King Lear* in the context of this basic antithesis, one notices that those among them who persist in their need to discover a pattern of sin and retribution or some other signs of a divine

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audience expecting it to break. *This*, we feel (over and over again), is the moment of change; now things have surely taken their turn for the better." Matchett's essay, together with those by Shaw, Rosenberg, Booth and Lyons mentioned elsewhere in my text, is particularly pertinent to my own interpretation.



order are either those of the Gloucester subplot or minor figures of the Lear story. Time and again it is on the level of the subplot that characters try to give meaning to the events by referring to sententious or proverbial truths. Gloucester himself explains his destiny by relating it to the paradox that he was blind when he saw and had to be blinded in order to see the true cause of his affliction:

I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen  
Our means secure us, and our mere defects  
Prove our commodities. (IV.i.18–20)

Gloucester's reasoning here, which relies on the familiar religious paradox of the fortunate fall or *felix culpa*, apparently stands in contradiction to his famous indictment of the gods when he says

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods;  
They kill us for their sport. (IV.1.36–37)

One can well argue, however, that this momentary despair is only an inversion of his belief, and that both of them, indictment and its inversion, show the same tendency to explain the world on the basis of sententious truths. The hope-despair pattern, which is part of this basic tendency, finds its major expression on the subplot level in Gloucester's attempt to commit suicide and Edgar's curious way of leading his father back to renewed faith by convincing him that he did indeed jump from the cliffs but that his life was miraculously spared.

Edgar's most famous statement placing the cruel destiny of his father squarely within a sin-and-retribution framework comes at the crucial moment in the fifth act when the forces of evil seem defeated and even the dying Edmund, to whom Edgar's words are addressed, echoes that kind of reasoning:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us.  
The dark and vicious place where thee he got  
Cost him his eyes. (V.iii.170–73)

The Elizabethans probably found Edgar's legalistic notion of punishment for lust far less shocking than some critics do nowadays, but it nevertheless



seems clear that Edgar's response is far from adequate. Moreover, it occurs at a point in the dénouement at which it seems that all those who suffered badly are responsible at least in the sense of unleashing in one way or other the destructive forces that subsequently caught up with them. Cordelia is still alive, and the most terrifying events of the play, happening at the very moment of Edgar's sententious statement, once more provide an ironic answer and crush the very framework within which Edgar's words belong.

In a brilliant essay on "The Subplot as Simplification in *King Lear*" Bridget Gellert Lyons has shown that we find a tendency in the subplot characters toward stereotype, not only on the level of sententious language but also on the pictorial level and on that of the conscious and unconscious use of archaisms. On the pictorial level, "the subplot often provides emblems, or pictures with clearly stated meanings, for the benefit of the audience as well as for Lear and the Fool" (27). Thus the appearance of Edgar on the Heath as a poor and naked Bedlam Beggar, for instance, is an emblematic representation of the poverty and nakedness that preoccupy Lear, stripped of his retinue and rank. And Gloucester's blindness is regarded by himself *and* others as a physical equivalent to his moral and mental obtuseness; later, when the king meets the blinded Gloucester at Dover, Lear, as Lyons points out, uses Gloucester "as a source of emblems: the blind man is blind Cupid (IV.vi.138) and 'Goneril, with a white beard' (IV.vi.97), in each case a picture that we associate, in its context in the play, with lust" (27–28). Similarly, Edmund's depravity, unlike that of Lear's daughters, can be accounted for by the fact that he is a bastard, and as such an emblematic embodiment of sin, since bastards were regarded as contaminated by the sinful way they were begotten.

Thus in a number of ways both the events of the subplot as well as their interpretation by the characters provide us with "a world of recognizably structured perceptions and values — the very oppositions of [the] dislocation and madness" that are so prominent on the level of the main plot. But, as Lyons argues, "the verbal and visual simplifications of the subplot do not merely provide a contrast to what goes on elsewhere in the play; they help to reveal the nature of Lear's experience by being so obviously inadequate to it. Lear's sufferings are heroic because they cannot be accommodated by traditional formulas, moral or literary, and the subplot exists partly to establish that fact" (25).

The inadequacy of the view of the world of the subplot characters becomes manifest on several levels. On the one hand, as we have seen, there are the frequent undercuttings which throw an ironical light on comments and interpretations as soon as they are uttered; on the other hand, the emblematic readings themselves become facile to the point of being ridiculous or grotesque. The servant who tries in vain to stop Cornwall from blinding Gloucester is obviously not the tool of the "justicers above" invoked by Albany, and to equate Gloucester's destiny with his sin is shallow if not shockingly reductive.

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Turning once more to the closing scene of the play in the light of what has been said so far, it becomes apparent that the dissolution characterizing it is directly related to the fundamentally different ways in which the characters of the two plots try to cope with the conflict. In Act V, Scene iii, the last scene of the play, Lear and Cordelia are led away as captives; we know they are in great danger at the hands of Edmund's henchman. Albany, who in the meantime has learned from the disguised Edgar that Edmund and Regan plan to kill him, demands from Edmund that he turn over Lear and Cordelia, for whose lives he now also fears. We are alarmed by the fact that Edmund's evasive answer goes unchallenged; then the focus of attention shifts quickly to the intrigue involving Edmund, Albany, Goneril and Regan, and finally to Edgar's trial-by-combat against Edmund, the carefully prepared ceremonial restoration of justice which more and more has the illusory feel of dramatic conclusion.

This ritual restoration of justice occupies the center of the stage for a painfully long time. We in the audience live through it with feelings of anxiety not only for Edgar but also for the imprisoned Lear and Cordelia, since unlike the characters on the stage we are aware of the fact that Edgar and Albany, who are fully preoccupied with the ritual restitution of order, have completely forgotten the king and his daughter.

This is true to the point where the play is complete without them, in the sense that Edgar's victory not only signals the triumph of virtue but contains, with the ritualized exchanges that follow it, a veritable "anthology of familiar signals that a play is ending," as Stephen Booth puts it (7). Edmund confesses and emphasizes the finality of the situation:

What you have charged me with, that I have done,  
 And more, much more. The Time will bring it out.  
 'Tis past, and so am I. (163–65)

These lines contain, of course, an ominous reference to the destiny of Cordelia, but nobody on the stage reacts – the ritual conclusion of the show-down continues. Edgar reveals himself and passes the moralistic judgment we quoted before on the retributive justice visible in their father's destiny. Edmund readily agrees – "Th'hast spoken right; 'tis true" (174) – then makes an almost explicit announcement that the drama is over:

The wheel has come full circle; I am here.

Albany now joins in, and the whole dialogue has more and more what Booth calls "a quality comparable to the resolution at the end of a piece of music" (7). There follows the moving account of Gloucester's death in the arms of Edgar, and fifteen endless lines on the destiny of Kent, closing this chapter, too. Finally – the formal conclusion by now seems to have dragged on for an endless period of time – Kent appears and abruptly stops the whole ceremony with his

I am come  
 To bid my king and master aye good night.  
 Is he not here? (V.iii.235–37)

Albany's spontaneous cry of surprise ("Great thing of us forgot!") is so banal and so ridiculously phrased that it might well strike us as downright comic in different circumstances. Together with the ensuing phase of complete bewilderment and distraction, it stands in total contrast to the rigidly ceremonial restoration of justice that has been going on for 200 lines. And even now Edgar and Albany are distracted from their main task of saving Lear and Cordelia, since they forget them again the very moment the bodies of Goneril and Regan are brought out. It is Edmund, of all people, who draws their attention back to Lear and Cordelia:

I pant for life. Some good I mean to do,  
 Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send –  
 Be brief in it – to the castle, for my writ  
 Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.  
 Nay, send in time. (V.iii.244–48)

Again, chaos follows. Albany's "Run, run, O run!" (248) is countered by Edgar's "To who my lord? Who has the office? Send thy token of reprieve." Finally, an officer is dispatched, and the delayed attempt to save Lear and Cordelia reaches its climax in the most moving of all the moments of undercutting in the play: Albany, learning that the captain has orders to hang Cordelia, exclaims "The Gods defend her," and he is answered, as it were, by a moment of unendurable pantomime as Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms.

One could call the second ending that now follows the catastrophe beyond the catastrophe, during which, as Stephen Booth says, the play "pushes on inexorably beyond its own identity":

When Lear enters howling in the last moments of the play, Shakespeare has already presented an action that is serious, of undoubted magnitude, *and complete*; he thereupon continues that action beyond the limits of the one category that no audience can expect to see challenged: Shakespeare presents the culminating events of his *story* after his *play* is over." (11)

Now, it is true that the first ending is a conclusion to an action that is "serious" and "of undoubted magnitude," but by giving us a second ending that undermines and explodes the first, Shakespeare relentlessly lays bare the shortcomings of the trial-by-combat conclusion. The idea of order that the subplot characters so stubbornly adhere to is not only undercut but revealed as archaic in its very foundations, as Bridget Gellert Lyons has noticed: "Like the curious scene on Dover cliff," she writes, "the combat — chivalric and medieval — is out of keeping with the main story of *King Lear*. In this scene the idea of justice is rendered in the archaic mode of romances." And Lyons goes on to say that "the trial by combat portrays the idea of law in its perfect form: ideally the just man won because of the rightness of his cause, just as in earlier primitive trials like the ordeal, a suppurating wound became infected only if the defendant was guilty. In the play, the stylized battle therefore gives form to an archaic conception of the way in which divine justice manifested itself in human affairs" (32–33).

It may be this very belief which gives Edgar the strength to defeat his brother in the combat, but, paradoxically, it may be the same belief that turns Edgar and Albany into figures who are so fully preoccupied with themselves as the instruments of a higher justice that they are oblivious of everything else and thus contribute to the catastrophe beyond the

catastrophe or at least neglect to do all they could to prevent it. Shakespeare thus undercuts the first ending and the vision of the subplot characters of which this ending is an expression on two levels: not only do they fail to cope with the forces of evil because of the limitations of their idea of a transcendental order, but they inadvertently contribute to it. Walter C. Foreman explores this idea both on the level of moral responsibility and dramatic form. "By giving the final scene of *King Lear* the form he does," Foreman writes,

Shakespeare apparently wants us to see the death of Cordelia and thus the death of Lear as finally the result of inattention, carelessness, accident. True, Edmund gave the order, but that does not excuse Edgar and above all Albany for acting as if everything were over when it's not. . . . Shakespeare has built a final scene that would make the tragedy seem avoidable, not inevitable, the result not simply of human malice, but of human incompetence and human insularity. (143—44)

Dissolution of form in the last scene of *King Lear* may thus well include even the notion of tragic inevitability; the idea that in different circumstances, with characters who are, paradoxically, less bent on ritually restoring justice, the worst could have been prevented, this idea may be part of the feeling of helplessness and terror that we experience in the last minutes of the play. It seems certain, at any rate, that Shakespeare, by breaking some of the major conventions of the dénouement, pushes to the limits a basic antithesis that runs through the whole play, the antithesis between the world of the subplot, whose characters keep up their belief in a divine order, and the world of the main plot, in which the characters move either towards despair and madness or are relentlessly crushed at the end of the play. What John D. Rosenberg sums up as the essence of *King Lear* in its entirety, I take to be the essence of the Lear story, as opposed to the Gloucester story. "*King Lear*," he writes,

asserts nothing, though it questions everything. It poses for our staggered imagination the possibility that the cosmos is amoral, perhaps malevolent, more likely a vast *nothing* — a word which in its several variations echoes like a diabolic chorus throughout the play, provides the Fool with his bitterest jests, and culminates in Lear's fivefold repeated "never." (137)



Thus plot and subplot in *King Lear* express fundamentally different visions of the universe and the forces that determine it. These two visions are so radically opposed to one another that at the heart of the play they create an irreconcilable tension or aporia, which undermines any attempt to define the essence of the drama as a whole. As a result of this, among other things, the final scene can no longer be built around the tragic hero and his *anagnorisis*, the moment of insight that allows him to see the essential forces at work with an unprecedented clarity. Lear is the only tragic hero in Shakespeare who dies as a man torn to the very last second between insight and madness, truth and delusion. As a consequence of this, the quest for meaning is at the end of the play even more than before an affair of the subplot characters.

Now the vision expressed by them is, as we have seen, obviously inadequate, as is amply demonstrated throughout the play by the frequent moments of undercutting. Does this mean that the quest of the subplot characters, marred by its tendency toward stereotype, archaisms and sententious truths, indirectly supports the vision of despair present in the play as its antithesis? I do not think so; the fact that the specific belief expressed by the subplot characters fails to explain the *Lear* universe does not mean that the play signals that the quest for order *as such* is futile. In that sense the fundamental division in *King Lear* is not simply that between two irreconcilable visions, one affirmative and the other despairing, but between those characters who carry on with the unquenchable need to discover a deeper order, and those others who in the course of the tragic events succumb or are destroyed.

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