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King Lear

CRITICAL COMMENT BY ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

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IF nothing were left of Shakespeare but the single tragedy of *King Lear*, it would still be as plain as it is now that he was the greatest man that ever lived. As a poet, the author of this play can only be compared with Aeschylus: the Hebrew prophets and the creator of Job are sometimes as sublime in imagination and in passion, but always quite incomparably inferior in imaginative intelligence. Sophocles is as noble, as beautiful, and as kindly a thinker and a writer: but the gentle Shakespeare could see farther and higher and wider and deeper at a glance than ever could the gentle Sophocles. Aristophanes had as magnificent a power of infinitely joyous wit and infinitely inexhaustible humor: but whom can he show us or offer us to be set against Falstaff or the Fool? It is true that Shakespeare has neither the lyric nor the prophetic power of the Greeks and the Hebrews: but then it must be observed and remembered that he, and he alone among poets and among men, could well afford to dispense even with such transcendent gifts as these. Freedom of thought and sublimity of utterance come hand in hand together into English speech: our first great poet, if loftiness and splendor of spirit and of word be taken as the test of greatness, was Christopher Marlowe. From his

dead hand the one man born to excel him, and to pay a due and a deathless tribute to his deathless memory, took up the heritage of dauntless thought, of daring imagination, and of since unequalled song.

The tragedy of *King Lear*, like the trilogy of the Oresteia, is a thing incomparable and unique. To compare it with *Othello* is as inevitable a temptation as to compare the *Agamemnon* with the *Prometheus* of the one man comparable with Shakespeare. And the result, for any reader of human intelligence and decent humility in sight of what is highest in the spiritual world, must always be a sense of adoring doubt and exulting hesitation. In *Othello* and in *Prometheus* a single figure, an everlasting and god-like type of heroic and human agony, dominates and dwarfs all others but those of the traitor Iago and the tyrant Jove. There is no Clytemnestra in the one, and there is no Cordelia in the other. "The gentle lady married to the Moor" is too gentle for comparison with the most glorious type of womanhood which even Shakespeare ever created before he conceived and brought forth Imogen. No one could have offered to Cordelia the tribute of so equivocal a compliment as was provoked by the submissive endurance of Desdemona—"Truly, an obedient lady." Antigone herself—and with An-

tigone alone can we imagine the meeting of Cordelia in the heaven of heavens—is not so divinely human as Cordelia. We love her all the more, with a love that at once tempers and heightens our worship, for the rough and abrupt repetition of her nobly unmerciful reply to her father's fond and fatuous appeal. Almost cruel and assuredly severe in its uncompromising self-respect, this brief and natural word of indignantly reticent response is the key-note of all that follows—the spark which kindles into eternal life the most tragic of all tragedies in the world. All the yet unimaginable horror of the future becomes at once inevitable and assured when she shows herself so young and so untender—so young and true. And what is the hereditary horror of doom once imminent over the house of Atreus to this instant imminence of no supernatural but a more awfully natural fate? Cursed and cast out, she leaves him and knows that she leaves him in the hands of Goneril and Regan.

Coleridge, the greatest though not the first great critic and apostle or interpreter of Shakespeare, has noted "these daughters and these sisters" as the only characters in Shakespeare whose wickedness is ultranatural—something outside and beyond the presumable limits of human evil. It would be well for human nature if it were so; but is it? They are "remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless"; hot and hard, cold and cunning, savage and subtle as a beast of the field or the wilderness or the jungle. But such dangerous and vicious animals are not more exceptional than the very noblest and purest of their kind. An Iago is abnormal: his wonderful intelligence, omnipotent and infallible within its limit and its range, gives to the unclean and maleficent beast that he is the dignity and the mystery of a devil. Goneril and Regan would be almost vulgarly commonplace by comparison with him if the conditions of their life and the circumstances of their story were not so much more extraordinary than their instincts and their acts. "Regan," according to Coleridge, "is not, in fact, a greater monster than Goneril, but she has the power of casting more venom." A champion who should wish to enter the lists on behalf of Goneril might plead that

Regan was so much more of a Gadarean sow than her elder sister as to be, for all we know, incapable of such passion as flames out in Goneril at the thought of foreign banners spread in a noiseless land. Beast and she-devil as she is, she rises in that instant to the level of an unclean and a criminal Joan of Arc. Her advocate might also invoke as an extenuating circumstance the fact that she poisoned Regan.

François-Victor Hugo, the author of the best and fullest commentary ever written on the text of which he gave us the most wonderful and masterly of all imaginable translations, has perhaps unwittingly enforced and amplified the remark of Coleridge on the difference between the criminality of the one man chosen by chance and predestined by nature as the proper paramour of either sister and the monstrosity of the creatures who felt towards him as women feel towards the men they love. Edmund is not a more true-born child of hell than a true-born son of his father. Goneril and Regan are legitimate daughters of the pit; the man who excites in them such emotion as in such as they are may pass as the substitute for love is but a half-blooded fellow from the infernal as well as the human point of view. His last wish is to undo the last and most monstrous of his crimes.* Such a wish would have been impossible to either of the sisters by whom he can boast with his dying breath that Edmund was beloved.

The incomparable genius of the greatest among all poets and all men approved itself incomparable forever by the possibly unconscious instinct which in this supreme work induced or compelled him to set side by side the very lowest and the very highest types of imaginable humanity. Kent and Oswald, Regan and Cordelia, stand out in such relief against each other that Shakespeare alone could

* A small but absurd and injurious misprint in this passage has hitherto escaped attention. From Butter's edition downwards the word Cordelia has been allowed to stand, where it would have been obvious that the sign of the genitive case was required and had been dropped out by accident. Of course we should read,

.... my writ
Is on the life of Lear, and on Cordelia's.
The present reading, "my writ is—on Cordelia," is pure and patent nonsense.



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ACT III.: SCENE IV.—LEAR, KENT, FOOL, AND EDGAR

have wrought their several figures into one perfect scheme of spiritual harmony. Setting aside for a moment the reflection that outside the work of Aeschylus there is no such poetry in the world, we must remember that there is no such realism. And there is no discord between the supreme sublimities of impassioned poetry and the humblest realities of photographic prose. Incredible and impossible as it seems, the impression of the one is enhanced and intensified by the impression of the other.

That Shakespeare's judgment was as great and almost as wonderful as his genius has been a commonplace of criticism ever since the days of Coleridge; questionable only by such dirty and dwarfish creatures of simian intellect and facetious idiocy as mistake it for a sign of wit instead of dulness, and of distinction instead of degradation, to deny the sun in heaven and affirm the fragrance of a sewer. But I do not know whether his equally unequalled skill in the selection and composition of material for the construction of a masterpiece has or has not been as all but universally recognized. No more happy and no more terrible inspiration ever glorified the genius of a poet than was that which bade the greatest of them all inweave or fuse together the legend of Lear and his daughters with the story of Gloucester and his sons. It is possible that an episode in Sidney's *Arcadia* may have suggested, as is usually supposed or usually repeated, the notion or conception of this more than tragic underplot; but the student will be disappointed who thinks to find in the sweet and sunbright work of Sidney's pure and happy genius a touch or a hint of such tragic horror as could only be conceived and made enduring by the deeper as well as higher, and darker as well as brighter, genius of Shakespeare. And this fearful understudy in terror is a necessary, an indispensable, part of the most wonderful creation ever imagined and realized by man. The author of the Book of Job, the author of the Eumenides, can show nothing to be set beside the third act of *King Lear*. All that is best and all that is worst in man might have been brought together and flashed together upon the mind's eye of the spectator or the student without the inter-

vention of such servile ministers as take part with Goneril and Regan against their father. Storm and lightning, thunder and rain, become to us, even as they became to Lear, no less conscious and responsible partners in the superhuman inhumanity of an unimaginable crime. The close of the *Prometheus* itself is pale and humble by comparison with a scene which is not the close and is less terrible than the close of *King Lear*. And it is no whit more terrible than it is beautiful. The splendor of the lightning and the menace of the thunder serve only or mainly to relieve or to enhance the effect of suffering and the potency of passion on the spirit and the conscience of a man. The sufferer is transfigured: but he is not transformed. Mad or sane, living and dying, he is passionate and vehement, single-hearted and self-willed. And therefore it is that the fierce appeal, the fiery protest against the social iniquities and the legal atrocities of civilized mankind, which none before the greatest of all Englishmen had ever dreamed of daring to utter in song or set forth upon the stage, comes not from *Hamlet*, but from *Lear*. The young man whose infinite capacity of thought and whose delicate scrupulosity of conscience at once half disabled and half deified him could never have seen what was revealed by suffering to an old man who had never thought or felt more deeply or more keenly than an average laborer or an average king. Lear's madness, at all events, was assuredly not his enemy, but his friend. The rule of Elizabeth and her successor may have been more arbitrary than we can now understand how the commonwealth of England could accept and could endure; but how far it was from a monarchy, from a government really deserving of that odious and ignominious name, we may judge by the fact that this play could be acted and published. Among all its other great qualities, among all the many other attributes which mark it forever as matchless among the works of man, it has this, above all, that it is the first great utterance of a cry from the heights and the depths of the human spirit on behalf of the outcasts of the world—on behalf of the social sufferer, clean or unclean, innocent or criminal, thrall or free. To satisfy the sense of



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ACT V.: SCENE III.—EDGAR, ARMED

righteousness, the craving for justice, as unknown and unimaginable by Dante as by Chaucer, a change must come upon the social scheme of things which shall make an end of the actual relations between the judge and the cutpurse, the beadle and the prostitute, the beggar and the king. All this could be uttered, could be prophesied, could be thundered from the English stage at the dawn of the seventeenth century. Were it within the power of omnipotence to create a German or a Russian Shakespeare, could anything of the sort be whispered or muttered or hinted or suggested from the boards of a Russian or a German theatre at the dawn of the twentieth? When a Tolstoi or a Sudermann can do this, and can do it with impunity in success, it will be allowed that his country is not more than three centuries behind England in civilization and in freedom. Not political reform, but social revolution as beneficent and as bloodless, as absolute and as radical, as enkindled the aspiration and the faith of Victor Hugo, is the key-note of the creed and the watchword of the gospel according to Shakespeare. Not, of course, that it was not his first and last aim to follow the impulse which urged him to do good work for its own sake and for love of his own art: but this he could not do without delivery of the word that was in him—the word of witness against wrong done by oversight as well as by cruelty, by negligence as surely as by crime. These things were hidden from the marvellous wisdom of Hamlet, and revealed to the more marvellous insanity of Lear.

There is nothing of the miraculous in this marvel: the mere presence and companionship of the Fool should suffice to account for it; Cordelia herself is but a little more adorably worthy of our love than the poor fellow who began to pine away after her going into France and before his coming into sight of reader or spectator. Here again the utmost humiliation imaginable of social state and daily life serves only to exalt and to emphasize the nobility and the manhood of the natural man. The whip itself cannot de-grade him; the threat of it cannot change his attitude towards Lear; the dread of it cannot modify his defiance of Goneril. Being, if not half-witted, not altogether

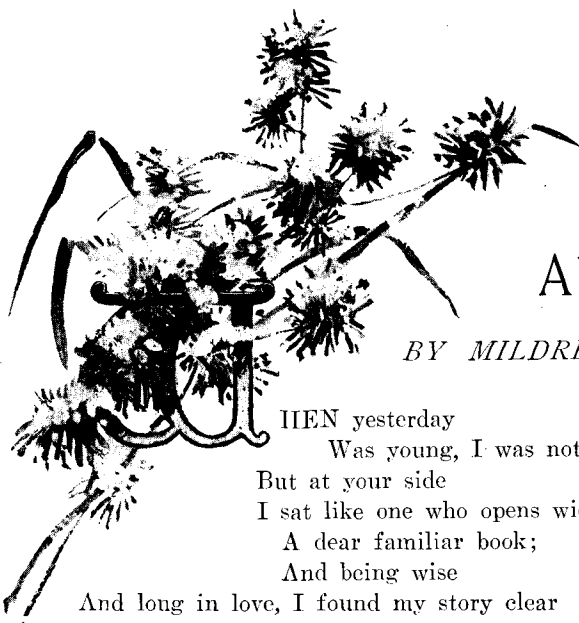
as other men are, he urges Lear to return and ask his daughters' blessing rather than brave the midnight and the storm: but he cleaves to his master with the divine instinct of fidelity and love which is not, though it should be, as generally recognized in the actual nature of a cat as in the proverbial nature of a dog. And when the old man is trembling on the very verge of madness, he sees and understands the priceless worth of such devotion and the godlike wisdom of such folly. In the most fearfully pathetic of all poems the most divinely pathetic touch of all is the tender thought of the houseless sufferer for the suffering of such a fellow-sufferer as his fool. The whirlwind of terror and pity in which we are living as we read may at first confuse and obscure to the sight of a boyish reader the supreme significance and the unutterable charm of it. But if any elder does not feel it too keenly and too deeply for tears, it is a pity that he should waste his time and misuse his understanding in the study of Shakespeare.

There is nothing in all poetry so awful, so nearly unendurable by the reader who is compelled by a natural instinct of imagination to realize and believe it, as the close of the *Choephore*, except only the close of *King Lear*. The cry of Ugolino to the earth that would not open to swallow and to save is not quite so fearful in its pathos. But the skill which made use of the stupid old chronicle or tradition to produce this final masterpiece of tragedy is coequal with the genius which created it. The legendary Cordelia hanged herself in prison, long after her father's death, when defeated in battle by the sons of Goneril. And this most putrid and contemptible tradition suggested to Shakespeare the most dramatic and the most poetic of all scenes and all events that ever bade all men not devoid of understanding understand how much higher is the genius of man than the action of chance: how far the truth of imagination exceeds and transcends at all points the accident of fact. That an event may have happened means nothing and matters nothing; that a man such as Aeschylus or Shakespeare imagined it means this: that it endures and bears witness what man may be, at the highest of his powers and noblest of his nature, forever.



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ACT V.: SCENE III.—LEAR, WITH CORDELIA DEAD IN HIS ARMS



Absence

BY MILDRED I. McNEAL

THEN yesterday
Was young, I was not here—
But at your side
I sat like one who opens wide
A dear familiar book;
And being wise
And long in love, I found my story clear
And sweet as is the May,
And took
My morning and my message from your eyes.

“To-day,” we said—
A word too sweet to lose—
And lifted up
Its beauty like a costly cup
To hold our wine of joy.
Oh time of pure
And unreserved delight! Who would not choose
To cage you ere you fled?
Happy as girl and boy
Were we, to think our treasury secure.

But now—to-day—
The widening miles between
Do dumbly lie.
I search my erring thoughts to try
If once I touched your hand
And had your smile;
And did I really learn what your eyes mean?
Man must be bold to say
He understands—
And, love, it was a very little while.

