



'Nothing Will Come of Nothing': Nature, Kingship, and the Unmaking of Order in Shakespeare's King Lear

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Abstract

King Lear is the Shakespearean tragedy that has most divided its readers over the question of what, if anything, its suffering means. For two centuries after Nahum Tate's adaptation gave the play a happy ending, audiences could not bear the original; for much of the twentieth century critics read the play as a Christian allegory of redemption through suffering; since the 1960s it has increasingly been read as a play that withholds redemption altogether. This article argues that the division is built into the play, and that its source is the word "nature," which King Lear uses more often than any other Shakespearean text and in senses that cannot be reconciled. Drawing on the historical scholarship that has reconstructed the competing doctrines of nature available in Jacobean England, on the cultural materialist reading that has treated the play as a dismantling of providential ideology, on the feminist and psychoanalytic criticism that has examined the play's absent mothers and its terror of the female body, and on the philosophical reading that has found in Lear's story a study of the refusal of love, the article examines three sites at which the play's conception of nature is tested: the opening division of the kingdom, the storm and the encounter with Poor Tom, and the deaths of Cordelia and Lear. The paper contends that the play does not resolve the conflict between a benign and a malign nature but stages it to exhaustion, and that its refusal of consolation is not nihilism but the most rigorous honesty about suffering in the English dramatic tradition. The article is intended both as a contribution to the study of the play and as a model of theoretically informed close reading for undergraduate and postgraduate readers.

Keywords:- Shakespeare, King Lear, Nature, Kingship, Providence, Cultural Materialism, Feminist Criticism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Tragedy, Suffering, Jacobean Drama, Order.

Introduction

"Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again" (1.1.90). Lear's reply to Cordelia's refusal to flatter him is the play's first proverb and its most consequential error. The King believes that the world is a system of exchange in which love can be measured by speech, land by love, and the value of a daughter by the size of her professions; Cordelia's "nothing" is, in that system, worth nothing, and Lear gives her nothing in return. The rest of the play is the demonstration that he was wrong. A great deal comes of Cordelia's nothing: the division of the kingdom, the

civil war, the blinding of Gloucester, the storm, the madness, and the deaths of every member of the royal family. Nothing, in *King Lear*, is the most productive word in the language.

The word around which the play's meaning is organised, however, is not "nothing" but "nature." *King Lear* uses "nature" and its cognates more than forty times, more than any other play in the canon, and it uses them in senses that contradict one another. For Lear, nature is the order that binds child to parent and subject to king, and Goneril and Regan are unnatural because they violate it. For Edmund, nature is the goddess who made him strong and handsome and owes no allegiance to the plague of custom, and the natural act is to take what one can. For Gloucester, nature is the sky whose eclipses portend disorder; for Edgar, it is the medicine that patience administers; for the Fool, it is the fact that a snail has a house and a man has none. John Danby's classic study argued that the play stages a conflict between two doctrines of nature, the benign order of Hooker and the predatory competition of Hobbes, and that the conflict is the play's tragic subject (Danby 15–53). Later criticism has complicated the account without displacing it.

This article argues that the play's contradictory uses of "nature" are not a confusion but an argument, and that the argument is conducted to the point at which every available conception of nature has been tested and found insufficient. It proceeds in four stages. The first situates the play in the Jacobean discourse of nature, order, and kingship. The second reads the division of the kingdom as the moment at which the King's conception of nature is exposed as a fiction. The third turns to the storm and the encounter with Poor Tom, where the play's alternative conception of nature, as bare unaccommodated life, is examined and found no more sustaining than the first. The fourth reads the play's ending, the deaths of Cordelia and Lear, in the light of the critical debate over whether the play offers redemption or denies it. A concluding discussion considers what the play's refusal of consolation offers to students of tragedy.

Quotations follow the Oxford Complete Works edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, which prints the Quarto and Folio texts separately; citations are to the Folio text, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, by act, scene, and line. Critical works are cited parenthetically in MLA style.

Nature, Order, and the Jacobean State

The Elizabethan World Picture and Its Critics

For most of the twentieth century the standard account of the intellectual background to Shakespeare's tragedies was E. M. W. Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture*, which reconstructed from sermons, treatises, and homilies a coherent doctrine of cosmic order in which every creature occupied a fixed place on a great chain of being, the king stood to the state as God to the cosmos and the head to the body, and any disturbance of the order at one level was reflected at every other (Tillyard 1–20). On this account the disorder of *King Lear*, the disruption of the family, the state, and the heavens, was the consequence of Lear's initial violation of order in dividing his kingdom, and the play's ending restored the order it had disturbed.

The account has been comprehensively challenged. Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* argued that the Elizabethan world picture was not a shared belief but an ideology, promulgated by the state precisely because it was contested, and that Renaissance tragedy, far from endorsing it, exposed its function as a legitimization of power (Dollimore 3–28). William Elton's study of the play's religious background demonstrated that Jacobean England contained not one doctrine of nature but several, from the providential order of orthodox Christianity through the pagan naturalism of the Stoics to the scepticism of Montaigne, and that *King Lear*, set in a pre-Christian Britain, deliberately withholds the Christian framework within which its suffering might have been made to mean something (Elton 1–33). What both readings share is

the recognition that the play's conceptions of nature are in competition, and that the play does not tell its audience which one is true.

Kingship and the Two Bodies

The play's treatment of kingship draws on the same contested ground. The doctrine of the king's two bodies, the body natural that ages and dies and the body politic that is immortal and never in error, provided the legal fiction by which the continuity of the state was secured through the mortality of its rulers. Lear's abdication is a violation of the doctrine, since the body politic cannot be divided or given away; but the play's interest is less in the legal error than in what happens to the body natural when the body politic has been stripped from it. Lear's question to the Fool, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (1.4.212), is the question of a man who has discovered that his identity was constituted by his office, and the Fool's answer, "Lear's shadow," is the play's diagnosis.

The relevance to the Jacobean moment was direct. James I had come to the English throne in 1603 as the ruler of two kingdoms whose union he was attempting, against considerable parliamentary resistance, to secure; a play about the disasters that follow the division of Britain was an argument for union, and the play was performed at court in December 1606. But James's theory of kingship also rested on the analogy between the king and the father, expounded in his *Basilikon Doron* and in his speeches to Parliament, and *King Lear* is a play in which the father-king is destroyed by the children to whom he has given his power. Whether the play was received as a warning against division or as an exposure of the paternal analogy on which the King's authority was built, it could not be received as a simple endorsement of order. Stephen Greenblatt's reading of the play alongside Samuel Harsnett's exposure of Catholic exorcisms argues that Shakespeare borrowed from Harsnett the language of Poor Tom's possession while emptying it of the belief it had served, and that the play thereby drains the supernatural of its authority even as it draws on its energy (Greenblatt 94–128). The same drainage, this article argues, is performed on nature itself.

The Division of the Kingdom

The Love Test as Exchange

The opening scene is a ceremony of exchange conducted as if it were a ceremony of love. Lear has already divided the kingdom; the map is drawn and the portions assigned; the love test is a ritual whose outcome is fixed in advance, designed to allow the King to give away his power while retaining the appearance of choosing to whom he gives it. Goneril and Regan understand this and perform accordingly. Cordelia does not, or will not: "I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (1.1.92–93). The word "bond" is the crux. For Cordelia it names the natural obligation of child to parent, which cannot be increased by speech; for Lear it names a contract whose terms she has refused to meet.

Stanley Cavell's essay on the play, the most influential philosophical reading it has received, argues that Lear's demand for professions of love is a demand to be loved without having to acknowledge that he needs love, and that Cordelia's refusal is intolerable to him because it makes his need visible. The play, on Cavell's reading, is a study of the avoidance of love, of the ways in which people evade the acknowledgment of one another because acknowledgment exposes them, and Lear's rage is the rage of a man who has been seen (Cavell 39–123). The reading connects the play's psychology to its politics. The King who cannot bear to be seen needing love is the King who cannot bear to be a body natural, and the love test is his attempt to convert the bond of nature into a transaction he can control.

Edmund and the Goddess

The second scene offers the play's alternative conception of nature in its purest form.

Edmund, the bastard, addresses nature as his goddess and argues that his illegitimacy, which custom brands as base, is in nature's eyes a mark of vigour: "Why brand they us / With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base? / Who in the lusty stealth of nature take / More composition and fierce quality / Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed / Go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops" (1.2.9–14). The speech is the play's most exhilarating, and its exhilaration is the point. Edmund's nature is the nature of appetite and force, in which the strong take and the weak are taken from, and it is a conception the play does not refute by argument. It refutes it by showing where it leads: to the blinding of Gloucester, the deaths of Goneril and Regan, and Edmund's own death at the hands of a brother he had wronged.

Danby's account of Edmund as the representative of a new, Hobbesian nature that was displacing the old, Hookerian one has been criticised as anachronistic, since Hobbes's *Leviathan* was not published until 1651, but the criticism misses the point. The conception Edmund voices did not need Hobbes; it was available in Machiavelli, in Montaigne's essays on the savages of the New World, and in the everyday experience of a commercial society in which custom was visibly giving way to competition (Danby 31–53). What the play does with the conception is to set it beside Lear's and to show that neither man's nature can account for what happens. Lear's nature cannot explain his daughters' cruelty; Edmund's cannot explain Cordelia's love, Kent's loyalty, or the servant who dies trying to stop the blinding of Gloucester. The play's world contains both kinds of act, and no available doctrine of nature contains both.

The Storm and the Unaccommodated Man

Nature as Weather

The storm of the third act is the play's most sustained examination of what nature is when the human conceptions of it have been stripped away. Lear addresses the elements as if they were agents, commanding them to crack their cheeks and rage, and then, in the play's first movement toward recognition, concedes that they are not: "I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness. / I never gave you kingdom, called you children" (3.2.16–17). The elements are not unkind because they are not kin. The nature that Lear had invoked to curse Goneril, the nature of bonds and obligations, does not extend to the weather, and the weather's indifference is the first lesson of the heath.

The second lesson is the discovery of other people. Lear's prayer for the poor naked wretches, "Take physic, pomp, / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.33–34), is the play's moment of political conscience, and it has been read as the King's conversion to a nature of common humanity. Jan Kott's reading of the play as a precursor of Beckett's theatre argued that the heath is the scene of a stripping in which every social identity is removed and what remains is the bare fact of the suffering body, and that the play's grotesque comedy, the mad king, the disguised earl, the blind man led by a beggar, is the comedy of that bareness (Kott 100–33). The reading has been criticised for imposing a twentieth-century sensibility on a Jacobean text, but the play's own language supports it. When Lear encounters Poor Tom he sees in him the truth of human nature: "Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (3.4.100–02). And he tears off his clothes.

Poor Tom and the Limits of Bareness

The irony that the play does not allow its audience to forget is that Poor Tom is not the thing itself. He is Edgar, a nobleman in disguise, performing madness in a language borrowed from the pamphlet literature of exorcism, and his bareness is a costume. Lear's recognition of unaccommodated man is a recognition of a fiction, and the play's alternative nature, the nature of the bare forked animal, is exposed as another construction the moment it is affirmed. Edgar's asides throughout the heath scenes, in which he steps out of his role to comment on the King's

suffering, keep the audience aware that the truth Lear has found is a performance, and that the performer will resume his identity as soon as the plot allows.

Coppélia Kahn's feminist reading of the play adds a further dimension to the heath. Kahn observes that *King Lear* is a play without mothers, that Lear's daughters and Gloucester's sons have no female parent, and that the maternal is present only as a threat, in Lear's terror of the hysterica passio that climbs toward his heart and in his identification of female sexuality with the sulphurous pit. On Kahn's reading, the bareness Lear discovers on the heath is the bareness of a man who has projected onto his daughters the dependency he cannot acknowledge in himself, and the play's tragedy is that the acknowledgment, when it comes, comes too late and is directed at the one daughter he had rejected (Kahn 33–49). Janet Adelman's account extends the argument: the play's absent mothers are the condition of its fantasy of a purely paternal creation, and the fantasy's collapse is the storm (Adelman 103–29). Nature, on these readings, is not only the weather and not only the bare animal; it is the female body the play cannot name, and the heath is the place where the King's flight from it ends.

The Ending and the Question of Redemption

Tate, Johnson, and the Unbearable

The death of Cordelia has no source. In the old play of *King Lear* that Shakespeare rewrote, in Holinshed, in Spenser, and in every other version of the story, Cordelia survives and restores her father to the throne. Shakespeare killed her, and the killing has been the play's central problem ever since. Nahum Tate's 1681 adaptation restored the traditional ending, married Cordelia to Edgar, and let Lear retire in peace, and Tate's version held the stage for a hundred and fifty years. Samuel Johnson, who edited the play in 1765, confessed that he had been so shocked by Cordelia's death that he could not bear to reread the final scenes until he undertook to revise them as an editor, and he defended Tate's ending on the grounds that all reasonable beings naturally love justice (Johnson 703–05). The confession is the most honest response the ending has received, and it identifies precisely what the play denies: the natural love of justice, the expectation that suffering will be rewarded and wickedness punished, which every doctrine of nature the play has examined had promised.

The twentieth century's answer to Johnson was the redemptive reading, which held that the play's suffering was meaningful because it produced wisdom, humility, and love; that Lear's recognition of Cordelia in the fourth act was a spiritual rebirth; and that his death in the fifth was a release. A. C. Bradley, who founded the reading, argued that Lear dies in an ecstasy of joy at the belief that Cordelia lives, and that the play might be renamed *The Redemption of King Lear* (Bradley 243–330). The reading has the merit of taking seriously the play's moments of tenderness, the reconciliation, the prison speech in which Lear imagines singing like birds in a cage. Its difficulty is the last scene, in which Cordelia is dead, Lear's joy, if it is joy, is delusion, and the survivors can find nothing to say.

The Weight of This Sad Time

Dollimore's reading of the ending as a deliberate refusal of redemption remains the most forceful. For Dollimore, the play systematically severs the connections between suffering and wisdom, virtue and reward, that the redemptive reading requires; Lear's insight on the heath does not save Cordelia, Gloucester's patience does not save his eyes, and the deaths of the wicked in the fifth act are followed not by restoration but by the entry of Lear with Cordelia in his arms. The play's world is one in which suffering is real and meaning is not, and the ending's unbearableness is its point (Dollimore 189–203). R. A. Foakes, who argued that *King Lear* displaced *Hamlet* as the central Shakespearean tragedy in the twentieth century precisely because its refusal of consolation spoke to a century of atrocity, traced the shift from Bradley's

redemption to Kott's absurdity as a shift in what audiences could believe about suffering (Foakes 45–77).

The argument of this article is that the play does not choose between these readings but exhausts them. Lear's final speech asks a question the play has been asking since the first scene: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?" (5.3.282–83). It is a question about nature, about why the natural order should preserve the animal and destroy the daughter, and the play offers no answer. Lear's last words, "Look there, look there" (5.3.287), may express the delusion that Cordelia breathes or may express nothing, and the text does not say. The survivors' final lines, "The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.299–300), are an instruction to abandon the language of consolation, and the play obeys its own instruction. What comes of nothing, in the end, is a stage on which the ought has been silenced and only the feel remains.

Discussion: Teaching the Refusal of Consolation

King Lear presents students with a difficulty that is also an opportunity. The difficulty is that the play seems to withhold what tragedy is supposed to provide: the sense that suffering has been made intelligible, that the moral order has been vindicated or at least clarified, that the audience can leave the theatre knowing something it did not know before. The opportunity is that the withholding is itself the play's argument, and that a student who has understood why the play refuses consolation has understood something about tragedy that no more consoling play could teach.

The critical traditions surveyed in this article offer different accounts of the refusal. The historicist reading of Elton and Dollimore locates it in the play's deliberate exclusion of the Christian framework within which its suffering might have been redeemed; the cultural materialist reading treats it as an exposure of the ideology of order; the feminist and psychoanalytic readings of Kahn and Adelman find in it the collapse of a fantasy of paternal self-sufficiency; the philosophical reading of Cavell finds the tragedy in the avoidance of acknowledgment; and the theatrical reading of Kott finds in the play's grotesque bareness a precursor of the modern stage. What unites them is the recognition that the play's contradictory uses of "nature" are not to be resolved but to be inhabited, and that the play's honesty consists in its refusal to let any one conception of nature account for a world that contains both Cordelia and Goneril, both Kent and Edmund, both the servant who dies for Gloucester and the sisters who put out his eyes.

For students, the lesson is one about reading as much as about tragedy. King Lear rewards the reader who can hold competing interpretations in suspension, who can register the play's tenderness without converting it into redemption and its cruelty without converting it into nihilism, and who can accept that the question Lear asks over Cordelia's body is a question the play was written to ask and not to answer. That capacity, the capacity to sit with what cannot be resolved, is what the survivors' final lines recommend, and it is what the play, more than any other in the language, has the power to teach.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the contradictory conceptions of nature in King Lear are the play's argument rather than its confusion, and that the argument is conducted to the point at which every available conception has been tested and found unable to account for the play's world. Lear's nature of bonds and obligations is exposed as a fiction in the first scene; Edmund's nature of appetite and force is exposed by its consequences; the nature of the bare forked animal that Lear discovers on the heath is exposed as a performance the moment it is affirmed; and the nature that would reward virtue and punish vice, the nature Johnson called the natural love of justice, is denied by the death of Cordelia and the silence of the survivors. What remains is not

a doctrine but a weight, the weight of this sad time, and the play's final instruction is to obey it.

The play's refusal of consolation has made it, in the past century, the Shakespearean tragedy that speaks most directly to readers who have their own reasons to doubt that suffering is meaningful, and its capacity to speak to them is the measure of its honesty. King Lear does not tell its audience that nothing will come of nothing. It shows them what comes, and it leaves them, as it leaves Edgar and Albany and Kent, to speak what they feel. That the play has been read, performed, adapted, and argued over for four centuries is the evidence that what they feel has not been exhausted, and that the question Lear asks over his daughter's body is still being asked.

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