

The Questions of Lear and Cordelia

by Louis Petrich

Shakespeare had, on average, three hours to give his audience the meaning of life in the form of a play. Now I have about one hour to discuss how he did it in King Lear. So if one takes into account only this difference in time, one may expect from this lecture not more than one-third the meaning of life. The additional two-thirds will appear in the uncut version soon available in the bookstore.¹ (The question period, however, has no time limits. King Lear is a play, and St. John's is a College, of endurance.)

Let us begin with a question. What sticks in one's mind as the most distinguishing feature of King Lear? Directors and designers often ask this question in order to discover "the looks" of a play; and actors ask it of a character to "get the trick" of playing that part. Some may answer that King Lear is a play emphatically in the negative mode. When Cordelia answers "nothing" to Lear's first question at line 84, a kind of metaphysical spell is cast on speech and action from which we never completely break free. The "no's," "not's," "never's," and "nothing's" proliferate, as if caught between two mirrors that reflect them to infinity. Others may find the most outstanding feature of this play to be the comparative and superlative modes of its speech. We constantly hear about things as "more" or "less," "greatest" or "least"; and to reach the extremes, we keep going beyond any previous

¹ This essay is the uncut version of a lecture that was delivered at St. John's College, Annapolis, on August 31, 2007. It goes without saying that the meaning of life discussed in these pages remains but fractional. Such is the disproportion between the ever-multiplying words on these pages and the dramatically embedded meanings of Shakespeare.

attempts to mark the boundaries. In conjunction with the negative mode, this means that just when we think, as Edgar does, that things at the worst can only get better (IV.i.1-9), that very thought, spoken, will be the cue to the action to get even worse.

Witness the blinding of Gloucester as an example of these two predominate modes (the negative and comparative/superlative), and also of a third one, the questioning mode. Cornwall puts out Gloucester's first eye ("See't [vengeance] shalt thou never," III.vii.68) with his foot. The cruelty of this act is barely endurable. The second eye he puts out with his own hands, to feel the "vile jelly," to see the "luster" go "out" with the eye, and then to ask where it went! (84-85). The cruelty thus gets worse. But notice something wonderful: between these two acts of blinding, a servant of Cornwall, having reached his limit of endurance with the first eye, and having "never" done "better service" (75), takes up a sword and wounds his master, as it turns out, mortally. Cornwall's death sets in motion a competition between Goneril and Regan for Edmund that will destroy these three evildoers. The viciousness thus gets worse for the vicious, too, which makes things better (as two negatives make a positive), even as they get worse. Where, then, is the self-contradictory action heading? Just as we approach the best that could be hoped for in the end, we discover that Cordelia is hanged, and we feel, at that moment, worse even than the former worst. How do we feel moments later? We must wonder if any human wisdom, at any point in time, can judge where human action is heading. In other words, we have to ask whether this play, an image of life, has a properly unified action that we call "plot."

This, I believe, is Shakespeare's question, for the sake of which he writes King Lear, whose problematic unity depends on an answer that satisfies our desire to know the deepest things. This question about life and death first arises from Lear near the start of the first scene in the form of a love test:

Lear [to his daughters].

Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge. (I.i.53-

55)

Lear's question is genuine and dramatically interesting.

He wishes to challenge nature by merit.

Goneril, the eldest daughter, tells us, by her answer, what she thinks that challenge means for Lear:

Goneril. Sir, I love you more than word can wield
the matter;

Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty,
honor;

As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

(I.i.57-63)

Goneril "wields" the unwieldy matter of love in comparisons that alternate between glibness (57, 59, 61) and bodily precision (58, 60, 62). The last line, chiasitic with the first, moves "beyond" the (earlier) "beyond," to foreclose the possibility of surpassing her enclosing love. Goneril thus challenges the nature of speech by using the art of speech to go beyond the limits of nature.

Now, connect this challenge in the realm of speech to the dramatic situation of Lear. Notice that Goneril speaks most aptly (and ominously) in the even-numbered lines that

emphasize life and its attributes of sensation, movement, health, beauty, breath, and speech. For she is speaking to an old man who, by the rule of nature, is approaching death, **unless** that rule can be challenged by the meriting of more life. In that case, he would be loved, not because the daughter naturally loves the father, but because he is lovable in himself. Good things are loveable, and Goneril says that Lear is as good as life itself, and all its finest attributes. That is the challenge to nature that Lear wants to hear and to believe.

The public confession of love, to be performed successively by the three daughters, each surpassing the former, the last of whom (we may assume) is known by all not to flatter or lie, is commanded by Lear to oppose **his** inevitable death by manifesting **his** indubitable merit. Cordelia has to speak last to speak surpassingly best, and she has to speak true for us to take seriously the challenge to death by merited love. This is the deeper current of the love test, which will carry us to the end of the play, when Lear, holding Cordelia dead in his arms, is still challenging death with the claims of justice, excellence, endurance, hope, and love.

Goneril's speech, even with its glib steps and self-contradiction, carries "conviction" as she utters it. She is challenging more than she knows. In time, she will put her love for Edmund before life and all its goods, just as she declares herself willing to do here, for Lear. Thus, her speech enlarges our view not only of speech, but also of character, to include what goes beyond the present particulars of action. Words falsely spoken are also truly said, if we hear them said by Goneril's romantic "double"

to Edmund, the one who would take Lear's and her husband's place.

Meanwhile, Cordelia, standing alone, downstage, nearest the audience, feels prompted by Goneril's speech to utter in an aside her first words: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I.i.64). Addressing herself in the third person, she recognizes that she is in a scene, staged by Lear, and so her **cue** to speak will come. She is thinking about how to answer, with no one to consult, for she is young and unmarried, and her voice, which we alone hear, has distinct womanly qualities that will later be called "excellent." Cordelia's first words form a genuine question with deep implications for life and death. We all live with this question whenever we are awake, though we are not often mindful of its momentousness. Let us now make ourselves mindful. A cue is the theatrical equivalent to the calling of one's name. To respond to the words of a cue is to let one's character be invoked to serve the action at the point of those words; not to respond to a cue is to remain outside the action at that point. Not to be needed or called anymore by the action is to be outside it at all points, in the place of the dead. Cordelia's question thus brings to the surface what it means to be alive as a human being called to action, and what it means to be dead.

To be alive in speech is to move forward, word after word, and line after line, because what has been said before falls short of what would be said. If we could say something perfectly true, we would repeat those words, not find new ones. When Cordelia speaks, she usually repeats her words. Here, she decides to "love, and be silent." This is an important internal direction to the actor. Can

we hear in Cordelia's voice and see in her presence the activity of love, independent of the content of the words? Much depends on that.

Regan, the second daughter, makes things worse for Cordelia. Lear addresses her as, "Our dearest Regan, wife of Cornwall." That is her cue, to better her sister by means of her husband:

Regan. I am made of that self mettle as my
sister,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love;
Only she comes too short, that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys
Which the most precious square of sense
possesses,
And find I am alone felicitate
In your dear Highness' love. (I.i.71-78)

Regan turns Goneril's comparative mode into the superlative, and adds a sexually perverse negative (ambiguously disguised). She negates all the lesser joys admitted by Goneril and by her own "most precious square of sense," including the joys provided by that conspicuous husband at her side. Her speech is what Cordelia will call "oily." There is something smoothly dirty about it. It sounds both transgressive and aggressive, solitary and mutual. If we remember to what joys she is the professed enemy, then we will watch her and Cornwall put out Gloucester's eyes (just as we watch Goneril become desperate of life for love of Edmund) as a confirmation in action of what is true in her presently false speech. She sacrifices husband to father in this speech, and the husband will die, undertaking the perverse action of this speech. So she, too, will discover her possession of a

"double": a woman alone, joyless, without the sexual power to seduce a "serviceable villain," Oswald (IV.v).⁴

That fine word, "felicitate," was uttered for the first time in 1605 by Regan, in the first performance of King Lear. Shakespeare invented it for her, and she no doubt thinks she surpasses Goneril by going beyond English usage. Regan thus offers a creative alternative to Cordelia's silent loving. If the words do not exist to speak love truly, then make up a new word, or put old ones together in new ways, as Shakespeare does all the time! You may say, however, that Cordelia is a character, not the author. But to whom, then, is she appealing in her asides? In her second aside, after Regan's speech, instead of asking what to speak, she prepares to speak, but immediately changes her mind, as if it were obviously impossible: "Then poor Cordelia!/ And yet not so, since I am sure my love's/ More ponderous than my tongue" (I.i.78-80). The stresses do not fall on "my," but on the surrounding words, for the obstacle to speech goes beyond her character, and even beyond the creative capacity of the sympathetic author who hears her appeal, since she is the first one ever to use the word "ponderous" figuratively, attributing to something non-material great weight, so as to be unmovable by the muscular tongue. The deepest obstacle to her speech is the incommunicability by words alone of the profound truth of love. This does not mean that her love is unknowable in its

⁴ Regan's double will be "alone felicitate" in the bastard she and Cornwall make "legitimate" by political adoption, Edmund (III.v.26).

profundity--we shall see that it is--but that words alone, even Shakespeare's, simply will not suffice.

Let us take the hint of "metadrama" further. Might the asides of Cordelia alert the audience that Shakespeare feels something deeper and weightier than anything he has yet written, for which sake he internalizes a negative mode towards his own, already perfected dramatic art? It is exciting to hear in Cordelia the presence of the self-critical author, who dares to champion, from within the center of his play, the "anti-theatrical mentality," which insists on keeping truth pure of a flattering, falsifying imitation, and virtue uncorrupted by any fear of being boring. As we get to know her better, we see that Cordelia hates making scenes. To allow her soul and body to be put to use by art to challenge nature, is offensive to her nature. She points the way to the abandonment of such art altogether, by Prospero, who is Lear's comic double in The Tempest.

Now Lear turns to face Cordelia. He reminds her that she has two rival suitors who have long been seeking her hand in marriage. This reminder is part of her cue to confess to a love that will answer both him and the suitors at once. Let us listen to her words as they come reluctantly to her lips, from out of the preferred silence. For Shakespeare gives us the opportunity here to study the mysterious momentum of nascent speech, as the still lips open and something very little comes out, and then something more, and more. Remember, as we listen, that the actor is always trying to perform Cordelia's "love." As Lear dies we shall have the opportunity to study speech as it evanesces back into the stillness of this opening silence:

Lear. Now, our joy,
Although our last and least; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cordelia. Nothing, my lord. [silence]

Lear. Nothing? [silence]

Cordelia. Nothing. [silence]

Lear. Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
(I.i.84-92)

Cordelia's "nothings" should look and sound like their empty content: hard to hear, unplaced, out of time. The word is trochaic, a fading from stress to less, and the trochaic meter, if it continues at any length, tends to become boring. The tension of this moment arises from seeing the most reticent of characters trigger enormous histrionic passion.

Notice how Lear turns the trochaic "nothings" back into regular iambs after the first word in the line: "Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again." He also restores the normal linkage of cause and effect, without which the forward movement in speech and action enters the darkness. He gently warns Cordelia to play the scene in the light. She acknowledges his authority over her speech, but not over the unhappiness she felt in that second aside:

Cordelia. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.
(I.i.93-95)

She offers a one-word definition of her love: "bond," and then she bounds it between two negatives, to prevent any

additions or subtractions. We may hear echoes in that word "bond" of its associations: "bound," "bondage," "prison." Lear hears them too.

By name, he asks her again to clear away the darkness and take the offer of happiness:

Lear. How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a
little,
Lest it may mar your fortunes. (I.i.96-97)

The name, "Cordelia" (which means, "of the heart"), is beautiful, and Lear tends to link it with the alliterative word, "little" or "small" (I.iv.273-274). (The boy actor was probably smaller than usual.) We shall revisit this linkage at the end, when she is heavily dead in his arms, and he says: "Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little" (V.iii.273). A little more breath there, a few more words here, it is the same action of life and death, the biggest of themes depending on the littlest of things in body and spirit.

Cordelia now tries to mend a little, and sounds as if she is taking the action towards a happy conclusion:

Cordelia. Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
(I.i.97-100)

She now bounds her love with the words "obey" and "honor," which are internal directions, again, to the actor on the manner of performance of her love. If only she would stop speaking here. Her little mending might suffice. But she has a burning question to ask, one that comes, perhaps unexpectedly, from the competitive, that is, the dramatic

nature of speech, as it faces contradiction in its forward movement towards perfection:

Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? (101-102)

Notice the slight challenge of tone, to accompany quick glances at her sisters, before she goes eye to eye with Lear on the word "all." She could stop here, and make Lear answer a genuine question. That is what the Fool will do--bitterly and obsessively--make Lear answer. The Fool is Cordelia's "double" (probably played by the same boy actor). She could also answer her own question and tell Lear what those sisters are really like.⁵ That is also what the Fool will do, out of growing terror from being at their mercy.⁶

Cordelia applies the mystery of doubleness to her love, perhaps rather clumsily:

Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
(102-104)

Lear, hoping that Cordelia will give him heart to live, hears the stresses falling on "half," "him," "half," in a trochaic line that is itself cut right in half. Half is better than nothing, but "life and death" are not half-and-half matters, or disjunctive things, to Lear, but one conjoined whole. Cordelia finishes her confession of love

⁵ Recall Cordelia's farewell speech to her sisters at the close of this scene:

Cordelia. I know you what your are,
And, like a sister, am most loath to call
Your faults as they are named. (I.i.271-273)

⁶ The Fool typically marks his exits with references to violence (I.iv.324-328; I.v.51-52; III.iv.79-95). Few, if any, of his sayings are of the laughing kind.

with another quick glance at her sisters, to shame them, and then looks straight at Lear, again on the word "all":

Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. [silence] (105-106)

Then, after another brief silence, Lear asks two fatal questions. Cordelia answers them plainly, the first with one of the few "yes's" in the play:

Lear. But goes thy heart with this?

Cordelia. Ay, my good lord.
(I.i.107)

Earlier, Cordelia says, "I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth." Now she affirms that her heart goes with her words. Has she been caught, like her sisters, by the necessity of contradicting herself in speech on the subject of oneness in love? I think so. To "Ay," she adds, "my good lord," affirming a second time (97), from her heart, that Lear is good. A good man would see the presence of love in her honoring of his authority, her painful obedience to his command to speak what she finds unspeakable. But Lear does not see or feel that presence.

He knows that she is young, but hears words of hard practicality that belong not to the young--another contradiction. So he gives her one final opportunity (the sixth!) to answer his question, for he must test whether the love he does not presently see or feel in her, is there in her:

Lear. So young, and so untender?

Cordelia. So young, my lord, and true.
(I.i. 108-109)

Cordelia mistakes her cue here. She could have negated his negation of "tender," as he negated her "nothing," to affirm her love. But she affirms her youth, and substitutes "true," for "tender."⁷ Remember, however, that the challenge to the actor who plays Cordelia is to continue loving Lear even as she adopts the appearance of untenderness by not upholding, through artifice, Lear's claim on life. Rather, she upholds nature's claim on new life through generation by affirming the naturalness of daughter becoming also wife and mother. She says nothing explicit about becoming a mother and providing Lear with grandchildren, perhaps because that admission would appear to divide her love even more than in halves, and it is kinder to leave generation as implicit in the marriage.

Cordelia's spoken love thus moves from "nothing" to "half" to "true." "True" means she does not have to change a single word; they are *all* true, hence repeatable. The partitioning of all her love does not hinder her in the least from saying that she is all true. That word "true" is the cue for Lear. The allness of her truth passes into the allness of Lear's anger, for it is allness that he wants from her. Is he not prompting her to offer, that is, to "tender" all her heart to him until he is gone, and then ("haply") to marry, not like her sisters? Cordelia would not have to change a single word in order to answer "yes" to that question, if it were so asked. I think she would

⁷ She could say, "true tender," but these words contain a pun, and Cordelia is the last person to make a pun. (Polonius makes much of this pun in *Hamlet*, I.iii.100-110.) She speaks truth plainly. Perhaps she thinks that speaking plainly is necessary for love not to become mere tenderness, which by avoiding pain, leads to the avoidance of love. Lear implies later that he sees "pride" in what she calls "plainness" (I.i.131). I myself do not.

Her father's heart from her! Call France. Who
stirs?

(I.I.110-128)

Kent attempts to intervene on the cue, "sometime daughter." "Time" is his call to action. He wants Lear to pause, reconsider, and mend his speech. Why not? No one has been stabbed to death. These are just words, and words can be undone or taken back. Words are "sometime things," or rather, not things at all. Anger is a "sometime passion." But Lear's anger, cosmic from the start, floods his voice and body with feelings of power and motion. His one hundred knights will substitute for Cordelia as his new means of maintaining longevity in anger. Goneril is not unwise to fear them. If Lear were to reconsider and take back his words, then the merits of his wrath, their felt benefits as challengers to age and death, would be "sometime things," momentary and unsubstantial, no matter how deeply felt and true in their utterance.

Kent's attempt to release Lear from his anger and restore Cordelia to favor puts the question of the play in terms of the remedy of losses. Death is anticipated by many manifest losses, big and small: the loss of a smile is a little death, of respect and recognition, of garments, shelter, sanity, eyesight, hope. We feel encouraged to see how many of these losses are indeed recoverable. In the end, we search time and place for Cordelia, who is lost to death's power. Thus it is Kent who first directs us, on the cue, "sometime daughter," to "see better" those things present for all time (I.i.161).

Kent's interruption does open a space for four and a half lines that Lear may not have spoken otherwise. His short line, "As thou my sometime daughter" completes

itself, both in sound and sense, with "Call France! Who stirs?" So we have Kent to thank for Lear's stunning line about "the Dragon and his wrath." Any Englishman would know that dragons are not to be tamed, but slain. The anger of Lear can be appeased only by killing it, which entails the risk of making him angrier, and that is just what happens. For a moment or two, however, Lear's anger does modulate downward to allow for his only confession of love, and his expectation of Cordelia's kindness. He looks her straight in the eye and holds her there: "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest/ On her kind nursery." He commands her "Hence." She stays there, and holds his eyes in hers, hoping to assuage his anger with her tears.⁹ But her staying there makes him even angrier, and he turns from her face, saying, "and avoid my sight!" as if by his power over himself, he could make her not his daughter, not present to sight, not felt inside him. Lear does not look at Cordelia for the duration of this scene. It is important to see them holding each other's eyes and then breaking apart, because they will replay this action of seeing in the forgiveness scene, in an opposite direction.

We can now appreciate what makes Lear probably the hardest of all Shakespeare's roles to perform. He reaches a peak of passion early in the play--line 110, with about 2900 lines to go--yet he must mount higher and higher in passion, with ever more of the whole coming into views. The actor has to differentiate and modulate that passion, as we just witnessed, according to the expanding views, so that we can see and feel as much of the whole as possible.

⁹ Cordelia sheds tears every time we see or hear of her (alive). Tears are as essential to her character as fatness is to Falstaff or blackness to Othello. Their multiple meanings require careful presentation.

This is a very hard challenge to meet. But Shakespeare has provided the actor internal directions for how to perform the precise meanings of every speech, moment by moment. The image of something coming "between the Dragon and his wrath," alerts the actor to the many thoughts and feelings that frequently come between Lear and his passion, which otherwise would obliterate distinctions in the world, and simply tire us out. The histrionic challenges to the actor are awesome, but the meanings of the play are commensurate to the challenges; so we must identify and meet them.

France and Burgundy, the two patient suitors from foreign lands, enter as the banished Kent exits to a foreign land. Here begins "part two" of the love test, intended by Lear to deprive his "sometime daughter" of a husband. To be neither wife nor daughter, but detached and unrelated, is to be sent on the way to being "nothing." In part two of the test, however, "she's there" for the man who wants "nothing more" than "aught" or "all" of the "little" that he sees standing there, and who, in addition, can brave Lear's "displeasure" to receive only "that":

Lear (to Burgundy). Sir, there she stands
If aught within that little seeming substance,
Or all of it, with our displeasure pieced,
And nothing more, may fitly like your Grace,
She's there, and she is yours. (I.i.199-203)

Let us remember this: Cordelia "stands" Lear's displeasure by remaining present throughout both parts of the painful love test, a show of strength.¹⁰ But she stands "there," not

¹⁰ When Edmund orders Cordelia and Lear to prison, she initially tries to maintain her presence to the action until her sisters appear (presumably so that shame may deride them). But she abandons the effort to stay, *not for lack of strength*, and loses her life as a result. Does Cordelia change? We are tempted to think so. But perhaps the same intent underlies both actions: to test the truth of

"here," not in the grace of Lear's presence. She is become "nothing but Cordelia." She shows too little "seemliness" in her answers to Lear, and that makes her ugly, not to be looked upon, a kind of monster. Lear implies all this by his professed hate, which coupled with the non-acknowledgement of looks, lays claim to the authority of nature. France asks the logical question: what monstrous thing did she do? He adds, that given all the praises he has heard of Cordelia, to believe something monstrous of her now must be a "faith that reason without miracle/ Should never plant in me" (I.i.223-224). This time, Cordelia does not mistake her cue: the "monstrous" would require a "miracle" to sustain it in this man. This time, she knows exactly what to speak to secure her reputation and possibly a husband. We are impressed that she has the composure to address Lear, the Dragon, who in his wrath will not look at her, not see the love still being proven:

Cordelia. I yet beseech your majesty,
If for I want that glib and oily art
To speak and purpose not, since what I well
 intend
I'll do't before I speak, that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
No unchaste action or dishonored step,
That hath deprived me of your grace and favor;
But even for want of that for which I am richer,
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking. (I.i.225-235)

Cordelia's "want," twice spoken, of which she is glad, is also a want of justification for Lear's anger. It is his want, which arises from his desire, his felt lack of a love that sustains life. We feel their double want as our want

love--when the dowry is taken away, when life is taken away--and all that remains is the substance one sees.

of a proper beginning for the tragic action now underway. We want to see what cause is at work driving the present action forward, with necessity and intelligibility, to its middle (forgiveness), and from there to its end (death). Critics have often worried about there being two plots in King Lear--the girl plot and the boy plot. I am more concerned, owing to these "wants," that there may not be one.¹¹

Lear takes up Cordelia's challenge, that he lacks a cause to deprive her of his looks of "grace and favor," in one of the most brilliant responses in the play:

Cordelia. A still-soliciting eye, and such a
tongue
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking.

Lear. Better thou
Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me
better.

(I.i.233-236)

Lear echoes the imperfect chiasmus at the end of Cordelia's speech (I am glad...have not/not have...lost your liking), by repeating her two "not's" in the figure of a perfect chiasmus (Better...not/not...better). He even draws a third, more complicated, chiasmus in relation to the sense of Cordelia's words: "**glad** I have not...not to have hath **lost** me/**not** been **born**...not **pleased** me." Lear's artful purpose is to justify his anger as a cause of tragedy, so

¹¹ Regan's question, "What need one?"(II.iv.262), goes beyond the immediate quarrel over the knights. (The knights go beyond themselves in their meaning. See footnote 3, page 3.) We hear in this question: "What need oneness? unity? wholeness?" Perhaps oneness depends on the presence of a love that bonds separate things as one, and keeps the halves of a double together as a whole, enduringly. Lear rejects the definition of love as "bond," and Cordelia, who offers it, is gone away to France when Regan asks this question. So it is a good question: "What need one?"

he adopts the proverbial, high tragic formula: "Better not to have been born." But he completes the comparison with words of such contrast ("not to have pleased me better") that France cannot take the pretension of tragedy seriously:

France. Is it but this? A tardiness in nature
Which often leaves the history unspoke
That it intends to do. (I.i.237-239)

So we are now back to where we started, with no cause to justify Lear's anger, and gladness at the want of it. France discovers here, in his anti-tragic, "Is it but this?" the very substance of "this," which is "nothing but Cordelia," and in her, he finds the "entire point" (242) of love. So we have made a circle of feeling in the two-part love test, from love to hate to love. The circle and the chiasmus provide images of potential plots. The circle is the wheel of fortune, whose operation the dying Edmund will affirm at the end ("The wheel has come full circle; I am here." V.iii. 176). The chiasmus suggests the cross purposes of comedy and tragedy. Its image at the end will be Lear carrying Cordelia in his arms: the living vertical crossed by the dead horizontal. We shall have to wait and see if either of these images satisfies our criteria for a unified plot.

Cordelia's "tardiness of [verbal] nature," which helps France to fall in love with her, is not a dramaturgical virtue. It is customary in Greek and Shakespearean tragedy to tell the audience ahead of time what is going to happen, rather than to surprise them.¹² Surprise is a juvenile

¹² Shakespeare gives the impression of telling us less than the Greek playwrights do, but he tells us too, though in more dramatic ways. Iago, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Claudius all tell us what they are going to

pleasure, which distracts from the main tragic emotions of pity and fear. To know the depth of these emotions requires concentration on them, not blind anticipation of events. Cordelia is not concerned to anticipate in speech her contribution to the action for the sake of our concentration or the perfection of tragic form. This is consistent with her anti-theatrical sensibility. But this tardiness of hers seems catching, like a disease, even by those who do not otherwise share this sensibility. Never does Kent, Gloucester, Edgar, or Albany tell us in advance what his plans are (if any) for Lear and Cordelia. The only plan that Kent and Gloucester articulate is to bring them together at Dover. We keep hearing the word "Dover," as if the place itself were a plan. The necessity and purpose of fighting a battle **after** the reunion at Dover remain mysteries. Goneril and Regan "hit together" (I.i.306) to separate Lear from his knights, but from how many of them? They do not plan the amount. They discover the goal is naught only in each other's competitive presence. What do they plan to do after that? The only character who does tell us his plan for Lear and Cordelia is Edmund. He plans to kill them so that he can become king. But even Edmund has no plan for disposing of the two sisters and Albany. He leaves that up to them and to chance (V.i.58-72). What kind of a tragedy is it that keeps us asking: What is happening? Where is it happening? What will happen next? Who is in charge of the action? On what should I be concentrating? Is this the time for catharsis, or should I wait?

do before they do it. There are surprises, of course, in these tragedies (Hamlet stops telling us what he is going to do when he returns from his sea voyage), but they are not of the fundamental kind we find in King Lear.

It may be, however, that by not knowing things that we are typically given to know in a tragedy, we shall be able to see the things it contains, not in terms of what we know or want, but *as they are*. That is to say, perhaps we shall be able to watch this play not as solicitors of tragic experience, of any kind we have known before, but as pure on-lookers, whose experience fits the object (action) patiently and freely at all points.¹³

Cordelia provides a clue to the meaning of pure looking in her criticism of the "still-soliciting eye." Goneril and Regan see things with an eye that works like a hand, always thrust out toward the world--begging, taking, or repelling. Cordelia sees things with no internal thrust toward possession or repulsion. France sees "nothing but Cordelia," and he loves her; for he sees someone whose seeing wants nothing from what she sees, and this is beautiful to him. He sees the object made one with her by being seen by her, without loss either to that object or to her as subject. The unsoliciting eye does not act on things, it beholds them, lets them be known inside the seer as they are outside. Cordelia's words take their matter-of-fact quality from her way of seeing, as do her body ("there she stands") and stage presence (a "little seeming substance"). Her sisters take their direction in speech and gesture from their "still-soliciting eyes," always seizing or thrusting away, fierce or seductive. Their way of seeing makes Goneril and Regan interesting characters

¹³ "Bear free and patient thoughts," Edgar counsels Gloucester, after he survives his leap of death from the cliffs of Dover (IV.vi.80). We know that Gloucester is at the bottom of those cliffs all along. But there is a lesson here for us, of maintaining proper disorientation to action. Our experience of the play is not to know where the next step of action will land us. We are like Gloucester, taking the steps that go from the heights to the depths, or the reverse, and learning thereby how to live with "free and patient thoughts."

for actors to play and for us to watch, since every glance points to some other end, outside itself.

Cordelia may seem comparatively boring. We have noted this before.

France expresses his love for Cordelia in a strange, new language of desire, which fits the beauty of their seeing:

France. Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich
being poor,
Most choice forsaken, and most loved despised,
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon.
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away.
Gods, gods! 'Tis strange that from their cold'st
neglect
My love should kindle to inflamed respect.
(I.i.252-257)

He walks to where she stands "there," and makes that place his "here," by taking up her hand in his own (on "Thee") and looking her in the eye and at her silent lips (on "thy virtues"). In his unified motion of legs, hands, and eyes, he bridges the gap between what is left abandoned out there, even by the gods, and what he finds newly wonderful in here, his heart--"inflamed respect." "Respect" is word of seeing and knowing, which we use to focus proper attention on the point of the matter at hand. "Seize," "kindle," and "inflamed" are words of intense desire, the present point of which, we are told, is "respect," which is itself a seeing of the essential point of things. The point to be seen in this action of love and marriage is that Cordelia inspires by her presence the righting of wrongs, even those of the gods. One wonders how far that power of hers will extend.

Lear accedes to the union from an angry distance. Not looking at Cordelia, he takes (as he thinks) his final parting from her:

Lear. Thou hast her, France; let her be thine, for
we
Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
That face of hers again. Therefore be gone,
Without our grace, our love, our benison.
(I.i.264-267)

Each of the terms of this exit will be replayed in the forgiveness scene. Finality will be undone on its own terms. How far will that power to undo finality extend?

Before we look at Lear and Cordelia's second scene together, I want to consider more deeply the meaning of entrances and exits, as markers of action, deeds of power, and anticipations of life and death. Look back for a moment at Lear's first entrance. Gloucester, speaking to Kent, says of Edmund: "He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. The King is coming" (I.i.33-34). Lear's cue to enter, the words "out" and "away," is Edmund's cue to prepare to leave the country. Edmund makes his actual exit (with Gloucester) to Lear's words, "darker purpose" (I.i.38). Lear and Edmund change places here, and they will continue to do so throughout the play. Lear's "darker purpose" receives physical expression and meaning through the most basic of the elements of theatrical art, the movement of bodies on and off the stage. Let me illustrate this further. It will prove important.

The human body is a lot of flesh and blood and bones to have to carry around all the time, if the profit is only to get something said. If the words alone were what that mattered, we would not find Shakespeare taking such care to

move bodies on and off the stage meaningfully and beautifully, not merely mechanically and efficiently. These motions are boundary crossings, mysteries of passage, to be questioned each time they happen. What brings Edmund quickly back from his intended, lengthy "out" and "away"? Answer: the dark purpose of Goneril, who, in a way, summons him with her exit line: "We must do something, and I' th' heat" (I.i.311). Edmund enters, addresses Nature as his goddess (no woman will he serve), asks a lot of questions about why his bastardy should prevent him from having land and title, and calls on his natural qualities to challenge the non-recognition of his merit. Edmund thus takes over the stage from Lear, the first question of Lear, and the "darker purpose" passed from Lear to the elder daughters, and thus begins the so-called, "second plot."

The coordinated changes of place between Lear and Edmund in Act III (the storm scenes) are impressive. At the end of scene iii, Edmund tells us of his plan to inform Cornwall of his father's possession of a treasonous-looking letter:

Edmund. This seems a fair deserving, and must
draw me
That which my father loses--no less than all.
The younger rises when the old doth fall.
(III.iii.24-26)

Lear re-enters the storm (scene iv) on the word, "fall" (for the storm is supposed to make him fall), yet determined to "endure" the "too rough" "tyranny" of nature, the "goddess" whom Edmund serves (III.iv.2-3). At the end of scene iv, Lear exits (still in the storm) on Edgar's: "Fie, foh, fum,/ I smell the blood of a British man" (III.iv.186-187). "Blood" summons back Edmund (scene v),

who convinces Cornwall that he (Edmund) risks being "censured" by others, because his "nature [blood ties] thus gives way to loyalty" to Britain (III.v.2-3); he implies, of course, that he merits his traitorous father's place as Earl of Gloucester, and a new father in Cornwall.

The movements on and off the stage throughout this play are almost always similarly meaningful. They capture the ordinary rhythm of nature, by which "the younger rises when the old doth fall." Let us not overlook this deep and natural current of action owing to our superficial fascination with evil. Every entrance, as such, advances the action and lays claim to life; every exit, as such, concedes to being unneeded by the action, and is an anticipation of death. To control the entrances and exits is to have power over life and death. The purpose of Goneril and Regan in Acts I and II is to make Lear exit at such a peak of passion that he will not be able to re-enter their presence, unless his passion is all spent. They, being young and strong, control the action, which has no further need of him, who, being old, weak, and (thanks to them) spent, can die naturally. What the sisters do not anticipate is that Lear will find in the storm new sources of passion, speech, and action, which include prayer, natural and social philosophy, preaching, and forgiveness.

Thus do the indispensable material elements of Shakespeare's dramaturgical art, I mean bodies in motion, provide us a laboratory for studying the moving joints of action, the contest of power, and the continual passages between life and death. The bodies are not being moved on and off the stage merely in order for words to be said, but to put us wholly in the presence of mysterious things, *which to know, takes that way.*

Let us turn now to the forgiveness scene (IV.vii), the second of Lear and Cordelia's performances together. Lear, decked in weeds, is caught by Cordelia's French soldiers as he runs and hides, with "burning shame" (IV.iii.47), in the fields of corn around Dover. After a long sleep, with new garments, music playing in the background, he is carried in a chair to Cordelia. How will she wake him from sleep and restore his lost mind? With medicinal lips she kisses his head of white hairs (26-29), which were torn by his own hands and "made nothing of" by the "eyeless rage" of the "impetuous blasts" (III.i.8, 9). That kiss, from lips that initially refused to speak her love, prompts Cordelia's longest speech in the play. Most of this speech consists of questions, whose aim is to picture Lear in the storm and hovel, without trying to explain how he got there:

Cordelia. Had you not been their father, these
white flakes
Did challenge pity of them. Was this a face
To be opposed against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning to watch--poor perdu!
With this thin helm? Mine enemy's dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that
night
Against my fire; and wast though fain, poor
father,
To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn,
In short and musty straw? Alack, alack!
'Tis wonder that thy life and wits at once
Had not concluded all. He wakes;
(IV.vii.30-42)

It is enough for Cordelia to see that "face" standing opposed to the winds and thunder, to see that "thin helm" watching for the lightning, and to see that "father"

hovelling in the filth of swine and wretches, to know--no matter what may be said on behalf of the elder sisters or against Lear--that "violent harms" have been done by them to him and his "reverence" (28, 29). These are not rhetorical questions, but clarifying ones, that deny to evil the blinding authority of its own perspective.¹⁴ Her wonder at his power to endure these harms is captured at the end of her speech by the decisive words, "not concluded all." That word "all" opens Lear's eyes.

Now that Lear is awake, how will Cordelia restore his wits? The politically respectful questions, "How does my royal lord? How fares your majesty?" (44), fail, as does the socially neutral question, "Sir, do you know me?" (48). Lear acknowledges her as a "soul in bliss" or "spirit" of someone dead (46, 49), for he does not yet fix his eyes on her, and thinks himself wrongly taken "out o' th' grave" (45). Lear does not know where he is, where he has been, what time it is, or what to say. He feels one hand prick another, but this does not assure him of his condition. That pricked hand is Cordelia's cue to kneel down before his chair and ask him to look upon her from above and hold that hand in blessing over her head. She now dares to replay the opening scene so as to obtain from Lear what he says then, in his exit line, would never be hers: his grace, love, and benison (I.i.267). The anti-theatrical Cordelia is drawing upon the essence of life *as play* to redo what was done badly.

¹⁴ The meaning of the blinding of Gloucester now becomes more apparent: see him as a traitor, from Goneril and Regan's perspective, and he deserves even worse than he gets. But this would be blind seeing, with an eye that solicits objects on one's own behalf, and therefore sees them as one's fears and desires determine.

Lear thinks that the figure kneeling before him is mocking him. So he kneels down to erase any distinction of level and power that could be mocked. In the act of kneeling he recovers the first part of his lost identity:

Lear. Pray, do not mock me:
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
(59-61)

He is aptly mocking himself now, in this general and specific statement of age (which echoes Cordelia's first statement of love, "According to my bond, no more nor less," I.i.95). The door to a possible comic ending from a mistakenly tragic beginning is opening a little. Lear steals a look inside his self:

And, to deal plainly [to speak as she spoke then]
I fear I am not in my perfect mind. (62-63)

He begins to look around at objects, some vaguely familiar, others quite unfamiliar:

Methinks I should know you and know this man,
Yet I am doubtful; for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is, and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments, nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. (64-68)

Cordelia starts to cry as he slips away from that open door. Her cries sound like laughter to him, as crying easily can when one is not looking at the person. He thinks he is being mocked again. This time, to put a stop to it, he dares to look at her face more closely, and to offer what little he knows to be true about his self:

Do not laugh at me,
For, as I am a man,

--as a *man*, he tentatively extends his hand to bridge the gap that separates him from others--

Lear. I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

Cordelia. And so I am, I am.
(68-70)

Cordelia affirms his acknowledgment by completing his thought, while extending it (and the line) to thirteen syllables. She could affirm him more briefly, with no harm to the meter, by not saying "And so," or by saying "I am" only once. But by saying "**And so** I am," she makes Lear's act of speech identical with the content of his speech. This is marvelous, perfect sanity. The gap between language and truth is bridged here, as is the space between them by his outstretched arm and hand (about to touch her face). The second "I am" prolongs this almost transcendent moment and affirms the double name, "my child Cordelia." (This is the only time Lear links "my child" with the name of a daughter.) The doubleness of this moment characterizes her (as child and lady), him (as father and man), and the two of them--made one in the act of seeing each other purely, and restored by this pure seeing to their true selves.

The second "I am" coincides with the fall of her tears. Lear focuses on her eyes, and with his outstretched hand he touches the "I am," in the form of a tear. He asks what quality it has, for he thought he was hearing laughter, and now he sees a smile: "Be your tears wet?" (71). He puts a tear of the "I am" to his lips and tastes it, making it one with him. "Yes, faith," they are wet (71). That is one of the few "yes's" of the play. Her tears are wet... like the rain. What rain? The good rain that falls from the heavens and extinguishes fire and

"burning shame" (IV.iii.47), waters the dead ground and makes to spring "all blest secrets" and "all...unpublished virtues of the earth"? (IV.iv.15-16). Or the bad rain that wet him in the wind and made him "chatter," while the thunder would not keep peace, and the lightning threatened to strike him dead? (IV.vi.101-104). That bad rain, if present now in tragic tears, he would make stop: "I pray, weep not" (71). To make the tears stop, he is prepared to die; or rather, to be one with his executioner, whose tears, tasted, are now his: "If you have poison for me, I will drink it" (72).

Each of these two lines (in bold type below), of wet tears and liquid poison, is a complete, grammatical unit:

Cordelia.

And so I am, I am.

Lear. Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.

I know you do not love me; for your sisters

Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

You have some cause, they have not.

(70-74)

Moreover, if we delete either or both of the lines, what remains is an equally intelligible flow of speech. They are thus gratuitous--free--though scripted. "Unit lines" like these are rare in Shakespeare. Something extraordinary is happening in them: a gestured extension in time of the almost transcendent moment of oneness. We are in the presence of something like "elemental grace."

The wrath and tears of the opening scene are turned into blessing and grace in this scene. To complete the replaying of that scene, Lear and Cordelia must also recover the love. Looking straight into Cordelia's face,

at his moment of greatest vulnerability, Lear says: "I know you do not love me" (73). For how could she--or anyone--love the foolish, the rot of age, the source of tears, and the father of wrong? Such a thing is ugly and hateful. Lear immediately puts his "knowledge" to the test:

Lear. I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.

Cordelia. No cause, no cause.
(73-75)

Cordelia turns the mystery of her sisters' evil, their "not" having of cause, into the mystery of her enduring love, which has "no cause" not to be. Again, she repeats herself, a sign of truth. This double phrase unifies the three sisters, two evil and one good, under joint subjection to the rule of "no cause." These words may be the most important in the play. *They substantiate the love as transcendent, since they annihilate any causal power over love by evil.* The opening scene has now been replayed to an opposite conclusion in every respect.¹⁵ Lear (not France, who is absent) has Cordelia, his child; he sees her face, and would go on seeing it forever (as their next scene shows); present are grace, love and benison. In this extended, transcendent moment--beyond cause and effect, and (for Lear) outside time and place--all fear is gone; all pity superfluous. "The great rage/ You see, is killed in him" (IV.vii.78-79). The dragon is slain.

¹⁵ Recall Lear's exit lines from the opening scene:

Lear. Thou hast her, France; let her be thine, for we
Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see
That face of hers again. Therefore be gone,
Without our grace, our love, our benison. (I.i.264-267)

Lear is driven mad and almost killed by his obsession with cause and effect. We hear, in his many causal questions, his step-by-step, agonizing descent into madness: "How now, daughter? What makes that frontlet on?" (I.iv.194). "Who put my man in the stocks?" (three times in II.iv). "What is the cause of thunder?" (III.iv.158) "Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?" (III.vi.76). We see how his mind is cured of this obsession, and the goodness of his life restored, when, after a long sleep, with music playing, he kneels down and reaches out to touch the tears of his child, which he would make stop, since he caused them, with an offer of his life; but there is no cause, she tells him, to make this offer. The tears are of her essence, and her essence is "love, dear love" (IV.iv.28).

But this scene is not yet over. Cordelia's tears, let us not forget, are also shed to persuade France to send an army to England. So it is fitting that Lear has one more question for her, about place: "Am I in France?" Kent, not Cordelia, answers him: "In your own kingdom, sir" (76). We must, of course, acknowledge the goodness of Kent in serving his master so loyally; but Kent is a political actor, a "vermin-killer" (to borrow something from Edgar, III.iv.162). His answer punctures the otherworldly moment. We hear the political dogs barking again, with no one to say, "Avaunt, you curs," except for Lear himself (III.vi.63). "Do not abuse me," he says to Kent (77). But it is too late. The bridge to Cordelia opens into a gap, and political causes and history rush in to fill it.

This is the fifth time in this scene that Lear worries he is being wronged, abused, mocked, or laughed at. This worry of his we recognize from the beginning, when he asks

his daughters to challenge with merit the nature of things, which mock us with change. Here, the underlying worry is that the endurance of suffering and the severity of virtue in the achievement of hope, are to become sources of mockery, by there being nothing in the end to justify them. Cordelia's "No cause" may have a dark side.

The double exits from this scene reinforce these fears. Cordelia and Lear exit first. On the advice of the doctor to "Trouble him no more" (81), Cordelia takes Lear's arm and helps him to stand up: "Will't please your Highness walk?" (83). She addresses him in his political capacity as she escorts him off. He stood up to the lightning when there was scarce a bush; now he stands up to the dominance of time and place, which he weakly and prosaically tries to keep from spoiling the transcendent moment (already passed with Kent's declaration): "You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish" (84-85). Cordelia and Lear exit, linked arm to arm. We see them twice more in this play, arms still linking them. The dominant gesture of the play is supporting and leading someone by an arm and hand, a visual reminder of that invisible oneness of two "I am's." Kent, however, remains on stage with a Gentleman to restore time and place to what they were: "'Tis time to look about; the powers of the kingdom approach apace" (93-94). No vain pursuit of transcendence for Kent. The restoration that matters to him is of the "dear rights" that Lear gave away to his "dog-hearted daughters" (IV.iii.44, 45). That restoration will depend, not on moments of touching oneness, blessed in the "holy water" shook free from "heavenly eyes" (IV.iii.31), but on a battle, won or lost with the arms of war:

Kent. My point and period will be thoroughly
wrought,
Or well or ill, as this day's battle's fought.
(97-98)

Exit Kent on the word "fought"--and so enters Edmund, along with Regan and soldiers, to the sounds of a drum, to begin Act V.

Lear's weak exit line, "Pray you now, forget and forgive" (84), is poignant in relation to this delayed exit of Kent. If evil is nothing, ultimately, then forgetting it makes sense. How can one remember a thing that is nothing? But if evil is something, then Kent is right to remain on stage to summon readiness for the battle. It is not enough to prevent the fiend from taking over one's own soul. One must also learn to kill the vermin, even at the risk of the fiend's return to vex the soul of the killer. We may call this "the crux" of the tragedy, manifest here in the exits and entrances between Acts IV and V. We shall experience it again in the mingling of forgetting, fighting, and forgiving that occurs after the day's battle is fought. Lear and Cordelia (sent to prison by Edmund) are forgotten by Albany, Edgar, and the others, who become quickly absorbed by what they see, with fear and desire, on their limited, personal horizons. As Edgar defeats Edmund in what is supposed to be a formal, knightly duel, and as its aftermath of last deeds and tales lingers on, Cordelia is being hanged. Whether we, too, forget about Lear and Cordelia is an empirical matter to be discovered in the presence of these actions. If we experience forgetting (and despite our prior knowledge of Edmund's plan to have them killed, I do forget), then we feel the power of "no cause" to rupture the unity of action and make us forget

evil in order to see to the fight against evil--a nothing that must nonetheless be treated as a something, in order to make it finally nothing. If we do so forget about Lear and Cordelia, then we understand, at once and intuitively, the truth of Lear's terrible cry at the end: "A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!" (V.iii.271).

Let us now turn to that end, which begins with the third (and briefest) scene between Lear and Cordelia, their going away to prison (V.iii.1-40). To approach this scene properly requires, as always, that we see how the prior action brings it forward, meaningfully. Action means bodies moving on and off. The movements of bodies shared between Edgar and Gloucester in the prior scene (V.ii) are brief, but unless we understand them and the accompanying speeches, we shall mistake the significance of what follows.

Shakespeare shows us nothing of the movements of battle, on which everything depends. Instead, we hear its sounds offstage, as we watch the blind Gloucester sitting alone under a tree, silently praying that "the right may thrive" (V.ii.2). After a short while, Edgar returns, still pretending not to be himself, to take the praying "old man" to some safety, since "King Lear hath lost" (6). Twice he yells "away," twice calls for Gloucester's hand and urges "come on." Gloucester does not budge: "No further, sir; a man may rot even here" (8). At this point we see that the action of prayer looks no different from the action of rotting. The difference depends on the silent thoughts inside and the silent god outside, both invisible. Edgar thought to have cured Gloucester of his despair (another premature, internal catharsis of sorts). So he applies another lesson: "Men must endure/Their going

hence, even as their coming hither:/ Ripeness is all. Come on." "And that's true too" (9-11), Gloucester replies, as he gets up off the ground (with Edgar's arm), goes "away" from the tree (the exit from here), and "comes on" toward ripeness (the entrance to there), in one motion that captures a life of endurance. Gloucester's thoughts encompass contradictory truths: rot here, ripen there--both the work of a man--just as his motion encompasses contradictory meanings of going and coming, dying and living. On this cue of contradiction, registered inside and outside of Gloucester, Edmund enters in conquest and immediately sends Lear and Cordelia off as prisoners. But who has caught whom? Who controls the movement of bodies? What meanings of "ripeness" have they come to enact?

"Some officers take them away" (V.iii.1), Edmund orders as they enter. But Cordelia has three things to say that delay the execution of Edmund's order. First, to everyone present, she says: "We are not the first/ Who with best meaning have incurred the worst" (3-4). So the battle was lost because others with good intentions have also lost. This is another version of "no cause." Second, to Lear, she says: "For thee, oppressed King, I am cast down;/ Myself could else out-frown false fortune's frown" (5-6). This is "ripeness" according to Cordelia: out-enduring "false fortune" in a frowning contest, and then smiling as the victor, afterwards. She is now "cast down" to the place of rot only on Lear's behalf. He will tell her in a moment that he is not "oppressed," but ready, with her, to out-endure their present enemies, and time and place as well.

Cordelia has one more line to say. She turns from Lear back to Edmund, the man of the hour, and speaks her

last words: "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" (7). The question is firm and sincere. Cordelia still thinks of Goneril and Regan as daughters and sisters. These relations are essential in her eyes, and on their basis the sisters can be shamed, and possibly even redeemed. What a scene that would have been: Cordelia finally calling her sisters' faults "as they are named" (I.i.273), rightly and repeatedly, in their presence, beside Lear as their prisoners, with tears, out-frowning them, negating their negations, and standing her ground, as we have seen her do, until truth ripens and uncovers itself.¹⁶ But we do not get that scene. Lear takes Edmund's cue for himself and answers Cordelia's question with four stressed "no's," two for her sisters, two for his daughters. They are not seeable as sisters and daughters anymore; they have ceased to be such in Lear's eyes. The four strong "no's" negate the relational names, and leave nothing there to see, no names to follow. Later, when the bodies of his elder daughters are shown to Lear (their faces covered), he feels nothing for them, and does not even turn his head to see them (V.III.294). This is not to say that Cordelia is wrong to call them "daughters and sisters." They can be, and not be, daughters and sisters, just as Gloucester can be praying and rotting. As long as the relation of gods to men remains unknown, we remain in a state of contradiction.

In order to know the gods, and settle all relations, Lear invites Cordelia to prison. He describes in nine

¹⁶ Recall Cordelia's last words to her sisters, upon exiting from their presence in the opening scene:

Cordelia. Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides,
Who covers faults, at last shame them derides.

(I.i.282-283)

clauses connected by nine "and's" how they will live there. Each clause surpasses its predecessor in expanse and beauty. He offers her a vision of life full of speech, sensations, and cognizance of the world's vicissitudes, but immune to them, a ripeness that **is** all, that never rots. Lear has become confident that the vision is not a mockery, because he and Cordelia have demonstrated that reality permits itself to be made as tragedy, and re-made as comedy, as in their re-enactment of the opening scene. Lear lays claim in this speech to more of those experiences of blessing, grace, and love, that will lead the two of them all the way up to the presence of God:

Lear. No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to
prison:

We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage:
When though dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins, who's in, and who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

Edmund.

Take them away.

(V.iii.8-19)

Edmund takes the word "moon," nature's emblem of inconstancy, as his cue to reissue his opening order, which is not being obeyed because Lear's speech has authority. The soldiers stand in awe at him. *As long as Lear can keep the vision going, no one will touch him or Cordelia.*

Lear twice stresses the word "out" at the end of lines. Edmund knows how it feels to be "out." (Recall the cue for their first change of place: "He hath been out nine

years, and away he shall again," I.i.33-34.) We hear Edmund's anger in his "Take them away." The soldiers start to move, but Lear mounts his vision yet higher and keeps those soldiers respectfully away:

Lear. Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught
thee?
He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,
And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes;
The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
Ere they shall make us weep. We'll see 'em
starved first.
Come. (V.iii.20-26)

Only now, on Lear's command "come," do the soldiers "take them away" to prison. Lear's "come" is the cue for Edmund's "Come hither, captain; hark" (27), and his secret plan to have them hanged. Whose "come" and whose speeches have the greater authority? Three gestures help us to answer this question.

Lear throws his arms around Cordelia as he asks, "Have I caught thee?" His encircling arms are an image, again, of the oneness of two "I am's," but the word "caught" also conveys the hunt. Recall that Cordelia's soldiers catch Lear just as he is about to resume running through fields of corn, on this intended exit line: "Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (IV.vi.189). When Lear realizes that the soldiers are obedient to his authority, he finds his true exit line: "Then there's life in 't. Come, and you get it, you shall get it by running. Sa, sa, sa, sa" (IV.vi.205-206). And off they run. In the present scene of catching, Lear says "he that parts us" will need "a brand" from heaven to "fire us hence," like foxes that are driven from their holes, to resume the hunt by running. If

we understand this anticipated parting as killing, then we assign to Lear's visionary words the value of the intended exit line of six "kill's," before Lear is caught by Cordelia and their value turns false. Now we can think that way here, and levy blame on Lear for sentimentalizing murder. But we can also let the image of bodies in motion support the visionary words. As Lear sees things, there is no death awaiting them in prison; at worst, the caught becomes uncaught and the hunt continues, with life still to be gotten by running. So we can understand their exit to prison as part of the continuing race to catch the prize of "all," as Edgar teaches Gloucester in the previous scene, naming that prize "ripeness." Running is an important image for understanding the final scene, when Cordelia is dead, and Lear is still trying to catch her, to go beyond the limits set by nature, and to know "the mystery of things." It will prove hard to keep up with him, but we shall try.

The second gesture that determines the meaning and authority of Lear's words is his wiping away of Cordelia's tears. They begin to flow when he speaks of parting. To wipe them he has to break the protective circle of his arms, as if the parting brand from heaven were descending in her very tears. He does not taste their wetness this time, but in the act of wiping them dry, he turns their new, threatening quality into support of their joint purpose of endurance and triumph. These tears, wiped dry and then withheld, foresee the drought that leads to famine and pestilence. Thus the heaven of her eyes, from which they fall, turn dry to evil men and starve them.

Third, and most important, as Lear and Cordelia exit on the word "Come," does either of them look back at

Edmund, as he says, "Come hither, captain; hark"? Lear, I feel sure, does not look back. He speaks so beautifully and authoritatively, that he wins, like Orpheus, the right to lead his beloved, "my Cordelia" (20), away from the false exit of death into the arms of life. Does Cordelia look back? I think she does. By turning her head towards Edmund (who never looks back himself from his vision ahead of more to win), she acknowledges the right and power of the political to turn the eye from its contemplation of the universal horizon back towards the "ebb and flow" of human affairs. Thus, Cordelia's body, in parting, tells us that she does not entirely share Lear's vision of transcendence, though she does go along with it, caught and uncaught at the same time. Her silence reminds us of the love test, that it continues, and that the tester is death. Edmund comes from "the ranks of death" to administer the test (IV.ii.24).

Edmund ends this "away to prison" scene, as Kent ends the forgiveness scene, claiming that "men/ Are as the time is" (V.iii.31-32). This is his understanding of ripeness: doing a "man's work" (40), according to the occupation made opportune by the time. Lear's visionary speech, which keeps the captain at a respectful distance, is to be understood, according to Edmund, as the timely fantasy of a loser in battle, about to be put to death--but Cordelia first, for that turn of her head, which catches Edmund's eye, proves her more dangerous. Where we turn our eyes--to look--makes all the difference, as we shall discover in the final scene between Lear and Cordelia, when we choose with our eyes where to be present to the action. Let us now turn to that scene.

The fourth and last scene between Lear and Cordelia begins, in my opinion, with the greatest entrance of all time. The cue for that entrance is Albany's: "The gods defend her! Bear him hence awhile." Then: "*Enter Lear, with Cordelia in his arms*" (V.iii.258).¹⁷ The last mention in this play of the gods brings on Lear and Cordelia, undefended. Lear enters as Edmund is carried off--their usual exchange of places, in that competitive rise and fall of young and old, nature's way. Please note that Lear carries "Cordelia" in his arms--not "the body of Cordelia." We need to pause here.

The usual technical difficulty in Shakespeare, with respect to the dead, is getting them off the stage, not bringing them back on.¹⁸ To bring a dead body--not just a head or headless corpse--back on intact, is rare. When this rarity happens in Shakespeare, the stage directions indicate: "the body of Ceasar" (shrouded), the "coffin" of Richard II or Ophelia, the "hearse" of Henry VI; moreover, in these cases, the body, coffin, or hearse is brought on for political or ceremonial purposes. What we witness in this last entrance of Lear and Cordelia, and in the action that follows, is altogether unique and awe-inspiring. Shakespeare's audience would have felt that immediately. We are put in the presence of death, right between the

¹⁷ Note the sequence of actions preceding Albany's cue to Lear: Kent enters and asks about Lear, which reminds everyone of the "great thing of us forgot"; the bodies of Goneril and Regan are then brought in; Edmund sees their bodies, and as their faces are covered, he acknowledges himself "beloved"; while "panting" for life, he intends to do good, "despite of mine own nature," by telling them to send "quickly" to the castle to save Lear and Cordelia. Three times he urges them to send fast, and Albany echoes him with "Run, run, O, run!" as does Edgar with "Haste thee, for thy life" (234-253). We recall, from our discussion of the prison scene, the image of the hunt and the getting or catching of life by running.

¹⁸ Shakespeare can get the dead bodies off with much feeling and interest, as happens with Hotspur and Polonius.

temporal points of having-just-happened and just-about-to-happen. The unprecedented purpose of bringing Cordelia back on stage is to question death with the authority earned by prior endurance, to make death yield up its secrets.

We need a password to enter the presence of death. Lear gives it to us with his entrance. It is "howl"--four top-of-the-mountain "howl's," that we are meant to take up as a chorus of wolves, all empty inside, ravenous to be filled with something:

Lear. Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of
stones;
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack.
(V.iii.259-261)

These "howl's" measure Lear's strides as he carries Cordelia to the point of concentration of all eyes and energy, center stage, the place of maximum acting potential, of most liveliness. The howls are separated by silences, which make them more terrible. What do I mean by that? When Gloucester screams for Edmund to "quit this horrid act" of blinding, he hears a genuine answer from Regan;¹⁹ when the thunder shakes the world flat, speech still intervenes between the thundering. Lear's "howl's," though they latch the hearing and eyes, do not elicit any sound or motion. Heaven's vault, which he would like to

¹⁹ *Regan.* Out, treacherous villain,
Thou call'st on him that hates thee. It was he
That made the overture of they treasons to us;
Who is too good to pity thee (III.vii.88-91).

Note that Regan perceives goodness of a high order in Edmund. That she is mistaken about him does not affect our impression of her capacity to love that goodness. This self-disclosure, honestly spoken after the release of supreme tensions in the acts of blinding, comes as a surprise to those who want her to be merely and consistently evil.

crack open to see what is behind it, stays as silently shut as Cordelia's eyes and lips.

Let us be aware of whether we assent to the helplessness of this old man and his dead child; or whether we remain open with Lear to the possibility that what he knows and what we know, on the basis of that entrance alone, namely, that she is dead and "gone forever" (261), is conditional, a matter of "if" (264). After all, Lear's knowledge that she does not love him is expressed conditionally ("If you have poison for me, I will drink it," IV.vii.72), and it turns out to be wrong ("no cause" for poison, 75). Our knowledge of her death is yet new, and must be fully suffered, endured, and tested from the outside and the inside. So Lear asks for a "looking-glass" to hold to her lips and test *if* there is breath:²⁰

She's gone for ever.
I know when one is dead and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.

(261-265)

No mirror is provided. Instead we hear the chorus of friends ask whether this is "the promised end" (Kent) or "image of that horror" (Edgar) (265-266). "End" (understood as the effect of "middle," which is the effect of a "beginning") comes with an implicit promise (from the theologian and philosopher) that it will better our souls with moral virtue and knowledge of the causes that make those three parts one action. This betterment is a kind of redemption of the sorrows that we endure from the beginning with these expectations of gain. But it is also possible,

²⁰ This scene itself is a mirror that we hold up to our mind's eye, to test the meaning of a mortality that speaks.

"excellent" it sounded in a world so otherwise full of hardness and loud terrors (274-275). In its universality as woman's voice, it is excellent, still.

We might not believe that Lear kills the manly captain who hangs Cordelia. So Shakespeare gives us an eye witness, the Gentleman who follows the howling Lear: "'Tis true, my lords, he did" (277). Six words from an anonymous man, and we believe. Spoiled by the "crosses" of age, however, Lear moves slowly, and he does not see "straight" (280-281). Are these crosses the causes of Cordelia's death? Of Kent's not receiving any acknowledgement for his continuity of service as Caius? Shall we fear age, for this power it has to unwitting the mind, make "corky" the arms (III.vii.30), and leave one inaccessible to the presentation of love and truth? Goneril fears Lear's age, and Regan, ever the competitor, catches her sister's fear, adds cruel perversity, plucks Gloucester's beard, and puts out his eyes. Their way cannot be our way.

The play presents another way. Lear cannot strike the captain quickly enough to save Cordelia's life, nor see through the costume changes of Kent and Caius to believe in the continuing presence of what seems absent. Let us try to link these failures of motion and perception. Perhaps, then, the other way, which fears not death, **is** a way of quickness of sorts: the shooting of a gap in motion, or the straight seeing that cuts right through dull habits of association. Or perhaps the way we seek is one of verbal quickness: the sudden finding on one's lips the missing unit of speech, the confessed truth, sounded by the body, and set free of the body's elements. In this direction we are heading, with "free and patient thoughts," led, as always, by the action (IV.vi.80).

The surviving friends agree that Lear, locked in the solipsism of grief (an intense form of the general solipsism we witness in this play), is not to be addressed any more. Albany tries to restore order by promising, in the spirit of Lear's first question, that the merits of friends will be rewarded, while foes will drink the "cup of their deservings," and that the "great decay," Lear, will be restored to "absolute power" (297-306). It is always in the interest of political men to get mourners to move on, after paying all due respects to grief. But before Kent or Edgar can affirm his words, Albany suddenly draws their attention back to Lear and Cordelia: "O, see, see!" (306). There can be no moving on politically until we come to terms with death's absolute disrespect.

What is there to see? "And my poor fool is hanged" (307). The conjunction "and," which Lear uses nine times in his previous scene to take authority from Edmund, in a single usage here takes all the authority away from Albany's political reasoning, or any such reasoning. For this little "and" attaches itself implicitly to every deed and act of speech: no more "if's," but the culminating "and" of death. Lear's three "no's," which previously he applies in foursome to the possibility of seeing "these daughters and these sisters" (7), he applies here to the "if's" of seeing Cordelia move. "No, no, no life?" (307). This question lingers over the sudden grotesqueness of the body he inspects: her head drooping aimlessly from the neck; the arms dangling pointlessly from the shoulders; the legs meeting at nothing; as death shamelessly discloses more of itself and takes away more of her. This is what catches Albany's eye and puts a stop to his political speech.

Then we hear Lear's penultimate question: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/ And thou no breath at all?" (308-309). We hear versions of this question all the time. But do we not feel that Lear has earned the right to have it answered? This has been his great question from the beginning, and its answer is the reason for our endurance. Why should an old man continue to lay claim to life at the expense of the young? Because the young confess to love him beyond natural causes. That is where we began. Now, Lear is asking the same question, but turned around: why should Cordelia, who is young, and almost without fault, not have the least bit of life, while animals, whose names are often assigned to indecent men and women, still live?

The words, "no breath at all," which conclude Lear's question, echo the words, "not concluded all," which Cordelia says to wake Lear from his grave of sleep (IV.vii.42). The voice that awakens here, to answer Lear's question, says: "Thou'lt come no more,/ Never, never, never, never, never" (309-310). Those five "never's," in the trochaic meter of on-going chant, are the complementary bookends of the five "nothing's" at the beginning. Those "nothing's," we noted, sound like what they mean; so should the "never's" sound: each the same, to capture the unchanging "no more-ness" of death, a brute fact of nature unassailable by art. To play with the "never's," to make them sound different, as actors inevitably do, might make death seem different over time, perhaps even an instigator of beauty. Such is the effect of death in Othello. Here it is very different. We must let the deep current of the line carry us relentlessly away from liveliness and light.

Five "never's" (one more than the self-cancelling pairs) tell us that we cannot cancel death by reference to another speaking occasion. There will be no more comings of Cordelia; no action calling her into presence at some other time or place, before some other audience; no more saying of her lines; for each successive "never" shuts out another would-be Cordelia, just as shutting the doors on Lear means that the action of life is quite through with him. These "never's" thus seem consistent with Cordelia's anti-theatrical disposition, and we may (for now) hear them as **her** answer to Lear's question of "why?" She is not a character subject to Shakespeare's authorial command, to speak words on cue, and to speak them again, over time and place, through embodiment in countless actors, whose particularities join to something universal in her. So we cannot even say that her death justifies itself by prompting the "why" question that turns us away from ephemeral dramatic poetry to the higher callings of theology and philosophy, since those "never's" wipe out participation in universals. As I said, we are permitting death to take away all that it can, in order to see if anything remains beyond it.

The "never's" are meant to kill Lear, by taking away both his animal breath and his capacity to find the next word and cross an infinite gap. But they are like a false exit line, for they do not kill Lear. Oh, he will die in about ten or fifteen seconds, but there is life in him yet. He finds--somewhere, somehow--twenty-two more words to say, all but two of them monosyllables, which occupy two and one-half lines. He will die mid-line, in an unfinished act of speaking and gesturing, which is as unique as his howling entrance. Tragic heroes in Shakespeare do not

leave their final lines and actions for some one else to take over as co-creator. Lear does.²¹ We must try to resist our pity as it focuses on Lear, in order to keep pace with Lear's own shifting focus outside of him. He offers us participation in his action as he dies. If we take the offer, we may approach the meaning of that action.

The leap word, taking the stress, that jumps beyond the "never's" to the next line of life, is "pray." "Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir" (311). This is a unit line, as before: intact unto itself, removable, gestural, and unifying. Although the line is scripted, like anything else in Shakespeare, its movement away from the deadly inertia of the trochaic "never's" is an act of freedom. The first two syllables ("pray you") continue the trochaic meter, but "undo" is an iamb, which undoes the sounding (and the sense) of the "never's." Lear's "Thank you, sir" is completely genuine--his first acknowledgement that free kindness is possible and that true gratitude is the only fit response. Full stop. Neither Kent nor Gloucester is ever thanked by Lear. The unbuttoner²² is thanked because his act is pure, and it contains in microcosm what Lear wants at the start from Cordelia: "kind nursery," to make his approach to death gentle (I.i.126). Lear's "thank you" completes the act, which then contains what he wants from all his daughters, gratitude, whose

²¹ And that is not the only remarkable thing he does. Lear's last lines contain nothing about reputation, causes of action, the next ruler--any of the worldly matters that occupy the final thoughts of other heroes. Nor does he say anything about his own living and dying. Kent, Edgar, and Albany allow Lear to pass, out of pity for him; they might have revived him! That, too, is unique in Shakespearean tragedy.

²² Who undoes the button? By my choice, he is the Gentleman, the man without a history, who confirms the truth of improbable things because he sees them. If Edgar, Kent, or Albany, each carrying his own personal baggage, undoes Lear's button, then the action will have an impure meaning, and we shall see a different truth in it.

essence challenges nature to include more than the harsh law that says merely, "the younger rises when the old doth fall" (III.iii.26).

You may say that Lear does not receive what he wants because the daughters are dead. But the things called "kindness" and "gratitude" are not dead. What we were saying a moment ago about the power of those "never's" to annihilate each and every coming of Cordelia is proved wrong by the unbuttoning. She is not the accomplice of those "never's." From her first question and answer ("What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent," I.i.64), to her last question ("Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" V.iii.7), and beyond, to the present action of death, she prompts inquiry into how poor mortals may participate, by speech or action, in the highest, immortal things. This is an inquiry that the imitative art of theatre essentially pursues. Buttons, after all, keep costumes on the actors so that we can continue to believe in the reality of characters and their deeds. Undo the button, expose the body of the actor, and we begin to undo belief in the closure of that world of fleeting appearances. We open a gap in time and cross a boundary between persons. Doubleness comes into view, and we see the oneness of two: the universal character who never dies, and the particular character of that singular performance, who will die and never come again.

Lear's last question is his greatest: "Do you see this?" (312). "You," considered internally, is the Gentleman, who sees and reports the truth, and performs an act that opens up new time and space. The content of "this," therefore, is the action of unbuttoning in the unit line, as it measures the overall action of the play.

Lear's question is short by necessity of waning breath. The full version is perhaps as follows: "Do you see what this action of life that we have performed at the moment of death, means?" The meaning of Lear's "this," as seen in action, first encompasses Cordelia: "Look on her. Look, her lips." Then it points somewhere out and beyond: "Look there, look there" (312-313). Notice the downward syllable count as Lear runs out of breath: a four syllable question; then three ("Look on her"), three ("Look, her lips"), two ("Look there"), two ("look there")--one (blank). The answer to Lear's last question, which we find out by looking and speaking, like Lear, under the ultimate pressure, should be a one-syllable word. What is that word? Maybe what we see is like what Cordelia sees when she looks at her own love: something that cannot be spoken. In that case, our one-syllable answer to the question: "Do you see this?" is either "yes" or "no," and there an end. "Yes," as I have said, is a rare word in this play, and one must work hard to say it. "No" is easy--consistent with play's unremitting modes of denial and isolation.

Let us do a little more work of looking with Lear, and then say "yes" or "no" to his last question, and be done. We look with him in the four stages he declares.

The first stage is: "look on her"--from outside and above. This is the position of Lear when Cordelia kneels down and asks for his blessing ("O, look upon me, sir,/ And hold your hand in benediction o'er me" IV.vii.57-58). That perspective leads Lear to kneel down, look her in the face, and recognize her by name as his child. The second stage is: "look, her lips"--from the inside. We are to look with our ears, and all the senses, crossing boundaries of function and person, into the source of her being. Her

lips, wet from tears, pronounce "I am, I am," which to Lear's lips tastes wet, like the good and bad rain; and then the lips pronounce "no cause, no cause" for love to die. With that pronouncement, the good and bad rains are known to be good. We are now poised to look beyond the world of the senses. Recall that at this point in the previous action, Lear's question of his whereabouts is answered by Kent as "here" ("In your own kingdom, sir," 76). The transcendent union then breaks apart, and political facts take over the scene. So now, in the third and fourth stages of looking, we shall not look to any places *here in the world* that would allow local causes and their "barking dogs" to prevail again. We look instead "there," and again, "there." But where are these "there's," which are beyond the world? We have looked "there" before, into the "near beyond," on three memorable occasions. Let us recall them to help us as we strain to look "there," into the "far beyond" of Lear's final visions.

First, we look "there" in discord, to where Edgar (as Poor Tom) snatches quickly, repeatedly, and randomly at the "foul fiend," the sight of which activity snaps Lear's wits: "Do Poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes. There could I have him now--and there--and there--and there again--and there" (III.iv.60-62). These jerky movements into nothing "there" teach Edgar how to enforce charity with an out-stretched, pin-pricked arm, and how to kill vermin. He later cozens and kills Edmund, in what is supposed to be a choreographed duel of knights, with a sudden, beguiling thrust, learned not as a knight, but as Poor Tom, "the thing itself," "unaccommodated man"

(III.iv.109). An exchange of charity with Edmund follows his victory.²³

Second, we look "there," on the assault of every sense, to where Lear, in much pain and peril of life, learns to distinguish a lifetime of everyday lies from the truth of universal mortality:

Lear. When the rain came to wet me once and the wind
to make me chatter; when the thunder would not
peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I
smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their
words: they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie,
I am not ague-proof.

(IV.vi.101-107)

And third, we look "there" in hunger and disgust, to where the Centaur, the riotous sexual appetite, dwells in women and seeks satisfaction, below the girdle:

Lear. There's hell, there's darkness, there is
the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah,
pah!

(IV.vi.129-131)

But when Lear sweetens his foul imagination, he sees this third, hungry, disgusting "there" as the place of universal entry to this "great stage of fools," where we "wawl and cry" to find ourselves born (181-185). We partake of the universal fool and learn the lesson of patience at birth. These two birthrights make Lear able to give the principle,

²³ How is Edgar able to kill Edmund? The answer, seen in performance, must make sense of Goneril's assertion that Edmund is not "vanquished," but "cozened and beguiled" by "practice" (V.iii.153-156). Indeed, Edgar has been at "practice" as Poor Tom, exercising himself at his study of how "to prevent the fiend, and to kill vermin" (III.iv.162). It is also worth noting, in this respect, that the name "Poor Tom" is an appositive for "Poor Turlygod," which is an anagram of "Truly god" (III.iii.20). Edgar tricks Edmund, by learning to strike quickly "there," where Edmund, the man of nature, is not given to look. Is that how God works?

"forgive and forget," a profound and sweeping application:
"None does offend, none, I say, none; I'll able 'em"
(IV.vi.169).

These, then, are the three "there's" we look to in Acts III and IV that prepare us to look in the direction of the final "there's": the shifting abodes of fiends and vermin; the terrain of all-out sensory assault by the elements of nature; and the entry hole of sex and birth. These "there's" appear to the eye or imagination as empirical places in the performance of the action, because rightly understood, they contain the principles of action, the higher causes of universal validity that we have been looking for all along. Each of them, as we have seen, is a double of good and evil. As evil, they torment, tempt with lies, seek to kill, and animalize; as good, they teach victory, compel charity, make truth felt, and bring about new life, with patience to endure. The good and evil of these "there's" are, one must admit, tragically inseparable; but they are not, as a matter of endurance, equal. The good proves stronger. It stands the most severe test of any of Shakespeare's tragedies.

So what do we see, now that we are reminded of what we have seen, when we dare to "Look there, look there," beyond any "here," beyond any nearby "there"? Wherever we look, we see both good and evil, but the good is not a "sometime good." Cordelia, the test case, has real presence in death, as a *theatrical fact*.²⁴ Her love is a silent act, performed by the actor, in Lear's arms and on the floor of the stage, requiring from us visual motion, from "her" to

²⁴ No Styrofoam Cordelia, no matter how life-like in appearance, can ever substitute for the real one. The scene would collapse in failure, and with it, the play.

"lips" to "there" to "there" to where **we** would next move. The motion of the eye in the action of death passes to us, the living, to continue on its course (or not). That passing of motion is why Cordelia makes this stupendous entrance with Lear. She is "there" for *all time*, present in the action of looking for her, the needed "one," whom Lear carries and delivers to us with all the strength of life. The evil of the play, however, despite all the pains and losses it causes, is a *sometime* evil, no more here, and naught there. Albany gets it right when he tells Goneril: "You are not worth the dust which the rude wind/ Blows in your face" (IV.ii.30-31). Her death will not touch him with pity (V.iii.234). Edmund is judged a "trifle" in death, in proportion to his late good intentions (297). And as for Regan, she makes her last exit vomiting, emptying herself of herself. The meaning is clear.

Have we done enough work to brave the mockery of hope and answer Lear's final question, which carries all the matter of life and death that precedes it, with, "yes, I see all this"?

Any one of us, by counting, can see that Shakespeare gives Cordelia only 110 lines in a play of nearly 3000. She speaks only three and three-quarters percent of the whole.²⁵ Yet we hear that her words do not pass away; they repeat and echo. We "see feelingly" that she is always present: in the Fool, her double; in Kent, her correspondent and competitor in goodness; in the sacrifice of Gloucester; and in the lurking presence of Edgar, the last one of the one hundred knights who take Cordelia's place at Lear's side. So it is not absurd to look for her

²⁵ Ophelia, who is entirely dispensable to the plot of Hamlet, has more to speak than Cordelia.

when she is dead, because she is "there," and "there," and "there" again.

Anyone can also see and hear that in this play Shakespeare does not speak in distinctly Christian terms and does not solicit the supernatural at all. (There is not even a dream in this play.) Shakespeare thus parallels Cordelia, in the selective silencing of his pen, and in presenting no more than what is there to see. If Lear sees more than what we see there at the end, he sees more as an adult sees more than a child, and as a child sees more than an infant. "He but usurped his life," and to any usurper go the powers of the thing usurped (V.iii.319). And those are natural, life powers.

Shakespeare, however, is so insistent on the naturalness of the action that I become suspicious.²⁶ Let me not be "cozened and beguiled," as Edmund is, by too much devotion to nature (V.iii.156). Instead, and in conclusion, let me obey Edgar's final words and "speak what [I] feel" is the truth of this play, based on what I see and hear in it. I see that life stands the test on "the rack of this tough world" (V.iii.316); I hear that Gloucester's heart "burst smilingly" (V.iii.201); I see that Goneril and Regan die for love of Edmund, and that Edmund finally intends good because of love, produced and proven to his eye; I see that anonymous and peripheral characters become indispensable to the action and carry the burden of its truth, on account of pity and kindness; I hear the quiet, "thank you, sir" as an answer to the "howl's"; and I see that the vault of heaven, still uncracked, is not the last sight; nor is darkness, for Lear

²⁶ I become suspicious, in the opposite fashion, when I experience Macbeth, which insists too much on the supernatural.

does not put out his eyes, as does Oedipus, in grief and fear, but keeps on looking, in one questioning motion, which (Edgar says) will outdistance all of us in the use of our eyes and breath;--these facts all *feel* to me like a current of miracle, though I know that what I *ought* to say is "almost miracle." But "almost miracle" is no miracle, so what I ought to say is "no." But I feel that the answer to Lear's question, "Do you see this?" is a hard won, "yes."

"Yes" means that I shall "look there" to other performances of this play, and see Cordelia and hear those voices again and again, knowing that each performance will be the same and different, thus offering more answers each time to all these questions. "Yes" means that I shall "look there," outside the horizon of this play, into the horizons of other plays, especially The Tempest, a comic retelling of King Lear;²⁷ "yes" also means "look there," opposite Shakespeare's comic and tragic stage, to the cares of the audience and outside world, so that we may apply there what we learn here in Shakespeare's "stocks," before it is too late; and finally, "yes" means "look there," even beyond this finite world--to no more speaking acquired from parents and authors, or taking things from report, to no more causes reasoned from nature, or effects learned from art--to where none of these sources interferes with being wholly present to the presence of things on an infinite horizon, seeing them feelingly in action, breaking with all

²⁷ The Tempest takes place where Lear intends for Cordelia and him to go. Lear's prison of beautiful singing and knowledge of the mysteries of things is Prospero's island. But the island is not, finally, sufficient. Miranda is to be married off, and Prospero, having drowned his precious books, is to be reinstated as Duke of Milan. Thus are political and familial demands given precedence over transcendental longings, as the price for comedy. But this is to anticipate another lecture.

that is breakable, and still looking for something there
that is not.