

‘all’s cheerless, dark
and deadly’

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'All's Cheerless, Dark and Deadly' Are Kent's Words a Fair Summary of The Tragedy of King Lear? Samuel Johnson asserted that the blinding of Gloucester was an 'act too horrid to be endured in a dramatic exhibition', and that he was 'too shocked' by the death of Cordelia to read the play again until he was given the task of editing it. ¹ Nor was Dr Johnson alone in finding himself unable to stomach the violence and apparent injustices that unfold in King Lear. The 18th century certainly found the play 'all cheerless' and preferred Nahum Tate's 1681 watered-down History Shakespeare's original, a tragedy simply too tragic, condemned to be unperformed for almost 150 years. King Lear is a dark play, with the near triumph of the malcontent Edmund, the intense sufferings of Lear and Gloucester, and the seeming lack of justice at the piece's conclusion. Shakespeare locates his tragedy in an extreme and entropic universe that makes his audience uncomfortable, and indeed is supposed to. On its own, the sheer violence of Act III. ⁷ bears witness to Kent's nihilistic utterance at the play's close. However, Lear's universe, as I have just stated, is one of extremes, and not merely negative ones. As A. C. Bradley notes: There is in the world of King Lear the same abundance of extreme good as of extreme evil. It generates in profusion self-less devotion and unconquerable love. ² The play contains a cluster of characters that are unequivocally good. Kent, for instance, is a paradigm of devotion. In Act I. ¹ he is publicly insulted and humiliated. In spite of Lear's threats, Kent remains determined to serve his master, even braving the storm to be near him. Cordelia too, is traduced and punished by Lear, and yet she is the model of magnanimity and familial love. Even the Fool hides an affectionate character behind his sardonic gibes. In Act I. ⁴ the

audience learn that he has 'pined' for Cordelia, while his last line in the play, 'Now, good my lord, lie here and rest awhile', addressed to Lear, is one of true care and concern. On the one hand we have the sickening reaction of Regan to the torment of her host, Gloucester: Go thrust him out at gates, and let him smell his way to Dover. [III. 7. 94-95] And on the other, the gentle, unthinking loyalty of the Old Man who leads his blind master in the scene that follows: O, my good lord, I have been your tenant, and your father's tenant these fourscore years. [IV. 1. 12-14] These two contraries inhabit the very same world and must necessarily do so in order for the play to be tragic. The relentless devotion of Kent augments the cruelty of Goneril and Regan, and the despair of Act V can only be reached from the catharsis and hope of the reunion between father and daughter in Act IV. The first both defines and heightens the second, its opposite. Tragedy involves the characters and spectators oscillating between these two extremes. A play that is truly 'all cheerless' would simply overload the audience with one emotion, in the long run immunising them against it. 'Without contraries [there] is no progression' as Blake neatly put it. Shakespeare creates an antithesis within the play, one which Lear himself embodies. At moments, his language is the most verbally aggressive of the whole piece: Into her womb convey sterility! Dry up the organs of increase, And from her derogate body never spring a babe to honour her! [I. 4. 290-293] This string of violently misogynistic maledictions, directed towards his own daughter Goneril, is the cruellest and most horrifying outburst of the play. Nothing that Cornwall, Regan or Edmund say comes close to it. And yet, the very same figure is capable of some of the most tender and lyrical lines ever written, such as the

famous 'birds in the cage' speech of Act V. 3. Lear's language encapsulates the dichotomy of the tragedy. Love and loyalty are just as much a part of the nucleus of King Lear as egocentricity, lust, malice and deception.

Nevertheless, the balance must be tipped in favour of the latter for the drama to reach the level of tragedy. Ultimately, the glimmer of hope, the promise of redemption in King Lear is vanquished. My own interpretation is that the second half of the play is a Shakespearian twist on The Passion.

Cordelia's return is met with a sudden increase in imagery from a distinctly Christian, rather than pagan, idiom: There she shook the holy water from her heavenly eyes and clamour moistened. [IV. 3. 30-32] Cordelia, if the

Gentleman is to be believed, is weeping not tears, but holy water. Even as hyperbole, the playwright is striking a parallel to Christ that is hard to ignore and pervasive in two scenes in particular. In Act IV. 3, Cordelia is described to the spectator using a Christian lexicon: 'passion', 'patience', 'goodliest', 'Faith' and 'benediction'. And again, in the following scene, when Cordelia speaks, her language continues this pattern, with words such as: 'blest', 'virtues', 'aident' and 'remediate'. Here is a figure that has been ostracised precisely because she stood up for truth when those around her valued hypocrisy.

Cordelia's return is one of great promise. She embodies the hopes of both characters such as Kent, and of the audience, for salvation, domestically and politically. She is the 'Sunshine' [IV. 3. 19] the light that shines in the darkness and the 'medicine' of 'Restoration' hangs on her lips [IV. 7. 26-27]. Into Act V the parallels between Christ and Cordelia continue.

She is condemned to death, though innocent, and is indeed hanged. Having borne his daughter's corpse on stage, Lear dies in the belief that Cordelia

still lives, uttering the words: 'Look on her, her lips, / Look there, look there!' [V. 3. 311-312]. But this is a false-resurrection and Cordelia a false-Messiah. Her execution is not followed by a rebirth. Kent is once again the mouthpiece for the audience, and his question, 'Is this the promised end?' [V. 3. 264], speaks volumes. The answer, of course, lies limp on the stage. Yet, Cordelia's path in the play is echoed by Edgar, in much the same manner that Gloucester's plight is comparable to that of Lear. Edgar too is virtuous, but nonetheless suffers and dies not physically, but spiritually when he exclaims: 'Edgar I nothing am!' [II. 3. 21]. And unlike Cordelia, his resurrection is real, when in Act V he reclaims his identity as the son of Gloucester. However, his rebirth does not bring with it healing and salvation – quite the contrary. The revelation of his existence occurs twice, once off stage and once on it, and on both occasions it is met with death: first that of his father and then that of his bastard brother Edmund. So then, if Cordelia is the false-Messiah in King Lear, Edgar is the anti-Messiah. And the message he brings with him is certainly not the 'promised end': The oldest hath borne most; we that are young Shall never see so much, nor live so long. [V. III. 327-328] Here, the pun on 'borne' suggests new life for the 'oldest', while the 'young', usually a beacon of hope and fertility, are condemned to short lives – 'nor live so long'. Edgar's closing words are disturbingly equivocal. They allude to the antithesis constantly at work in the play a mixture of hope and despair. Perhaps the couplet is ultimately nihilistic, and the play as a whole equally so. Redemption remains unattained. However, while I would agree that Kent's words that 'All's cheerless, dark and deadly' may be the overriding message of the tragedy, I do not believe that King Lear can be

simply summed up in such a comment. To do such a thing would be to see the drama two-dimensionally to ignore the world of polarities, of good as well as evil, which Shakespeare creates in which to hold his play. 1 Johnson as Critic, ed. John Wain, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1973, pp. 216-2172 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearian Tragedy*, Macmillan 1908, pp. 304 -305