Critical Quotes on *King Lear*

(more thorough citations available on request…)

The experience of reading *King Lear*, in particular, is altogether uncanny. We are at once estranged and uncomfortably at home; for me, at least, no other solitary experience is at all like it. I emphasize reading, more than ever, because I have attended many stagings of *King Lear*, and invariably have regretted being there. Our directors and actors are defeated by this play, and I begin sadly to agree with Charles Lamb that we ought to keep rereading *King Lear* and avoid its staged travesties. (Bloom 476)

We cannot know what he (Shakespeare) believed or disbelieved, and yet the burden of *King Lear* allows us finally only four perspectives: Lears’s own, the Fool’s, Edmund’s, Edgar’s. You have to be a very determined Christianizer of literature to take any comfort from this most tragic of all tragedies. The play is a storm, with no subsequent clearing. (Bloom 493)

On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear,--we are in his mind and we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms…Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage. (Charles Lamb quoted in Bloom 18)

After writing more than four pages about the dropped plot lines and inconsistencies in the text, A. C. Bradley goes on to write, “From these defects, or from some of them, follows one result which must be familiar to many readers of *King Lear*. It is far more difficult to retrace in memory the steps of the action in this tragedy than in *Hamlet*, *Othello* o*r Macbeth*. The outline is of course quite clear…But when an attempt is made to fill in the detail, it issues sooner or later in confusion even with readers whose dramatic memory is unusually strong.” (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, A. C. Bradley, 1904)

And Harold Goddard writes, “But that does not mean that anyone has the right to insist that his way of taking it is the only possible one. I hope that I have myself given no impression of speaking ‘the truth’ about *King Lear* in this sense. All I have wanted to do is to point out the figures I see moving in this fiery furnace of Shakespeare’s imagination, in the hope, naturally, that other may see them too. But if others do not see them, for them they are not there. Far be it from me in that case to assert that I am right and they are wrong. (*The Meaning of Shakespeare*, vol. 2, Harold C. Goddard, 1951)

Edmund realizes that the law which denies the father’s property to the illegitimate son is merely ‘custom’….the relationship between affection and property is purely arbitrary: there is no natural or essential reason why the amount a of love a parent holds for a child, or a child holds for a parent, should have any connection with how much property that parent passes on to his children…If our natures were laid down by the position of the stars in the sky at the moment of our conception, there would be nothing we could do to change the way the world is. In that sense astrology is part of a distinctly conservative ideology. But Edmund sees that this is a story that we tell, like the one about ‘legitimacy’ and ‘illegitimacy’, to mask the real facts of individuals and groups seeking to exert power over others. They are just stories; and the more that those stories involve the mystical or the ‘natural’, the more powerful they are likely to be. Edmund sees all this; he sees the fact that justice in the world of the play is simply what the powerful say it is. This is the message that Lear is going to learn at his cost. (McEvoy, 215)

The image of the gods as amoral is supported recurrently throughout the first four acts not only by the rapid political ascent of the wicked characters over the virtuous ones, but also by the perceptions of the actors, in particular Lear and Gloucester…They are pagan in their want of principle and not, by any definition, Christian…What is significant, then, about the judgments of the final scene?...(Lear) has demanded of them (the gods) that they turn from the indiscriminate punishment of unoffending outcasts and, instead, bring those both guilty of major crimes and as yet “unwhipp’d of justice” to account…That the society headed by Albany and Edgar, as well as by Lear, had he lived, is culturally ready for Christianity is attested by its transmutation of its pagan gods into intelligences governed by principle and no longer by amorality and caprice. (Reed, 38-41)

Revision, invisible to the reader of edited texts, and alien to anyone who wants to think that Shakespeare wrote with the permanence his lines are now accorded, is a basic feature of the early modern repertoire. (Stern 61)

Lear has no necessity or motive for his abdication; also, having lived all his life with his daughters, he has no reason to believe the words of the two elder and not the truthful statement of the youngest; yet upon this is built the whole tragedy of his position. (Leo Tolstoy quoted in Bate 147)

Then follows Gloucester’s attempted suicide. Possibly a supreme actor might carry off this difficult incident. But it may be doubted. The few times I have seen it in the theater it has come nearer to producing smiles than tears—I almost said, has fallen flat. Yet it is completely convincing to the reader. How right that is, when one stops to think, in a scene whose theme is the supremacy of the imagination over the senses! It is Shakespeare’s old habit of carrying his play leagues beyond and above the theater, making it practice what it preaches, as it were, act out its own doctrine, incarnate its own image within everyone who genuinely come to grips with it. The cliff scene in *King Lear* is a sort of imaginative examination to test our spiritual fitness to finish the play. (Goddard 151)

If Lear constructs a reality that ultimately collapses, so do Regan and Goneril, so do Gloucester and Edmund, and so, in a curious way, does Cordelia…Each character is frustrated, more or less, in their individual attempts to resolve satisfactorily the problems that they encounter. It is not a thesis and antithesis leading to synthesis; it is rather a raw expression of the agony of what it can mean to be human in an inward, self-harming society driven by vicious ambition and cruelty. (Scott 55)

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 then as an editor…It is disputed whether the predoiminant image in Lear’s disordered mind be that loss of his kingdom or the cruelty of his daughters…Lear would move our compassion but little, but did we not rather consider the injured father than the degraded king. (Samuel Johnson quoted in Bloom 15)

(Lear is) like the hurricane and the whirlpool, absorbing while it advances. It begins as a stormy day in summer, with brightness; but that brightness is lurid, and anticipates the tempest. (Coleridge quoted in Bloom 20)

We can spend much time gauging the level of irony in the endings of the tragedies, but when we see or read these great plays we do not construe the endings, we feel them, and what we feel is a paramount sense of suffering and loss. The distinction of *King Lear* is that the death of Cordelia compounds that feeling and focuses it. All of us are pagan in our immediate response to dying and death. The final scene of *King Lear* is a representation—among the most moving in all drama—of the universality of this experience and of its immeasurable pain. (Arthur Kirsch in Bloom 241)

Shakespeare’s purpose throughout this first scene is clearly to stress the old King’s need of love—the word itself appears insistently throughout the scene—and it is not only a mark of Lear’s affectionate nature that he should think love so important, but psychologically it is exactly what we would expect of an old man, until now all-powerful, giving himself into the power of his daughters. Who would not want reassurance at such a moment? There is nothing exceptional in either Goneril’s or Regan’s answer to their father’s request: their answers are exercises in courtly hyperbole demanded by the occasion. Cordelia’s reply, on the other hand, is shocking and is intended to shock. (Farley Hills in Bloom, 252)

Perhaps it is not so surprising in an age when kings have been either outlawed or emasculated and the authority of fathers questioned, that Shakespeare’s presentation of his great King has been so misunderstood. His very act of wisdom and generosity in giving up power while he is still able to manage an orderly succession have been described (by those duly taking their pensions at 65) as political irresponsibility. His failure to detect flattery in the voice of decorum and love in the voice of rudeness has been condemned

We have to admit that practically speaking Goneril and Regan are largely right about their father in his dotage. And by this kind of understanding Gloucester almost deserves his punishment for how he treats Edmund. It is spectacle that dignifies suffering and makes sympathy overrule what judgment might be tempted to conclude. (Altieri in McDonald)

Lear can already be seen as imperious and selfish; we discover that even giving his kingdom away is a selfish act. And immediately we are offered a critical view of the other main sufferer, Gloucester, and his relations with his natural son, Edmund. Gloucester treats Edmund’s birth as an occasion for bawdy joking. (Kermode 185)

There is a cruelty in the writing that echoes the cruelty of the story, a terrible calculatedness that puts one in mind of Cornwall’s and Regan’s. Suffering has to be protracted and intensified, as it were, without end. (Kermode 197)

Were this episode (the first scene) presented in isolation, we would have little cause to blame Lear for his credulity. Goneril and Regan’s words, while excessive, seem appropriately formal in the context of the grand royal audience. Shakespeare provides, however, three means by which we can gauge their sincerity: The contrasting response of the third daughter, Cordelia; the outrafged protest of the loyal counselor the Earl of Kent; and the cynical commentary of Goneril and Regan themselves (Hamilton 112)

…the Fool has artfully and poignantly demonstrated that the King is a fool…The Fool is a mirror, as the wasteland and the storm are mirrors, reflecting back at Lear his own concealed image…the Fool appears in the play only at the point when Lear has begun to act like a fool. The fool of the play’s opening scenes is the mad Lear before he has gone mad. (Garber 671-2)