

The madness of king lear

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It is odd to think that true madness can ever be totally understood.

Shakespeare's masterful depiction of the route to insanity, though, is one of the stronger elements of King Lear. The early to middle stages of Lear's deterioration (occurring in Acts I through III) form a highly rational pattern of irrationality: Lear's condition degenerates only when he is injured or when some piece of the bedrock upon which his old, stable world rested is jarred loose. His crazy behavior makes a lot of sense. Despite his age and frailty, Lear is no weak character; it is difficult to imagine how another character could have better resisted such mental and emotional weights as the king suffers under. Lear's worsening madness is understandable only when interpreted with a proper appreciation of the intense forces acting on him and of the gradual disappearance of everything he finds recognizable about his former world. As Lear sets out from his palace toward his daughters' homes, he is still sane, though he begins to regret disowning Cordelia—the first sign of mental stress and the first step toward his eventual madness. Lear's Fool needles him about the rash decision, and the king blurts out, "O! let me be not mad, not mad, sweet heaven; / Keep me in temper; I would not be mad!" (I. v. 46-47) It is a harbinger of thoughts to come. Lear's impending madness is established in parallel with the growing storm; both threaten to break at any moment. But Lear is strong: he does not give in to insanity all at once; instead he holds on as long as he can, only gradually slipping into lunacy. And Lear is strong—it is important to note the severity of the stressors acting on him; ignoring them can lead to a misinterpretation of his character as a weak, senile old man instead of a capable leader simply abused by the people he trusted. Perhaps he was foolish to trust them in the first place, but

he was not crazy. Above all, Lear's madness is understandable. It is rooted in dismay. Each time a loved one wounds him, Lear weakens, and so does his increasingly tenuous grip on reality. One by one, the pillars that had for eighty years elevated him above the rest of Britain crumble, eventually leaving him at the bottom of the pile, in frightening, alien territory. When Lear discovers Kent in the stocks at the beginning of Act II, Scene iv, he simply cannot comprehend what has happened that his daughter would treat his messenger with such insolence. First, Lear laughs surely this must be a joke! But Kent informs him that Regan and Cornwall are personally behind the humiliation. Lear cannot believe it. Their exchange is almost comical (especially in contrast to the lines that follow): "No." "Yes." "No, I say." "I say, yea." "No, no; they would not." "Yes, they have." "By Jupiter, I swear, no." "By Juno, I swear, ay." Lear refuses to see the truth; he desperately seeks some other explanation for what is perfectly obvious. Whatever comedy the dialogue produces is then instantly negated by Lear's intense lament: They durst not do't; They could not, would not do't; 'tis worse than outrage. Resolve me, with all modest haste, which way Thou mightst deserve, or they impose, this usage, Coming from us. [...]O! how this mother swells up toward my heart; Hysterica passio! down, thou climbing sorrow! Thy element's below. (II. iv. 21-57) A part of Lear's world that was once cement is suddenly loose, fluid, not at all dependable. He is hurt not just as a king by a subordinate but also as a father by a daughter, which brings its own special pains. Moreover, Regan's salvo compounds the injuries inflicted by Goneril, so Lear suffers doubly. Note the phrase "down, thou climbing sorrow!" The damage to Lear's heart is climbing psychosomatically toward his brain. He

resists its ascent; when it eventually does overtake him, when the last of the vestiges of Lear's old world dies, he is subject to the awful floundering usually felt only by creatures in the midst of major earthquakes, when they discover that the one fundamental constant of life—in their case, the solidity of the earth under their feet—is no more than an illusion, a sham, and always has been. Lear has no earthquake; he has a thunderstorm, which, with its gusts and torrents, accurately enough mirrors the chaos of his mind. Lear's brain is at this point overwhelmed by grief in two flavors: he has lost his daughters and his political capacity as well. Lear is not losing his mind so much as having it wrenched away from him. Whatever the method, it is slipping away, and is doing so in time to the worsening of the storm outside. Thunder is heard just after Lear says he is "[a]s full of grief as age; wretched in both!" (II. iv. 273) and moans, "O fool! I shall go mad!" (II. iv. 286). Lear refuses to deign to stay without his knights at one of his daughters' homes; instead he chooses to retreat to the woods. Lear's first entrance on stage is in his formal, rigid palace; next he appears at the lesser homes of his daughters; now he is in the wild. As Lear moves to less and less formal locations, so too does his mind deteriorate. Act III reveals the political disorder that has overtaken Britain. In the absence of the king's central authority, Lear's feuding successors create their own mayhem with their machinations against him and each other. Disarray exists in three spheres: mental, inside Lear's head; political, as the villains scheme for power and each other's undoing; and physical, in the literal tempest. All of this is in contrast to Lear's earlier orderly rule. Lear's madness intensifies. In Act III, Scene ii, he talks to the weather; his rants aren't wholly mad, though, for

they have an element of fun in them: a (once) powerful king having a good time, shouting at the elements to do their worst; nothing more. Yet while Lear retains control of his faculties, there is still something unsettling about his tirade. It is the somewhat unconscious knowledge that true lunacy looms, that this kind of behavior will not be pardonable for long. Lear senses it, too: When the mind's free / The body's delicate; the tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else / Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude! [...] To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure. In such a night as this! O Regan, Goneril! Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all, / O! that way madness lies; let me shun that; No more of that. (III. iv. 11-22) Lear alternates scarily between being impressively aware of his mental decay (he breaks off his train of thought, recognizing he's ranting) and impulsively goading on the rain (the sudden "Pour on"). Lear's descent into madness is made all the more genuine by the appearance of Edgar, disguised as poor Tom; he feigns craziness with gibberish, like "O! do de, do de, do de" (III. iv. 56-57) and "suum, mun ha no nonny," (III. iv. 97) which just seems silly in contrast. The ridiculous babble makes Lear's authentic insanity all the more threatening. Edgar's crazy talk makes perfect sense to Lear, though, and while the former king may lose some rationality he gains some humanity when he tears off some of his own clothes in a show of solidarity for his new, naked companion. Lear thinks out loud: "Is man no more than this? Consider him well. [...] Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." (III. iv. 103-106) Lear realizes that there is essentially no difference between a king and a beggar. His old world has been totally

uprooted. After such upheaval) such a precipitous descent) Lear's abnormal behavior seems forgivable. Lear's madness is deftly woven by Shakespeare as it intensifies through the tragedy's first three acts. Because it is so plausible, given the intensity of the forces acting on Lear, the old king's plight is universal. What makes King Lear truly great, though, is the swiftness with which Lear's nation is plunged into absolute despair. The first three acts (minus the last few lines) must be separated from the final two. In the first "half," Lear is merely pitiable; he has wronged and been wronged and some treachery has transpired, but nothing apocalyptic has taken place. The blinding of Gloucester (this occurs so close to the end of Act III that for simplicity's sake it will be considered part of the second section of the play) is so violent, so vicious ("Out, vile jelly!" sneers Cornwall gratuitously), in contrast to the relatively tame earlier scenes that it marks a fundamental discontinuity in the tragedy. Before, only feelings were hurt, and reconciliation was a theoretical (if remote) possibility; now blood has been spilled, the storm truly rages, and there will be no turning back. Leaping forward over all the interceding action, the play ends with Lear cradling a dead Cordelia in his arms, the portrait of unqualified grief. This evokes not mere pity from the audience but something more like trauma, so heartrending is the image; instead of a relatively limited work about one man's descent into madness, Shakespeare has crafted a bitterly nihilistic tragedy. There is some redemption) Edgar defeats the evil Edmund; Lear is redeemed as a man and father) but there is no escaping the awful weight of the final scene, driven by madness, and the haunting sense that its coming was all too logical.