

The Promised End Some Last Words on *King Lear*

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Is this the promis'd end?
Or image of that horror?

I find it curiously appropriate that my last academic or scholarly public lecture¹ should be concerned with *King Lear*, because more than thirty years ago my career as a literary critic began with an essay on the play published in a literary journal which has long since vanished from the face of the earth. In preparing for what is in effect a valedictory lecture on Shakespeare – for after leaving the university in July I intend to devote my time to writing and to literary journalism – I found a copy of that ancient periodical and read an essay which I had long ago forgotten yet an essay that proved curiously and embarrassingly familiar.

My main reaction to it was largely one of embarrassment. The essay was very much the work of a young man: ambitious, full of self-importance and more than a little impressed with himself. In four or five thousand words I set the world right on *King Lear*, sweeping aside the scholarship and criticism of the past to offer my own, unique and indisputably correct version of Shakespeare's tragedy. Nowadays I am not so convinced of the inevitable rightness of my literary opinions – or perhaps I have evolved a critical style that seems less arrogant, more modest. I would no longer presume to give a definitive reading of a mysterious and self-renewing work of art in fifty thousand let alone five thousand words.

Yet for all that, once I got over my embarrassment in meeting my younger, rather gauche self, I was surprised to

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find that my view of the play had not changed a great deal over those thirty years, despite large-scale changes in critical attitudes to Shakespeare and to literature in general over that period. That may reveal no more than the hardening of the critical arteries, though I hope that is not the case. What I did find though, after reading one or two things I had written about the play in later years, and perhaps more revealingly after looking through the sets of lectures on *King Lear* I had prepared over those thirty years, was that the way I discussed it, the aspects of it I chose to stress, responded to the various changes of emphasis in the study of Shakespeare during those years. Reviewing that body of work – if I may grace a few articles and a bundle of lectures with such a term – revealed a skeleton cultural history of the thirty years I have spent as a professional academic critic and scholar. I would like therefore to speak this morning about the way interpretations of Shakespeare of and *King Lear* in particular have changed in the course of those years, and also about the adjustments that I found myself obliged to make as my view of the play came up against the challenge of the smaller and greater revolutions of academic life.

That first essay was called '*King Lear* and the Egocentric Universe'. Its contents should not detain us at all, but I would like to pause for a moment on the title. It stands as an emblem of the assumptions and priorities of a literary and academic culture which was at that time, the mid 1960s, already meeting a substantial intellectual and indeed ideological challenge. Perhaps a snatch of autobiography might be appropriate here. I took my first degree in 1960 at this university; my postgraduate work was done at University College London, an institution which at that time concentrated on the study of literature in its historical context. Such an approach did not concern itself with the impact a play like *King Lear* would make on contemporary readers and audiences. That was not to imply that immediacy of appeal was irrelevant to criticism or even to certain scholarly interests. It was nevertheless deemed to be peripheral to the academic study of literature. Our aim was to disclose (as far as it lay within our capacities) the *essence* of *King Lear*, a

literary/dramatic text of the early seventeenth century. Of course none of us was foolish enough to assume that such an essence could ever be fully disclosed or that it remained static in time. Nevertheless, the assumption that underscored my literary or scholarly attitude and endeavours was that *King Lear* required elucidating, that is to say that a full understanding of Shakespeare's play could only be achieved by means of an act of historical and conceptual understanding.

I would like to place some emphasis on those two concepts. In the first place such an approach assumed that a literary text such as *King Lear* was governed by attitudes, ways of conveying experience, conceptual frameworks and the like which had inevitably altered and become to a considerable extent inaccessible through time. The most obvious instance of that element of the play is, of course, its vocabulary: words that were no longer in currency; words so obsolete that their precise meaning is difficult to determine; words that had changed their meaning radically (for instance 'sad', 'conscience'). More importantly, perhaps, the same phenomenon is reflected by the play's concern with certain social, political and even theological assumptions particular to the early years of the seventeenth century: most notably in *King Lear* the concern with the duties and responsibilities of kingship.

The second element is what might be called the criterion of difficulty. The intellectual climate in which that essay on the play was conceived assumed that the most significant works of literature are subtle, complex, difficult, and in need of erudite elucidation for their meaning and importance to be disclosed. In practice such elements in a literary work were adduced by aligning them with arcane and recondite philosophical, ethical or religious concepts or schemes. Literary scholarship often consisted of acts of alignment: the scholar or researcher sought after analogies between an imaginative work and large-scale, often abstract theories or preoccupations. One very simple instance must suffice. Two passages placed in juxtaposition in I. ii. of *King Lear*, Gloucester's 'These late eclipses of the sun and moon

portend no good to us...' (I.ii.107ff) and Edmund's 'This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and stars...' (I.ii.123ff), provide a striking clash or collision of two antithetical views of a complex series of assumptions about the nature of causality. Gloucester's fundamentally deterministic view of human affairs as ruled by an inexorable causality, of which prodigies are signs and warnings, is placed in sharp contrast to Edmund's libertine, rational (in sixteenth and seventeenth-century terms) celebration of chance and accident. The two attitudes may therefore be aligned with the two conflicting pictures of the world that were thought to be current in Shakespeare's time: and older, essentially religious view of human affairs, and the celebration of a potentially destructive, self-centred individualism in Edmund, the Machiavellian new man.

The implications of that clash of attitudes and ways of looking at the world may be traced through several layers of the play. The contrast between Gloucester as the representative of a species of *ancien régime* and Edmund the illegitimate younger son consumed by improper and perhaps sinful ambitions, is obvious. It is capable of being extended to other areas of the play as well: Cordelia's refusal to speak her love and Lear's intemperate reaction to it may be traced, as I attempted to do in that essay, to similar concerns and preoccupations about the nature of the world represented in the play. In short I attempted in the essay – with how much success I am not in a position to judge – to view the play as a coherent, unified structure. Its conceit is implicit in the two key words of the title 'egocentric universe'. I should like to quote its opening paragraph to indicate the extent to which I attempted in the essay to confine *King Lear* within the implications of those two words.

A major theme in *King Lear* is the Renaissance preoccupation with the nature of the self. When Lear, at the beginning of the play, auctions his lands to his daughters he is far more than a selfish and inconsiderate old man who is intent on exploiting the authority of kingship while denying its responsibility: he

is not simply a king who breaks divine rule by abdicating a position from which only death can absolve him; he is in fact a man of the Renaissance for whom the self is the only comprehensible entity, as well as the ultimate reality. Moreover, in the circumstances presented by Shakespeare at the commencement of the play, Lear occupies this essentially solipsistic position without the mollification of any ethical or metaphysical considerations.²

The pages that follow attempt to discuss the play in terms of 'Renaissance' concepts of the self and its relationship with both the body politic and the metaphysical world. They seek, moreover, to account for all, or at least most, elements in the play in terms of that concept.

In that way, my 1966 essay seems in retrospect very much to be the product of the intellectual and academic climate of the late fifties and the sixties. This was the time, after all, when a number of highly complex books about Shakespeare's tragedies and this play in particular were published which attempted to align those works with at times highly recondite philosophical and even theological notions. *King Lear* in such formulations was seen as a document of high culture, a poetic drama that rose above its origins on the boards of a London theatre in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Neither my own small contribution nor those much more complex scholarly books addressed themselves to an obvious and one would think inescapable question: to what extent may the essentially ephemeral nature of the theatre be reconciled with highly abstract concerns? We avoided that conundrum because we regarded *King Lear* as a purely literary text, an entity that did not rely on any form of reception, either by reader or spectator. It was discussed, on the contrary, as a cultural and literary monument of the early seventeenth century.

Not too many years after the publication of my essay that notion was to receive the first radical challenge, though it

2 Andrew Riemer, 'King Lear and the Egocentric Universe', *Balcony* 5 (1966), p.33.

SYDNEY STUDIES

took some more time before it spread into the general academic community. Two years later the ferment of political and intellectual controversy in France led to the near-successful student revolt in Paris, one curious consequence of which was to question the kind of certainties on which my modest essay had been based. Yet even in 1966, when I was largely unaware of those developments that were later to flower into structuralism and post-structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism, the attitudes and principles underlying the essay had received a strong and uncompromising challenge which arose through certain developments in the Department of English at this university.

I find it hard to understand why English studies should be the subject of so much intrigue, passion and dissent – perhaps all that is the consequence of the utter uselessness of English studies. Certainly the climate in which I received my education both here and in London did not concern itself with the *use* of literary study. It was assumed as a matter of course that the study of literature was an essential part of the social and cultural life of a community. No great need was felt to justify it in terms of either pragmatic or ethical principles – though in effect we were then, as we are now, largely involved in providing a part of the professional training of people such as yourselves, secondary teachers of English.

Nevertheless, at the time when that essay was written a group of people had arrived in this university – mostly from Melbourne, that most responsible of cities – who obliged us to consider the principles and grounds of our academic and scholarly lives. They were known as the Melbourne Leavisites because most of them had been inspired, directly and indirectly, by the work of F. R. Leavis and his followers. Retrospect tells me that there were probably as many differences as similarities among the principles on which those people based their critical and pedagogic attitudes. Yet from the perspective of the essentially historical scholarship into which I had been educated, their attitudes seemed remarkably homogeneous and committed to a clear point of view.

Their attitudes were in essence refinements of the eighteenth-century principle of didacticism, though they were so far refined that it was well nigh impossible to recognize those origins. Nevertheless, their preoccupations were largely didactic because, unlike the basic objectivity of the type of scholarship practised in this university in the years before their arrival, they were passionately committed – or said, at least, that they were passionately committed – to the moral and imaginative power of literature. They did not of course express it quite as crudely or clearly, but they sought nevertheless to cultivate in students a liking for and understanding of those works of literature that were capable of intellectual or even spiritual ennoblement. They were, it seems to me, seeking essentially religious consolation from the secular phenomenon of literature.

That provoked what I saw at the time, and still see, as a hardening of academic attitudes, principally because that essentially missionary zeal was accompanied by preferences that were little short of sentimental. The end of *King Lear* provided one of the most important sites for their particular view of the nature and purpose of literary study, and that insistence provides a polemical undercurrent to my 1966 essay on the play.

Because of the attitudes to the uses of literature held by those critics and teachers, the apparent tone of the end of *King Lear* seemed a major impediment to the play's status as one of the supreme masterpieces of literature, a dramatic poem that explored the essential dilemma of humanity more thoroughly and with greater imaginative complexity than almost anything else. The impediment was this: since those critics wished to stress the capacity of great literature to endow our lives with meaning, to give us a measure of consolation and even perhaps of hope, the bleakness of the end of Shakespeare's tragedy seemed shocking, scandalous. They knew full well that Shakespeare had altered the ending of his sources by allowing Cordelia to die and by casting Lear into the nihilistic fury of

No, no, no life!

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,

And thou no breath at all? Thoul't come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never.³

Because such apparent nihilism proved intolerable, their literary and ethical preoccupations drove them to argue a position very hard to maintain, it seemed to me, as it still seems, in the face of Shakespeare's apparently wilful alteration of the shape of his story. There must be some value, they attempted to argue, in the suffering, in the terrible quashing of hopes at the end of the tragedy.

Since their stance was purely secular, they could not entertain any sense of religious consolation of the kind Christianity would offer. Instead they fell back on the type of secular piety evident in A. C. Bradley's famous remark that Lear dies in an agony of joy and grief believing that Cordelia lives.⁴ They insisted therefore on reading Lear's last words, which follow immediately on the extract I quoted a few moments ago –

Pray you undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips –
Look there, look there!

(V. iii. 311-13)

– as confirmation of of the essentially positive, even perhaps optimistic tenor of the play's conclusion despite the apparent bleakness of the ending where the fragile reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia is brutally swept aside by the forces of malice and evil.

I recall getting annoyed and irritated at what seemed to me at the time an excessively sentimental attitude to this disturbing and uncompromising tragedy. Such an attitude, even where argued with great sophistication and flair, threatened to render *King Lear* into some kind of Sunday School parable. I found it hard to swallow the implicit claim that the horror or suffering endured by Lear and Cordelia

3 *King Lear*, V.iii.307-10. All quotations are from the Challis Shakespeare, ed. E. A. M. Colman.

4 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904: repr. 1951), p.291.

were ultimately worthwhile because of the overpowering force of the love between them. I might also remind you that it was around that time that *Love Story* enjoyed great popularity.

In all events, looking at my essay on the tragedy, I found a paragraph which reflects a view of the play I still hold, almost thirty years later, yet a paragraph marked, it seems to me, by a stridency which was provoked, I am certain, by the challenge posed by those 'upbeat' attitudes to the play that were, of course, accepted as revealed truth by thousands of our students. This is the paragraph, dealing with those words of Lear I have been discussing:

At this point the play descends into the bleakest pessimism our literature possesses. No matter how critics attempt to find some values which will negate this negativity – whether in L. C. Knights's Christian values or in Wilson Knight's belief in an ordered society purged of evil in which love assumes almost transcendental significance – the great paradox of the play is that it sees the vitality and imaginativeness of those who live in the egocentric universe as evil, undesirable and self-destructive, while the corollary, the selflessness of Lear in the last act, despite its serenity, is regarded as not only vulnerable, but also unattractive because it denies the vitality the protagonist possessed earlier in the drama. Shakespeare's world is thus caught in an insoluble dilemma: the selfless world is necessary, and the attainment of wisdom inevitably leads to such a state, but the play cannot affirm absolutely the value of this attainment since it cannot neglect the potency of all that has to be excluded in the achievement of this position. Lear's final attainment can offer no consolation to those who seek some affirmation of values in great art.⁵

Two observations need to be made here. The first is that I am still convinced that the ending of *King Lear* is deliberately, even perhaps provocatively bleak. We must regard Shakespeare's alteration of his sources as entirely purposive; he was, in other words, making a point. The second remark I would make about the extract I have just quoted represents

5 'King Lear and the Egocentric Universe', p. 39.

something of a retraction. Though I maintain the play's uncompromising blackness and pessimism, I do not think that one should discuss what is essentially a poetic drama in such overtly and rigorously conceptual terms as I did in that essay where I attempted to make all of that complex work of the imagination referable to its concern with an 'egocentric universe'. The essay seems to me to have rendered the play into a kind of machine. A couple of years later, perhaps as a result of the challenges to which my essay was in some ways a response, I came to be preoccupied by the paradoxical nature of Shakespeare's great tragedy.

The next piece of archival evidence I found as I was cleaning up three decades of an academic life was a lecture I gave to this organization in 1968.⁶ Two things stood out as I reread the pamphlet containing an expanded version of the lecture I gave in May of that year. Both were consequence of the way in which traditional English studies had begun to be questioned and challenged by the mid-sixties.

The most notable difference between the two publications – separated by less than two years – is that by 1968 I found myself obliged to address changing attitudes to the play through its 350 years or so of existence. The lecture began indeed with an account written in the 1830s by the French composer Hector Berlioz in which he described the frenzied ecstasy he experienced when he read *King Lear* – presumably in a French translation – while lying on the grass on the banks of the Arno in Florence. The change of emphasis seems to me important and significant. The earlier essay assumed that the play was a fixed, immutable entity. The lecture and the monograph to which it gave birth both recognized that other ages, other societies, other sensibilities found different things to admire or to comment on in a work of the imagination which resists total categorization. I think, incidentally, that that was all to the good.

I was therefore looking at *King Lear* from a particular

6 A. P. Riemer, *Darker Purpose An Approach to Shakespeare's 'King Lear'* (English Association, Sydney, 1968).

perspective. The rhetoric of the monograph is more measured, even more tentative perhaps than the frontal-assault of the earlier essay. I was no longer confident, moreover, that the play could be adequately discussed in terms of a single, overarching intellectual or philosophical perspective. The core of the monograph is concerned therefore with discussing the paradoxical, ambiguous relationship between the play's main action, and the subsidiary material of Gloucester and his sons. In 1966, as far as it is possible to judge from the essay, I seemed still to assume – as everyone also assumed – that the subsidiary action repeats and reflects, at a level of lower intensity, the emphases of the main action. By 1968 I was more intent on stressing the contradictions between the two, despite the superficial, symmetrical similarities between the two elderly men and their relationship with their offspring. In that monograph I was arguing, consequently, that the tragedy brings into conflict two opposed irreconcilable views of life and experience, one – the story of Lear – close to a type of nihilism, the other – the story of Gloucester – a much simpler, and in essence simplistic, exploration of Christian stoicism.

The lecture stressed therefore the curative, didactic ambitions standing behind the strange calvary on which Edgar leads the blind Gloucester in the latter half of the play. The argument is this. Edgar cures his father of despair by educating him into the Christian virtue of patience. He allows the grotesque mock-suicide (I.v.vi) to proceed so that Gloucester might be led from his despair –

O you mighty gods!
 This world I do renounce and in your sights
 Shake patiently my great affliction off.
 If I could bear it longer and not fall
 To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
 My snuff and loathed part of nature should
 Burn itself out.

(IV. vi. 34-40)

Gloucester is cured of the great sin of despair by his miraculous survival. Edgar, now in the guise of his rescuer,

SYDNEY STUDIES

comments:

Therefore thou happy father,
Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours
Of men's impossibilities have preserv'd thee.
(IV. vi. 72-4)

to which Gloucester assents

I do remember now. Henceforth I'll bear
Affliction till it do cry out itself
'Enough, enough' and die.
(IV. vi. 75-7)

The subsidiary interest culminates therefore, the argument goes on, in Edgar's description in the last scene of the way in which his father, having been reconciled with his wronged son, achieves the great Christian ideal of the good death.

Met I my father with his bleeding rings,
Their precious stones new-lost; became his guide
Led him, begg'd for him, sav'd him from despair,
Never – oh fault! – reveal'd myself unto him
Until some half-hour past, when I was arm'd.
Not sure, though hoping, of this good success,
I ask'd his blessing, and from first to last
Told him our pilgrimage. But his flaw'd heart –
Alack, too weak the conflict to support –
Twix two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly.

(V. iii. 191-201)

We are back, you might have already noticed with the central issues in the article I wrote two years earlier, the denial that Lear dies in an ecstasy of joy and grief. That fate, my lecture argued, is reserved for Gloucester. The easy, perhaps old-fashioned certainty of that part of the play is then swept aside, brutally and shockingly, by Lear's terrible suffering, by irrational and nihilistic forces.

The lecture was as much concerned, therefore, with the play's contradictions as with its certainties. In 1968 I no longer assumed that *King Lear* was some kind of vast poetic machine or an intellectual or philosophical jigsaw where

every element within it had a unique and inevitable place. The gaps, so to speak, seemed as significant as the solid blocks of meaning or assertion. In that way the tragedy became a more ambiguous and much less lucid structure than it had been two years earlier. The critical reading contained in the lecture, although it still stressed the play's essential bleakness and pessimism, was more tentative because it relied on the suggestive power of the contrast between its two blocks of narrative interest. *King Lear* by this instance had become much more mysterious and – as the lecture attempted to argue – more menacing and disconcerting. The title I gave to the published version – *Darker Purpose*, taken, of course, from Lear's words in the first scene – reflected that changed emphasis.

I have been trying to remember how far I was aware in 1968 of those critical and theoretical preoccupations that were to transform literary studies in the following quarter of a century. I have no clear recollection of any familiarity with the work of Roland Barthes, for instance, let alone Derrida or Foucault, or even perhaps with Saussure in a literary (as opposed to a purely linguistic) context. Nevertheless, when I reread that lecture of 1968 in preparation for this morning I was struck by how far it mirrored – or perhaps anticipated – some of those later developments.

In stressing the contrast rather than the similarity between the play's two narrative strands, I was echoing – intuitively I think – something that became an article of faith in subsequent decades: that meaning in literary works is contingent on context, rather than being indelibly inscribed, and that meanings emerge by means of contrast, by means of differences between possibly arbitrary elements within a text. I had not reached, nor would I ever wish to reach, the nihilism of much contemporary thought that denies all possibility of meaning in general, but I was on the way, it seems to me, towards a recognition of the essentially arbitrary way in which a work of literature is supposed to achieve its *meanings*. In consequence, *Darker Purpose* seems to me more tentative, even perhaps provisional, than that earlier,

apparently more confident lecture.

After that I published no more on *King Lear*. For many years I had at the back of my mind the intention of writing a book on the tragedies, but it was never written. I continued nevertheless to teach the play up to the present time. Looking at the lectures I have written, revised and completely recast in the course of the last twenty-five years, I am aware how consistent my view of the play has remained despite having been obliged to meet various challenges to those notions in that time. I still see *King Lear* as being essentially pessimistic, close indeed to nihilism. Its bleakness is countered only by our immersion in Lear's suffering, and perhaps by our admiration for his persistence, in the face of everything, in clinging to life. Unlike Gloucester, a lesser creature in most ways, suicide is never an option for him. In addition, I am more interested nowadays in what I would call the affective aspects of the play, in its engagement with a human predicament, with the capacity of certain individuals to endure seemingly inhuman suffering. I have retreated, it seems to me at times, to a view of the potency of poetic tragedy closer to the standards of the eighteenth century. I find myself no longer very interested in the 'meaning' of the play; I am suspicious of the academic and scholarly endeavour to align it with abstruse philosophical preoccupations; and I am struck by certain near-mythic elements in the play – for instance the reversal, so to speak, of the conventional image expressed in versions of the Deposition from the Cross in the final image where Lear cradles in his arms his daughter's inert body.

It strikes me as significant, and it might strike others as significantly imperceptive, that I did not address myself anywhere to an element in that final *tableau* which would, I presume, impress immediately many other contemporary critics and commentators: its reversal of the mother-son axis in the imagery of the Deposition as depicted in countless paintings and statues of the Italian Renaissance. The final scene of the tragedy comes to a climax with Lear's agonized entrance with 'Cordelia in his arms':

Howl, howl, howl! Oh you are men of stones.
 Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
 That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.
 I know when one is dead, and when one lives:
 She's as dead as earth.

(V. iii. 259-63)

Here, and for the remainder of the scene, Lear is the *pater dolorosus* (to coin a phrase) in a reversed Christian iconography. Where Mary, the grieving mother, is usually depicted calm in her anguish as she holds the body of the slaughtered Christ, Lear rages, almost inarticulate in his grief, as he bears Cordelia on to the stage. Instead of the consolation of the Christian story – for the beholder, if not for the Virgin – we are presented with a spectacle of brutality, or at least its consequences. There is no consolation here, not even in Lear's vain cry

Lend me a looking-glass:
 If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
 Why then she lives ...
 This feather stirs – she lives! If it be so,
 It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
 That ever I have felt.

(V. iii. 263-5; 267-9)

There is no consolation here; rather there are strongly eschatological implications in Lear's anguish, in the impossibility of redeeming sorrow in a benighted world and above all in the resonant antiphon of

KENT Is this the promis'd end?
 EDGAR Or image of that horror?
(V.ii. 265-6)

The religious implications, or rather their reversal into a diabolic world, have, I found, formed a part of my thinking about the play for many years. What I have not considered, or thought worth considering at least, is the implication of the reversal of sexes implied in that *pietà*.

What does that disturbing image tell us about deeply buried ideology of the play? Why did Shakespeare change the traditional ending of the story? Such questions are

commonplace in contemporary discussions of Shakespeare. Deconstructing *King Lear* could provide some disturbing and unsettling possibilities. Viewed from one perspective the play may be thought to reveal a particularly punitive attitude towards women, a desire on the part of its essentially male sensibility to control, and what is more to suppress and punish, women's attempts to gain independence and to shape their lives. It is possible to offer an account of the play along such lines, and the attempt has indeed been made several times, in part at least. From the opening measures of Act I, where even limited autonomy for Lear's daughters is made contingent upon a particular form of servitude, the formal expression of love for their father, that ideology may be revealed in fairly direct ways. Cordelia is, of course, punished first, with the first of the terrible curses Lear delivers in the course of the play. Her refusal to conform to stereotypes of behaviour appropriate to women earns the play's deepest suspicions and misgivings, despite her being presented superficially as an almost divine figure. The play cannot rest, indeed, until she is once more under Lear's control – in death, where she may no longer make a bid for freedom and autonomy. Gonerill and Regan, whose bid for autonomy is of course more successful, are punished equally cruelly. Their protestations of love are made to seem nauseatingly hypocritical; their independence and strength of character are presented as evil, sexually depraved and murderous. They too must be punished, excluded and destroyed before the play may come to an end. *King Lear*, in such a reading, is an alarmed male fantasy and an elaborate attempt to reinscribe male domination in a world disrupted and brought close to destruction by the sisters' attempts to ordain their own lives. Lear's wife, as many feminist commentators have remarked, has also, in a way, been suppressed by the text.

I have not discussed such matters in my lectures on the play in recent years. Perhaps I have been remiss in this; perhaps I too am a victim of my own ideology. Yet it seems to me that one may find a more cogent, more defensible reason for remaining silent. I have no doubt that the play may be construed in such ways. I am not convinced though

that it should be so construed. The reason for my saying that is not political but aesthetic – though I am fully aware that many believe that no attitude is free of ideological taint. Nevertheless, I would suggest that such a view of the play, or one that focusses exclusively on, for instance, a Marxist interpretation, misses its capacity to move, to enthrall, and even to disturb. Why would anyone come to it to find a political treatise? Modern theories of literature seem entirely incapable of comprehending the one element which draws us to great works of literature, an element that appeals to us whether we are women or men, whether we live in twentieth century or lived in the sixteenth, and that is the capacity of certain works, formerly known as masterpieces, to stir the imagination. That is a very simple view of the nature of literature and art. It is perhaps too simple for the complex world of the contemporary academy. But then in a few weeks' time I shall be mercifully free of it.