Truth, Lies, and Poesie in *King Lear*

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At the beginning of his tragedy, *King Lear* requires each of his daughters to “speak” her love for him, promising the most opulent share of the kingdom to her who “doth love us most.”¹ In answer he gets the well-known rhetoric of Goneril (“I love you more than words can wield the matter”) and of Regan (“I am alone felicitate / In your dear highness’ love”). Then, expecting yet more, he gets Cordelia’s “I love your majesty / According to my bond, no more, nor less.” Lear bids her, “mend your speech a little,” but when she amplifies to “I . . . obey you, love you, and most honour you . . . [But] sure I shall never marry like my sisters / To love my father all,” Lear rejects her “truth”: “Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.” When Kent intervenes – “Be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad . . . To plainness honour’s bound / When majesty falls to folly”² – the angry king banishes him with a curse, and turns to further reward those whose words have pleased him.

Goneril’s and Regan’s hyperbole here, and Edmund’s fabrication about Edgar in the next scene, are devised to flatter a known weakness: Lear’s desire for adulation, Gloucester’s physical timidity. The eager faith both old men give to verbal manipulation will cause all the suffering they will endure themselves and bring on others. Good counsellors tell them to prefer plain truth. Long before their deaths they learn the folly of their trust in falsehoods. Yet, strangely, much of the good that befalls them itself is built upon falsehoods by characters who intend to benefit them. Kent disguises himself as a servant and becomes the fellow of the Fool. Edgar successively adopts the roles of madman, poor stranger, peasant, and nameless knight.³ These disguises depend upon carefully constructed fictions: Kent farcically exaggerates his own personality, Edgar obliterates his (“Edgar I nothing am”) and creates wholly new identities. Within his disguises of person, Edgar fabricates fictions such as the famous Dover Cliff speech; yet, because the falsehoods of Kent and Edgar are benevolent, even so morally sensitive a critic as Johnson does not remark that their deceptions exceed those of the play’s villains, who if anything overdo plain speaking once they come to power. The relationship between telling the truth, telling lies, and inventing fictions – the “poesy” of Kent and Edgar – shapes the play’s most important actions. This relationship parallels the 16th century’s awareness that the need to persuade may conflict with the need to tell the truth, an aware-

ness most important in the justification of poesy (the creation of fictions) against charges that to make them is to lie.

Truth, of course, means that what is affirmed states what is. Renaissance writers commonly assume that the truth will displease:

. . . the truth plainly setteth downe the matter as it is indeed, albeit the event thereof be not verie pleasant.⁴

. . . sometimes a man must not speake all that he knoweth, for if he do, he is like to find small favour, although he haue just cause to speake, and may with reason declare his mynd at large.⁵

As Bacon observes,

. . . Truth is a naked, and open day light, that doth not shew, the Masques, and Mummeries, and Triumphs of the world, halfe so Stately, and daintily, as Candlelight.⁶

Unlike truth, Bacon continues, falsehood has to be pleasing: "A mixture of a *Lie* doth ever add Pleasure. Doth any man doubt, that if there were taken out of Mens Mindes, Vaine Opinions, Flattering Hopes, False valuations, Imaginations as one would, and the like; but it would leave the Minds of a Number of Men, poore shrunken Things, full of Melancholy, and Indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves?" Men even love lies from "a naturall, though corrupt Loue, of the *Lie* it selfe," even when the lie gives neither pleasure nor advantage.⁷ When the person lied to is powerful, the falsehood told to please him endangers the whole state; Erasmus devotes a chapter in *The Education of a Christian Prince* to the evil of flattering a ruler and proposes death as the penalty.⁸ His disciple Sir Thomas Elyot amplifies this chapter in *The Governour*, insisting on putting flatterers "openly to tortures . . . in reason how much more pain [than forgers and coiners] (if there were any greater pain than death) were he worthy to suffer, that with false adulation doth corrupt and adulterate the gentle and virtuous nature of a nobleman."⁹ Shakespeare uses the words "lie" and "flatter" almost interchangeably: "Therefore I lie with her and she with me / And in our thoughts by lies we flattered be." A large class of villains are lying flatterers – the morality Vices, Proteus, Parolles, Iago, and the Witches of *Macbeth*, Heywood's Wendoll, Jonson's Volpone, Milton's Satan, and Bunyan's Worldly-Wiseman. *King Lear* abounds in them – Goneril, Regan, Burgundy, Oswald, Edmund – all exemplifying the danger to a prince that Erasmus worried over, especially if the prince is a child or an old man, who "by natural inclination . . . [take] more pleasure in blandishments than in truth."¹⁰

The moral danger inherent in pleasant lies may explain the uneasiness many of the same thinkers feel about poetic fictions:

The principall ornament of [poets'] verses are tales made at pleasure, & foolish & disorderly subiectes, clean disguising the trueth & hystorie, to the end they might the more delight. . . . Hence grew the common prouerb, that al Poets are lyers. . . . The occasion of so free passage giuen to Poets is, for that their fables slyde away easily, and cunningly turne themselues to tickel at pleasure.¹¹

A fable is a forged tale, containing in it by the colour of a lie, a matter of truth.¹²

One of the Fathers, in great Seuerity, called Poesie, *Vinum Daemonum*; because it filleth the Imagination, and yet it is, but with the shadow of a Lie.¹³

The confusion of fiction and lie, between which Sidney discriminates in his familiar statement, "The Poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lyeth,"¹⁴ may draw strength from the dreaded perils of flattery.

Thomas Wilson attempts to override objections to pleasant fiction by a utilitarian argument from experience. As he says, one cannot persuade an audience that does not listen:

. . . I woulde thinke it not amisse to speake much, according to the nature and phansie of the ignorant, that the rather they might be won through Fables, to learne more weightie and graue matters, for all men can not brooke sage causes, and auncient collations: . . . Talke altogether of most graue matters, or deeply search out the ground of things or use the quiddities of Dunce, to set forth Gods misteries: and you shall see the ignorant . . . either fall a sleepe, or els bid you farewell. . . . And yet it is no foolishness, but rather wisdom to win men, by telling of Fables to heare of Gods goodnesse.¹⁵

Sidney says the same throughout the *Defense of Poesie*:

. . . glad [men] will be to heare the tales of *Hercules*, *Achilles*, *Cyrus*, and *Aeneas*; and hearing them, must needs heare the right description of wisdom, valour, and justice; which, if they had been barely, that is to say Philosophically, set out, they would sweare they be brought to schoole againe . . . For even those harde-harted evill men who thinke vertue a school name, and knowe no other good but *indulgere genio*, and therefore despise the austere admonitions of the Philosopher, and feele not the inward reason they stand upon, yet will be content to be delighted, which is all the good felow Poet seemeth to promise; and so steale to see the forme of goodness (which seene they cannot but loue) ere themselues be aware.¹⁶

The means to this end, in the famous definition, is to imitate reality under fictitious names:

Poesie . . . is an arte of imitation, . . . a representing, counterfetting, or figuring forth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight. . . . [T]hey which most properly do imitate to teach and delight

. . . borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be [here differing from the historian tied to the truth of a foolish world], but range, only rayned with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be. . . . It is that fayning notable images of vertues, vices, or what els, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by.¹⁷

The poet, that is, makes a convincing imitation of reality, not a slavish record of fact; his purpose is to teach the ideal by representing it as the possible, and to present the ideal clearly through the ethical quality of his fiction. Since (unlike the philosopher) he is not exhorting to virtue directly but only showing the behavior of imaginary persons and its consequences, he reconciles the demands of truth, however unpleasant, to "imagination as one would" without flattery. Thus the poet will be heard when the truth-speaker is rejected. Yet his hearers will not be harmed by listening to his fictions, as they will if they listen to a flatterer's pleasing lies.

Like Sidney's men who refuse the philosopher's virtuous exhortations, Lear will not accept truth "barely set out"; it is hardly accidental that he rejects "plain" and "plainness" so often during his exchanges with Cordelia and Kent. Gloucester knows "no other good but *indulgere genio*" and cannot feel "the inward reason" of Edmund's insinuations that Edgar wants his father dead. Both, therefore, prove susceptible to language that flatters their particular weaknesses, and once they have accepted the flattery they prove impenetrable to the truth of either words or experience till experience changes their minds. Neither Goneril nor Regan nor Edmund bothers to lie or gild the truth once they have secured property and power – until, of course, they start to lie to one another.

The first two scenes of the play define the roles truth, lies, and poesy will assume in the rest of it. Goneril and Regan flatter Lear with an inflated and hyperbolic rhetoric. It takes very little skill in logic to show what they say is nonsense; however, Lear is not listening for logic but for just the kind of comparatives and superlatives they give him. When Cordelia utters a plain statement instead of another, longer ladder of "more's" and "dearer's," the contrast between what he has been hearing and what he now hears makes her words sound harsher than their meaning. France points out that her language "reverbs no hollowness," while the repeated "plain's" and "true's" applied to it by Lear and everyone else show that the trouble is not in the substance but in the language used to express it. And if Cordelia's "plain" truth displeases Lear because its expression does not verbally conform to what he thinks due him, Kent's – that Lear is mad, foolish, rash, evildoing – offends him in words and meaning alike. Yet this is nothing to the truths he gets from Goneril and then from Regan when they are in possession and no longer need trouble to flatter him.

When Goneril "breeds occasions" to dismiss her father and his knights she simply tells him the truth:

By her, that else will take the thing she begs,
 A little to disquantity your train;
 And the remainders, that shall still depend,
 To be such men as may besort your age,
 Which know themselves, and you. (I. iv. 244-9)

Recalling Cordelia's "plain" speech for which he banished her as a "most small fault," Lear tries to control Goneril with threats and curses. Then, since these fail and since he cannot banish this daughter to another land as he did Cordelia, he must banish himself, still expecting that Regan will side with him and even that he may "resume the shape" Goneril thinks he has "cast off forever."

Regan shows her true feeling for her father first by deeds, then by words. When Lear finds his messenger in the stocks and hears that "It is both he and she, / Your son and daughter" (II.iv. 11-12), he will not believe it: "They durst not do't. They could not, would not do't" (II.iv. 21-2). He then catches at Regan's greeting, "I am glad to see your highness" (II.iv. 125), as truth. Because rejecting Cordelia and Goneril has left him with only Regan, he takes much longer to accept that her words truly express her feelings and mean the same as Goneril's:

O sir, you are old;
 Nature in you stands on the very verge
 Of her confine: You should be rul'd and led
 By some discretion that discerns your state
 Better than you yourself. Therefore I pray you
 That to our sister you do make return;
 Say you have wrong'd her. (II.iv. 147-153)

Lear evades the meaning of these and succeeding words, understanding only when Goneril enters and Regan takes her by the hand – and even then he tries to deny this visible evidence of their alliance. The two allies "disquantity" his train from one hundred to none; his weapons of curse and threat fail him:

I will do such things –
 What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be
 The terrors of the earth. (II.iv. 182-184)

These "terrors of the earth" turn into weeping and oncoming madness, and disturb not at all the complacency of Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall as they dismiss Lear to the weather and go inside. Meanwhile, his forced recognition that his two daughters neither obey him, love him, nor honor him drives Lear into the storm and the insanity it prefigures. After this experience of truth at its most painful, it is hardly surprising that Lear at first

believes his reunion with a loving and forgiving Cordelia to be a dream, or that he retreats into "imaginations as one would" during the disasters of Act V.

In the central part of the play truth and falsehood, and confusions between them, remain important, but instead of being centered on verbal lies they are centered on deceptive appearances, which are closer to poesy than is the rhetoric of the first scene. To supplant his brother, Edmund forges a letter, reports an imaginary conversation, stages an incriminating interview, and conducts a noisy duel in which he even wounds himself. Later, seeing advantage in truth, he tells Cornwall of his father's correspondence with France and secret aid to Lear. Gloucester, who is not present when Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia speak in the first scene, sees that the King has acted "upon the gad," but he believes what he thinks visual proof of Edgar's treachery and Edmund's truth, to be undeceived only at the moment of his blinding. Exhilarated by his first successful manipulation of appearances, Edmund repeats the double deception of father and brother on Goneril and Regan, and attempts to trick Albany about his command and later about his prisoners. Only at the last when he is dying does Edmund speak a disinterested truth "despite of [his] own nature" (V.iii. 243). Edmund's "poesy" is corrupted by the ill purpose directing it; not "himself a true poem" he invents fictions that "tickle at pleasure" those who attend to them, and teach wrath, lust and treason.

Kent's "poesy" manipulates his own appearance so successfully that his fellow nobles can speak of Kent to him and not recognize him. But the fictional Caius depends almost entirely upon a "raz'd . . . likeness" (I.iv.4), for the style of his language differs very little from that of the Earl in the first scene, and what he tells Lear as Caius in their first interview would be equally true of Kent:

I can keep honest counsel, ride, run, mar a curious tale in telling it, and deliver a plain message bluntly; that which ordinary men are fit for, I am qualified in, and the best of me is diligence. . . . I have years on my back forty-eight. (I.iv.32-9)

Kent "[shapes] his old course in a country new" (I.i.186), the one below stairs where his fellow is Lear's Fool who speaks truth because, as he says, he has not learned how to lie. In their dialogues these two tell Lear truths he would rather not know in a form he can neither object to nor repudiate, yet these are the same truths about his folly he rejected when Kent spoke them in his own person. But Kent easily resumes the authority of a great nobleman in Act III, where he commands Lear's knight and is obeyed, because he has not sunk his own self into a created identity. Neither Cordelia nor the audience can see why he keeps up his disguise once he has brought Lear to Dover.

Kent's poesy, then, is mainly rhetorical, intended to persuade Lear and others that he is not what he is. For the audience, what he and the Fool mainly do is to keep Lear in touch with the continued presence of loyalty in a world that seems bent on uprooting it. For Lear on the heath, the Fool can do little and Kent hardly more. Kent's outward fiction and inner truth fulfil the requirement of poesy – a false vehicle for a true tenor – but Kent is not a major poet. At the entrance to the hovel, the major poet enters at Kent's call:

What are thou that dost grumble there i'th'straw?
Come forth.

Enter Edgar

(III.iv.43-44)

Even more than his half-brother Edmund, Edgar proves a master of invented identities, but instead of grafting "loyal son," "faithful subject," "true lover" upon his own person, he sinks his identity with true "negative capability" into a succession of invented personages: poor Tom, "a most poor man," a rustic, a messenger, a nameless knight; "Edgar I nothing am." At first this obliteration of self is for survival, but after the King's party finds him in the hovel, he attaches himself to Lear's cause and by the end of Act III he seems to have decided to "lurk" in his disguise in case he can help. This makes him available to watch over his father and others until he can return as Edgar Earl of Gloucester in Act V. Particularly as Poor Tom, the most elaborate, difficult, and long-lived of his fictional identities, Edgar is the poet, spinning his "autobiography" of the "serving man proud in heart and mind . . . that slept in the contriving of lust and wak'd to do it" (III.iv.85-91), hearing "the foul fiend [haunt] poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale [and] Hoppedance [cry] in Tom's belly for two white herring" (III.vi.30-32), learning from Frateretto "that Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness" (III.vi.6-7), singing snatches of ballads and inventing a rhyme about dogs.

That Edgar who is a poet creates a madman who is a poet is not surprising, especially when one remembers the words of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – a play with so many likenesses of form and language to *King Lear* that Shakespeare appears to be imitating his comedy in his tragedy:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
This is the madman. . . .
The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (V.i.7-17)

Giving "to airy nothing" a convincing and vivid "local habitation" is a major function of the poet in the view of Renaissance theorists:

Poesie . . . is an arte of imitation, . . . a representing, counterfetting, or figuring forth; to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture. . . . it is that fayning of notable images of vertues, vices, or what els . . . which must be the right describing note to know a poet by.¹⁸

The desideratum is *enargia*, "when a thyng is so described that it semeth to the reader or hearer that he beholdeth it as it were in doying,"¹⁹ by an agent equally real. Such a "speaking picture" appears as Edgar plans his disguise:

I will preserve myself; and am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury, in contempt of man,
Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots,
And with presented nakedness outface
The winds and persecutions of the sky.
The country gives me proof and precedent
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,
Strike in their numb'd and mortified bare arms
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary,
And with this horrible object, from low farms,
Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes, and mills,
Sometimes with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,
Enforce their charity. (II.iii.6-20)

When Edgar next appears, this verbal portrait has become a live, speaking picture, in its turn speaking further such pictures:

. . . poor Tom, whom the foul fiend hath led through fire and through flame,
through ford and whirlpool, o'er bog and quagmire, that hath laid knives
under his pillow and halts in his pew, set ratsbane by his porridge, made him
proud of heart, to ride on a bay trotting horse over four-inch'd bridges, to
course his own shadow for a traitor. . . . Poor Tom, that eats the swimming
frog, the toad, the todpole, the wall-newt and the water; that in the fury of his
heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for sallets, swallows the old rat
and the ditch dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool. (III.iv.50-57,
126-131)

It is hard to remember that this is all imaginative creation, that a sane Edgar is keeping decorum within a consistent and distinctive style that hardly falters through two long scenes, in spite of the growing pity for Lear that almost mars his "counterfeiting." Only when he meets his blinded father does the role become too much for him: "Poor Tom's acold. [Aside] I cannot daub it further" (IV.i.51). When the Old Man clothes him in his "best 'parel," even wretched Gloucester notices a corresponding change in his

speech, and when Edgar (truthfully in ways Gloucester cannot know) insists “In nothing am I chang’d / But in my garments,” Gloucester still maintains “Methinks you’re better spoken” (IV.vi.9-10). Edgar’s reply is the famous “topotesia, that is fiction of a place,” which describes Dover cliff “so that it semeth to the reader or hearer that he beholdeth it,”²⁰ and Gloucester believes he has fallen from this merely verbal precipice to be preserved by miracle. Edgar thereupon creates for himself a new character, “a most poor man, made tame to Fortune’s blows” (IV.vi.218), and within this character by “prosopographia . . . a description of a fained person [such as] harpies, furies, devils, . . . and soche lyke”²¹ paints a horror on the clifftop:

As I stood here below, [another fiction supporting
Gloucester’s “fall”] methought his eyes
Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses,
Horns whelk’d and wav’d like the enridged sea.
It was some fiend. (IV.vi.69-72)

In the midst of these fictions Edgar turns to the audience to explain:

Why I do trifle thus with his despair
Is done to cure it. (IV.vi.33-4)

That is, he is teaching Gloucester to come to terms with truth through fictions adapted to limited capacity to receive truth unadorned. And these fictions do what they are intended to, for after he thinks he has miraculously escaped a tempting demon, Gloucester prays to “ever gentle gods” (not the wanton tormentors who “kill us for their sport” [IV.i.37]), “Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you please” (IV.vi.214-5).

Edgar’s later disguises, as Mummerset peasant, messenger, and nameless knight, include less fiction than Poor Tom and the stranger on the beach, since each shows some aspect of Edgar as he is indeed. The peasant defends helpless, blind Gloucester from a murderer, as Edgar would do even if the victim were not his father. The man who brings Albany Goneril’s letter to Edmund and who promises to return after the battle hardly has time for a personality, but exhibits Edgar’s own caution and good manners. As the nameless challenger, he is almost himself. In these roles his disguise, like Kent’s, is more rhetoric than poesy – conscious persuasive art, not another creating Nature.

In his madness, Lear produces something like Edgar’s poetic creations as Poor Tom, but with one absolutely essential difference. Edgar deliberately feigns his demons. Lear thinks he sees what he describes. At first, as he learns how to be mad from the blanketed beggar, he merely invests him with identities suggested by his garment: “learned Theban,” “good Athenian,” “Robed man of justice,” “Persian.” But he soon hallucinates, seeing

Goneril in a joint-stool, Regan as an invisible cadaver for dissection, "the little dogs and all" who bark at him. When he first meets blind Gloucester, he thinks him a recruit for a troop of archers, then "Goneril with a white beard" (IV.vi.96), then the accused in a capital trial (for adultery), and last, in a lucid flash, "Thy name is Gloucester" (IV.vi.175). With words he calls out of "airy nothing" the "simp'ring dame" and the "rascal beadle," hypocrites pretending sexual virtue but really depraved by lust. Lear thus creates "notable images of virtues, vices, or what els," showing the truth underlying appearance and in this way teaching the auditor. But Lear's "poesie" is without poetic intent, for it is the unwilling vision of the lunatic who "sees more devils than vast hell can hold," not the controlled fabrication of the poet, not even the compulsive truthfulness of the Fool. Lear describes what he thinks he sees, insisting that others "see," "behold," "look," "look there." He has no idea of teaching through fiction or otherwise, unlike Edgar when he bids a man he knows is blind "Do but look up" (IV.vi.59). What Lear says truly reports the facts of his experience; in his madness, he cannot lie. But to be a poet, one must be able to lie, communicating truth in a veil of fiction, and this means that to be a poet one must be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood so as to communicate truth through falsehood.

After Cordelia and her doctor have restored Lear to sanity, he veers between uncertainties about what is true. At first he cautiously explores his perceptions and only believes that he is with a loving and forgiving Cordelia after testing his senses with a pinprick. When he and Cordelia are brought in as Edmund's prisoners, Cordelia is perfectly aware that they "are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred the worst" (V.iii.3-4), and expects to confront her victorious sisters. Lear, on the other hand, retreats into "imagination as one would," spinning his idyl of paradise in prison with Cordelia. To Lear, this may be "a divine consideration of what may and should be," but his "Newgate pastoral" is at once exposed for the fantasy it is by Edmund's brutal colloquy with the captain.

But here, and also in his last moments, it is uncertain whether Lear can distinguish what he imagines from what really exists. When he enters carrying his dead daughter, we have an independent witness that he killed the captain, and visible evidence of the strength to do it. But once on stage, he vacillates between the plainest of harsh truths, "She's dead as earth" (V.iii.261), and the airiest of "imagination as one would," "This feather stirs, she lives!" (265). His last words first deny and then affirm Cordelia's life, and he dies bidding the others "Look on her! Look her lips, Look there, look there -" (310-11). In his last scene as in his first, Lear cannot bear the truth about Cordelia.

When Sidney defines the purpose of poetry as "to teach and delight," he does not mean by "teach" to communicate factual truth, which is the job of

history or the sciences. Nor does he mean to communicate moral truths, which is the job of philosophy and divinity. Poetry unites precept and example by telling what someone did and the consequence of his deed. Roger Ascham, in *The Schoolmaster*, justifies literature because it gives vicarious experience and spares those who learn from it much pain if not outright disaster.²² Because Lear refuses truth and believes falsehood, and because Gloucester believes a lying poesy devised to deceive him, they are turned over to the school of experience. Goneril and Regan say this explicitly:

'Tis his own blame; hath put himself from rest
And must needs taste his folly. . . . To wilful men
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters. (II.iv.293-307)

Lear in the storm and Gloucester newly-blinded come to some recognition that they have caused their own sufferings; Gloucester especially recognizes a connection between his past life and his present pain:

. . . that I am wretched
Makes thee [Poor Tom] the happier: heavens, deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
. . . that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly. (IV.i.63-7)

The deceptions of poesy mitigate the sufferings of both old men in a limited way, enabling them to understand and accept what they have done and what they are, even though the teaching that comes through these deceptions comes too late to avert madness, mutilation, and remorse, and much too late to halt the evil deeds their refusal of truth and acceptance of falsehood have started.

Gloucester, Lear, Kent, Edgar, Edmund, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and the rest are themselves fictions, part of the poetic creation called tragedy. Any attempt to explain the *Tragedy of King Lear* by the awkward and uncertain definitions available in Sidney, Puttenham, and their fellows would be inadequate. But inside his tragedy Shakespeare has included an examination of what the poetic fiction of *King Lear* is supposed to be doing for its audience, and among many ways to read it, one is Shakespeare's defense of his own poetic art. Yet the last lines of the play cast doubt upon this art. Whether their speaker is the obtuse reader Albany or the futile poet Edgar, he insists that truth is the only thing left for the survivors:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. (V.iii.32 4-5)

In the face of the final tableau of death and all that has led up to it, neither the flattery of rhetoric nor the delight of poesie has any place. Truth, dreadful as it is, is the only use left for words.

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Notes

- 1 All quotations are from *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir, Ninth Edition New Arden (London: Methuen, 1972); all quotations in the first paragraph, from I.i.
- 2 Truth as plainness is extensively discussed by Martha Andresen, "'Ripeness is All': Sententiae and Commonplaces in *King Lear*," *Some Facets of King Lear*, ed. Rosalie I. Colie and F.T. Flahiff (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 157.
- 3 See Hugh MacLean, "Disguise in *King Lear*: Kent and Edgar," *SQ*, 11 (1960), 49-54; Thomas F. Van Laan, "Acting in *King Lear*," *Some Facets*, pp. 59-76; Phyllis Rachin, "Delusion as Resolution in *King Lear*," *SQ*, 21 (1970), 29-34; William Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1966), pp. 75, 84, 86, 285.
- 4 Edward Hoby, *Politique Discourses*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith (Oxford: University Press, 1904), I, 343.
- 5 Thomas Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*, 1560, ed. G.H. Mair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), p. 10.
- 6 Francis Bacon, "Of Truth", *Essays (1625)* (Oxford: University Press, 1937), p. 5. Such displeasure at truth is very plain in Lear's first discourse with his Fool, whose mental infirmity makes him unable to lie even though he sees that to lie would be to his advantage:
Fool: Prithee, nuncle, keep a Schoolmaster that can teach Thy fool to lie. I would fain learn to lie.
Lear: An you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipp'd.
Fool: I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are; they'll have me whipp'd for speaking true, thou'lt have me whipp'd for lying; and sometimes I am whipp'd for holding my peace. . . . (I.iv.186-192)
- 7 *Ibid.* pp. 5-6.
- 8 Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, tr. Lester K. Born (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), p. 196.
- 9 *The Book Named The Governor*, ed. S.E. Lehmberg (London: Dent, Everyman's Library, 1962), p. 156.
- 10 Erasmus, pp. 193, 196.
- 11 Hoby, pp. 341-3.
- 12 Richard Rainolde, *The Foundation of Rhetoric* (New York: Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1945), fol ii.
- 13 Bacon, p. 6.
- 14 *Apologie for Poetrie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, 184.
- 15 Wilson, p. 198.
- 16 Sidney, pp. 172-3.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 160.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Richard Sherry, *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes*, ed. Herbert W. Hildebrandt (Gainesville, Fla: Scholars' Facsimilies and Reprints, 1961), p. 66.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 66-7.
- 22 *The English Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. William Aldis Wright (1904; rpt. Cambridge: The University Press, 1970), p. 214.