

LIFE AND STERILITY IN *KING LEAR*

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In order to describe Shakespeare's way of perceiving the world, Norman Rabkin, in his illuminating book *Shakespeare and the common understanding*, introduces the concept of "complementarity" borrowed from quantum mechanics. Rabkin's conceptual framework is later used by Bernard McElroy (1973) to discuss Shakespeare's four great tragedies. The 'fathers' of the term, Robert Oppenheimer and Niels Bohr, define it as the idea that "in the analyses of physical phenomena an electron must sometimes be considered as a wave, and sometimes as a particle (quoted after Rabkin 1968 : 22)¹. This principle, concerning the subatomic particles, was formulated on the basis of the twentieth century investigations of the fundamental nature of light. The conducted experiments showed clearly the dual character of light, the fact of its being both waves and corpuscles. "The problem is that there are phenomena which physicists can understand treating light as waves and others which they can interpret only by treating it as quanta, discrete packets of energy" (Rabkin 1968 : 21).

Complementarity, transferred to literary grounds, and to Shakespeare in particular, in its most general terms means that statements of truth and value which are logically contradictory or mutually exclusive can, however, coexist, both being perfectly true. Complementarity does not produce any compromise, there is no release of the fundamental tensions. In his comment upon Rabkin's idea, McElroy implies that

Complementarity is quite different from the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-resolution in that there is no final merging into oneness, no relaxation of the dialectical tension. Both thesis and antithesis remain fully distinct, both are equally persuasive and each has equal demands for adherence. Above all, complementarity is not an ideology and still less a statement which a play makes. It is a mode of perception which enables the plays to create illusory worlds, which, like the world we feel about us, make sense in ways that consistently elude us to articulate them rationally and yet seem to represent the truth better than rational articulation (McElroy 1973 : 7).

¹ J. R. Oppenheimer, *Science and the common understanding*, New York 1954 : 69.

The dialectic design of Shakespeare's plays rendered as "complementarity" by Rabkin corresponds to the idea of "polyphony" introduced by Marvin Rosenberg (1978: X). Rosenberg adopts the notion in order to, as he himself explains, "convey the sense of many notes in the character designs and their dynamic, changing patterns" (Rosenberg 1978:X). Thus, in musical terms, Shakespearean tragedy contains both tonic and countering, anarchic chords. It polyphonic or many-voiced, multi-propositional. The internal harmony is often disturbed, the balance shaken; we observe a constant clash of truths and values.

The principle underlying both polyphony and complementarity, the concepts which belong to seemingly very remote fields, is the presence of opposites and contradictions that generate unresolved tensions and stimulate a variety of responses. The existence of unreleased strains constitutes the essence of Shakespeare's tragic vision of the universe.

King Lear, to a greater extent than any other play of Shakespeare, is built around such tensions. The most basic conflict in the tragedy exists between two mutually exclusive world-views held by two groups of characters. As John Danby shows in his *Shakespeare's doctrine of nature*, the dramatist confronts in *King Lear* two epochs, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and two ideas of society: Lear's feudal state in the stage of decomposition and Edmund's society of New Man and the New Age (cf. Danby 1972 : 138). Besides this fundamental conflict we also encounter such ones as, for instance, age and youth, reason and love, reason and madness, reality and appearance, order and confusion, life and sterility or life and death. The last pair of opposites exists within the pattern of denial, a design of alls and nothings, two polarities or "abysses between which the action of the tragedy strains" (Danson 1981 : 135).

As Rosenberg observes, "the words are the primary clue to the Lear system of world and antiworld. Not only the large words, so full of reverberant meanings..." (Rosenberg 1973 : 6). The critic directs attention to the constant repetition of a small word "if", which "announces the substructure of the play and reflects the conditional, uncertain mood permeating the tragedy" (Rosenberg 1973 : 6-7). "Even the eternal basic values Shakespeare affirms — love, kindness, loyalty — have corrupting shadow sides. Nothing is sure in this world" (Rosenberg 1973 : 6) and Lear is "the primary if-but-yet character of his if-but-yet world" (Rosenberg 1973 : 20). "All" and "nothing" grow to the status of keywords to Lear's universe. Shakespeare constantly presents us conflicting images of man. This refers not only to man's position in the world around him, in which he may stand above all or be merely a "bare forked animal", but also to man's internal system of values. Man may be all and nothing.

The opposition between life and sterility is firmly set in this system of negation and affirmation. The primary issue which we confront in *King Lear* is whether the world presented by Shakespeare is nihilistic or affirmative,

or perhaps both, in terms of complementarity. Is it possible at all to find any satisfactory answer for this question?

One of the perplexing problems that emerge in our consideration is the matter of the setting of the play. The scene on which that great drama of Lear and humankind takes place is endowed with uncertainties. Dubious and full of contradictions is the image of Lear's kingdom. Lear is an absolute monarch of pagan Britain, yet, McElroy observes, "the setting of the Lear world is an amalgam in which borrowings from several different eras and civilizations are fused for particular dramatic purposes, the two most important epochs being the Middle Ages and Shakespeare's own time" (McElroy 1973: 146). Moreover, this pre-Christian universe is governed by ambiguous Roman and Greek gods. The ambiguity of the setting is intensified by the incongruity in the topographical descriptions. On the one hand, the picture of the kingdom is produced by Lear himself during the initial act of dividing his dominions. Still at the top of magnificence, Lear says to Goneril, showing her territory on the map:

Of all these bounds, even from this line to this
With shadowy forests and with champains rich 'd,
With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,
We make thee lady: to thine and Albany's issues
Be this perpetual.

(I.I. 62-66)²

Goneril's share is presented by Lear as the land of plenty, abundant in shadowy forests, unwooded plains, numerous rivers and meadows; it is the land which is to be perennially rich. By the words "to thine and Albany's issues/Be this perpetual" Lear emphasizes not only that his decision is an absolute law, irrevocable and permanent, but he also stresses that Goneril and Albany's gain is to be theirs forever and that it should be an inexhaustible source of life.

"Unburthening" himself from the second part of the kingdom on behalf of Regan, Lear underlies the fertility of the land he is giving to her:

To thee and thine, hereditary ever,
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
No less in space, validity and pleasure,
Than that conferr'd on Goneril.

(I. I. 78-81)

Regan's portion of the realm is in no aspect deficient to Goneril's. Cordelia's dowry, in Lear's original arrangement, was to surpass her sisters' shares; she was to receive the central part of the kingdom and the coronet. Lear calls his youngest daughter "more opulent than her sisters" (I.I.85), referring to Cordelia's moral superiority over Goneril and Regan, and revealing his plan of favouring Cordelia.

² The text and line references of this and all the subsequent quotations are taken from *The Arden Shakespeare*, (Muir (ed.) 1985).

When Lear abdicates, nobody seems to question the truth of his words; the kingdom really *is* the land of plenty. Goneril's and Regan's protestations of love, however false they are, confirm the worth of rewards awaiting them. "The vines [vineyards] of France and milk [pastures] of Burgundy" (I.I.83) compete for the youngest princess's dowry, and Lear's disinheritance of Cordelia is the cause of Burgundy's withdrawal. Yet, the picture of the realm which Lear draws in the first scene is undermined by the play as a whole. Not even a glimpse of Lear's description is detectable in the universe we face in the tragedy.

The action, initially set at Lear's court, then moves to the yard of Gloucester's castle, into the heath, a hovel, and open fields near Dover where the final battle takes place. Critics have emphasized the indefiniteness or placelessness of the setting. Gloucester's castle is situated in the middle of the heath where "There's scarce a bush" (II.IV.300) and the mad king roams through "the high-grown field" (IV.IV.7). This vast, open area is a scene of horror and destruction brought upon man by himself, the elemental powers and the indifferent or retributive pagan gods. Bradley aptly observes that the vague locality that Shakespeare creates in *King Lear* resembles not so much "any scene or particular place but the world [...] It is closer to Caucasus, to which Prometheus was chained [...] than to Britain" (Bradley 1985: 214). The final image of Lear's dominion is the "empty bleeding earth" (Kott 1967: 116), the rack upon which mankind is stretched. The paradoxical nature of the setting (the two conflicting pictures we obtain) epitomizes the contradictory nature of Lear's universe, the shifting of truths and values inherent in it, as well as the diverse perspectives for perceiving the world.

The love-auction scene commences the process of the encroachment of death upon life, and erosion of Lear's world. After Goneril and Regan satisfy their father's hunger for reverence with "oily art" of their speeches and receive their opulent shares, the attention of the whole court witnessing the ceremony is directed to Cordelia. Her 'shouting' silence and then forced reply reverberant with "nothings" petrify the king. This pivotal moment in the movement of the play causes an avalanche of unexpected events. Outraged and humiliated, Lear erupts in anger summoning the powers of darkness to act on his behalf:

Let it be so, thy truth, then be thy dower
For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
By all the operations of the orbs
From whom we do exist and cease to be,
Here I disclaim my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this time for ever.

(I. I. 107–115)

Calling down Hecate and "the operations of the orbs" which govern life and death ("from whom we *do exist* and *cease* to be") and denying the blood ties connecting him with Cordelia, Lear accomplishes the act of killing Cordelia on the symbolical level³, which he will later repeat in the words "we have no such daughter" (I.I.262). Hecate, a Greek goddess, traditionally associated with witchcraft, sterility and death, functions as a destructive force not only in *King Lear* but also in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*.

In *Macbeth*, Hecate is the patroness of magic, witchcraft and crime; she is the "contriver of all harms" (III.V.6). The titular hero sees witchcraft celebrating "Pale Hecate's offerings" (II.I.51–52) in a nightmarish vision born in his "heat-oppressed mind" at the moment when the decision to kill Duncan receives the final shape. The one hemisphere of the world, where "Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse the curtain'd sleep" (II.I.48–50), the dominion of Hecate, reflects the evil-touched half of Macbeth's divided mind. Shakespeare uses similar imagery of the darkening night and the animals preying in it to depict Macbeth's surrender to "black" Hecate's power before the murder of Banquo and to create the atmosphere of the next "deed of dreadful note (III.II.44)⁴.

In *Hamlet*, Hecate making use of her magic power infects the poison then poured by the murder into Gonzago's ear in the Mousetrap play performed by the troupe of actors at Elsinore (III.II). As may be observed, Hecate is invoked by Shakespeare's characters to endorse their evil actions or to become an instrument of retribution in their hands. She clearly functions as a wasteful power.

A similar role may be referred to Apollo called down by Lear in his threat directed to Kent who tries to show the king his injustice towards Cordelia. In the image of the bow — "The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft" (I.I.142) — Lear shows that he sees himself as vindictive Apollo, frequently represented with the bent bow in the Renaissance iconography (cf. Zbierski 1978: 16).

The eruption of Lear's wrath is in a sense also self-destructive, Lear summons black powers that will turn against his kingdom and himself. Rosenberg writes that "Lear's design is explosive, he is created to destroy himself" (1973: 69); casting away Cordelia he consolidates the forces of evil. In Kott's words "the exposition of *King Lear* shows a world that is to be destroyed" (1967: 103), it is in fact the first stage of the decay and fall of Lear's universe.

³ The symbolical death of Cordelia as a part of the symmetrical design of *King Lear* is discussed by H. Zbierski (1978: 16–17).

⁴ I do not mention act III scene V, where Hecate appears on the stage as a *dramatis persona*, following the widely accepted view that it may be an un-Shakespearean interpolation.

If Lear's renunciation of Cordelia and the division of the kingdom between the two elder daughters starts the process of dissolution of Lear's world, the curse cast on Goneril constitutes its next stage. This time Lear not only summons the natural and supernatural powers to witness his denial of parentage, but he urges the forces of nature to act on his behalf and annihilate his own progeny. At first he turns to darkness and devils, the powers, which together with Greek (Apollo and Hecate) and Roman (Jupiter) gods, Fortune and Nature form the metaphysical world of the play. Shakespeare offers us this curious mixture of mythologies, glossed with some Christian texture, to convey the idea of the inscrutability of the universe we confront in *King Lear*. This impression is intensified by the fact that the supernatural forces do not acquire any dramatic reality. They are exclusively envisioned by mortals, either as their allies endorsing or meting out the often perversely understood justice, or as their own tormentors of "The Old Testament character", "the gods of wrath and judgement who seek out their enemies for swift and terrible vengeance" (McElroy 1973: 152).

The divinities are thus conceived as destructive in a double sense: as instruments of revenge acting on man's commands, and as malevolent oppressors of mankind, entertaining themselves in a cruel game of killing humans. The only character that seems to have absolute trust in their benevolence is Gloucester, who, however, utters the bitterest statement in the play upon the gods' ways with men. In all their paradoxical nature, the metaphysical powers in *King Lear* leave an impression of persecuting, at best indifferent, divinities or forces existing exclusively as figments of man's imagination.

After the preliminary invocation of the dark powers to witness his curse on Goneril, Lear refers to Nature to execute punishment on his eldest daughter. The order is dressed in the form of a prayer or supplication addressed to a goddess:

Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility.
Dry up in her the organs of increase
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her!

(I. IV. 273—9)

The command comprises a basic paradox: Lear directs his unnatural wish to Nature, whom he believes to be the organizing principle of the universe. The king, protector of life, instead of being the perpetuator of it, becomes its chief destroyer. Having deprived himself of one daughter, Lear now denies Goneril his own grandchildren. The refusal of Goneril's fertility and the order to scorch her reproductive organs is a suicidal demand: Lear appeals for the

extinction of his own descendants, the royal line. If Nature is to disobey his will, Lear claims an unnatural child made of spleen, whose ungratefulness will hurt more than a serpent's tooth. This prefigures Lear's own torment, which will be expressed in the image of a nourishing pelican drained from blood by his young, the "pelican daughters" (III.IV.74).

Just before Lear calls down vengeance upon Goneril for the second time, he realizes the futility of his wrath. His mind moves between extremes:

Life and death! I am asham'd
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
Should make thee worth them.

(I. IV. 294—7)

The invitation addressed to "blasts and fogs" to infect, disease Goneril, is again directed against his hown progeny, whom he metaphorically kills.

The father's curse thrown upon Lear's eldest daughter is repeated once more in the presence of Regan. Lear demands "vengeance! plague! death! confusion!" (I.IV.92), and then erupts with thunderlike words:

All the stor'd vengeances of Heaven fall
On her ingrateful top! Strike her young bones,
You taking airs, with lameness!

(II. IV. 159—161)

and

You nimble lightnings, dart you blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty,
You fen-suck'd fogs, drawn by the pow'rful sun,
To blister her!

(II. IV. 162—165)

Lear envisions heaven as a storehouse of vengeances distributed by angry gods. The elements of nature, seen here as equal to gods, seek mortals to torture them. In the image of lightnings, which in the form of flaming darts reach Goneril with unfaltering precision, Shakespeare comprises mankind's role as the targets in the game played above. Lear's words later echo in Gloucester's comment on the divine providence engaged in the sport of killing. Lameness, which is to strike the young bones of Goneril or of the foetus in her womb, and blistering fogs invoked by Lear in his vindictive rage, will really reach the earth but, ironically, they will touch Lear himself.

After Lear's outburst tones down, he will forgive Goneril, will not bid "the high-judging Jove, the thunder-bearer shoot" (I.IV.224, 225) on the condition she reproves. Yet, when the daughters reduce the number of his retainers one by one to nobody, his anger and humiliation are so great that any punishment he can think of seems inadequate:

No. you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall — I will do such things,
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth.

(II. IV. 276—280)

Lear's curse is now complete. He has rejected all his three daughters, denied their and his own posterity, called down all "the terrors of the earth" upon them. The only step further that remains is to deny the whole humankind and life itself. Lear does this in his apocalyptic rage, an "aria of anger" (Rosenberg 1973: 190). Shakespeare presents in the tempest scenes the fullest identification of Lear with the raging nature; the protagonist assumes the role of Jupiter ordering thunderbolts to cleave the sphere of the globe, the cosmic womb:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown 'd the cocks
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' 'th' word!
That makes ingrateful man!

(III. II. 1—9)

Lear demands from the elemental powers the second deluge, which will drown the evil mankind and make humanity sterile. Moreover, he orders nature to commit suicide. Rosenberg emphasizes that "Lear touches an image that the subconscious in the character design has been tracking since his first rages and will follow a compelled hunt, in terror and fury, for the source of life" (Rosenberg 1973: 192).

This chase for the source of life, with the purpose of annihilating it, has come to the end. No other, more terrible curse is possible. Lear has condemned, all ingrateful humanity, he has "invoked the storm to destroy the seeds of matter" (Muir 1982: 28), begged to make it sterile. Yet, this negation of life on his part is undermined by Lear himself. In madness, however much he is disgusted with sex and hypocrisy accompanying it, he will say "Let copulation thrive" (IV.VI.114), reaffirming in this way the value of the procreation act and its life-restoring power. Thus we may observe the complementary mode of vision persistently operating in Lear's world, conveying, as Rabkin formulates it "the fact that the apparently unresolvable paradoxes and contradictions [...] are in the mainstream of human nature" (Rabkin 1968: 20).

Throughout the process of executing revenge upon his daughters, in madness, Lear feels a genuine compassion for the lot of the harmed embodied in Tom O'Bedlam. Mc Elroy observes that "Lear's attitude toward humanity

in general sways between compassion for the helpless, and fathomless loathing which can be satisfied only by the annihilation of the species" (Mc Elroy 1973: 182). Affirmation and negation coexist again in the bi-polar universe of the play.

Imagery of sterility is constantly present in the Fool's comments upon Lear's situation after he has abdicated, especially, in his parable of the egg:

Fool. Nuncle, give me an egg, and I'll give thee two crowns.

Lear. What two crowns shall they be?

Fool. Why, after I have cut the egg i 'th' middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i 'th' middle, and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt: thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy gold en one away.

(I. IV. 152—160)

The egg, traditionally recognized as a sign of new life, is here drained of its life-giving flesh. The image shows in a parabolical way the error of Lear's division of the kingdom and its consequences: once the "meat is eaten up" life cannot be reborn and we may only expect that "Nothing will come of nothing" (I.I.89).

The final issue concerned with the opposition of life and sterility in *King Lear* is that of the implications of the ending of the tragedy. Criticism has proposed basically two contrary readings of Cordelia's and Lear's deaths: a totally nihilistic or absurdist vision of unmitigated suffering, chaos and darkness, in the words of Nicholas Brooke "a bare iteration of unredeemed negative" (quoted after McElroy 1973: 203); as well as an optimistic picture with Lear regenerated and ultimately reunited with sainted Cordelia on the other side of the grave. The vehement discussion that has been taking place in literary criticism concerns mainly the meaning of the final words uttered by Lear nursing dead Cordelia in his arms, after he enters the "Armageddon" battlefield, his last statements in particular:

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, un do this button: thank you, Sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!

(V. III. 304—309)

At first, full of vindictive rage, Lear summons a plague upon "murderers" and "traitors", in whom he sees all mankind. Yet, as Lear admits, he has no "tongues and eyes to use them so/That heaven's vault should crack" (V.III. 257—8). The terrible Dragon has become utterly a *homo patients*, a helpless suffering man, a Pietá-like figure in the "pyramid of suffering", the world.

Lear's last speech reverberates with negative words "no" and "never", which "echo so sepulchrally throughout the world of the play" (Mc Elroy 1973: 156). In the threefold "no" put before "life" and five times repeated "never", Lear negates life, but this denial entails new areas of meaning. He no longer summons or acts on behalf of divinities, but questions the transcendental order as such, the order in which animals are granted life and humans are slaughtered.

Lear's final glimpse of the world is Cordelia's lips. "As at the beginning of the play she says nothing, but this time Lear dies with the effort of realizing to the full the implications of her silence" (Walton 1982: 73). Rosenberg, trying to provide the answer to the question what Lear sees in Cordelia's lips, enumerates two possibilities:

[it is] "an ecstatic illusion that Cordelia is alive, that at last she speaks [m]; a vision of some supernatural aura about her, presumably beatific; even an apparent glimpse of her spirit, rising toward heaven, or a horror of the ultimate silence that has stilled her" (Rosenberg 1973 : 319).

Thus, Lear may die of joy, but it is equally possible that he dies of despair. Far from subscribing to the opinion that Shakespeare follows a clear-cut pattern and moulds Gloucester in all aspects as Lear's shadow, we might, however, draw some parallels between the two characters' deaths. Edgar describing his father's death says that:

his flaw'd heart
Alack, too weak the conflict to support!
'Twist two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly.

(V. III. 195—7)

Gloucester's emotions move rapidly between two poles, and it is impossible to say with what feelings he expires. Perhaps it is the closest depiction of the last movement of Lear's thoughts and passions.

McElroy also sees a conflict of emotions as the cause of Lear's heartbreak. He admits that:

Lear dies with an expression of joy on his face, but that joy scarcely makes *Lear* a drama of personal redemption and fulfilment. Quite the contrary; Lear's joy is far more painful to witness than despair could possibly be. His joy is based on hope, but his hope is groundless. He knows it to be groundless, but must cling to it desperately because the alternative is too terrible to be accepted. Lear in his final agony becomes emblematic of the human capacity to hope when seeks from life that which life is unwilling to yield; it is hope that breaks the heart (McElroy 1978 : 201).

The critic finishes his discussion of Lear's last speech with the following statement: "The final agony of Lear expands rather than diminishes man's proportions" (McElroy 1978: 203). Arriving at these conclusions Mc Elroy does not take into consideration exclusively the play's attitude towards

the world in which Shakespeare's characters live, (which is undoubtedly pessimistic), but the play's attitude towards man. He expresses the latter employing Keats's famous phrase of "impassioned clay" (Mc Elroy 1978: 204). Man is "clay" because of his mortality, but he is "impassioned" because of his spiritual potentialities, owing to which he may attain greatness.

McElroy is unquestionably right stating that Lear's agony expands his human proportions. Shakespeare endows Lear with definitely more grandeur at the end than at the start of the play. And even if we accept after Kott that "*King Lear* makes a tragic mockery of all eschatologies, [...] in fact — of both Christian and secular theodicies; of cosmogony and the rational view of history..." (Kott 1967: 116); even if man's endeavours are devoid of any sense, and the world is only a place of undeserved suffering, Lear is far from a clownish figure manipulated by cruel machineries. He refuses such a reduction rejecting the world as it is. Lear is most majestic when stripped of all his majesty. In this sense, although *King Lear* appears pessimistic, it may be argued that it is nevertheless optimistic.

There is, however, one issue that Shakespeare leaves us with, which turns the scales on the pessimistic side: it is the lack of new order. Stampfer's claim that "the problems of justice and order, however interpreted, finally rest in the mystery of Lear's last moment, and not in the ambiguity of whether Edgar will or will not take over, by default the throne of England [...] and the problem of succession is 'but a trifle'" (Stampfer 1982: 78) seems impossible to agree with. Truly, the matter of justice is strictly connected with the interpretation of Lear's last words, nevertheless, the issue of order remains to the living. In *King Lear* the old order is not reestablished. Edgar does not share the nobility, resoluteness and strength of the successors in Shakespeare's other tragedies. He himself disbelieves in his capabilities for carrying out the task of the healer of the "gored state". His statement⁵, with which the tragedy ends, emphasizes the mood of uncertainty permeating the play's world as well as his own figure:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

(V. III. 322—5)

Rosenberg, commenting upon these words, stresses that Edgar in fact has never spoken as he felt (cf. Rosenberg 1973: 322). His dubious behaviour toward his own father, the too much prolonged revelation of his real identity,

⁵ The Quartos give the final words to Albany, this, however, does not change the general impression left by the finale. Albany is even less reliable as the future king; tolerating his wife's evil for so long, he has become a partaker in in the plot against Lear.

killed Gloucester. He has undoubtedly contributed to driving Lear insane. Even if we accept that the cruel endurance test he carried out on Gloucester was simply a miscalculation of the results, Edgar leaves too much doubt to be trusted as a ruler.

The new king is not hailed, no coronation finishes the tragedy. What we confront is a collapse, a disintegration of the world of the play. The kingdom is a wasteland with no restorative powers to 'fertilize it again. At the close of *King Lear* Shakespeare does not offer counterpoint. What remains on the stage in the dark finale is the tableau of corpses and "general woe".

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