KING LEAR, MACBETH, INDEFINITION, AND TRAGEDY

Stephen Booth

Yale University Press
New Haven and London

Designed by Nancy Ovedovitz and set in Garamond No. 3 type by Northeast Typographic Services, Meriden, Connecticut. Printed in the United States of America by Edwards Brothers Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Booth, Stephen.
King Lear, Macbeth, indefinition, and tragedy.
Includes index.
1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616—Tragedies. 2. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. King Lear. 3. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616. Macbeth. 4. Tragedy. I. Title. II. Title: Indefinition and tragedy.
PR2983.B6 1983 822.3'3 83-42875
ISBN 0–300–02850-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PART I
ON THE GREATNESS OF *KING LEAR*

The Get-Ready Man was a lank unkempt elderly gentleman with wild eyes and a deep voice who used to go about shouting at people through a megaphone to prepare for the end of the world. "GET READY! GET READ-Y!" he would bellow. "THE WORLLLD IS COMING TO AN END!" His startling exhortations would come up, like summer thunder, at the most unexpected times and in the most surprising places. I remember once during Mantell's production of "King Lear" at the Colonial Theatre, that the Get-Ready Man added his bawlings to the squealing of Edgar and the ranting of the King and the mouthing of the Fool, rising from somewhere in the balcony to join in. The theatre was in absolute darkness and there were rumblings of thunder and flashes of lightning offstage. Neither father nor I, who were there, ever completely got over the scene, which went something like this:

Edgar: Tom's a-cold.—O, do de, do de, do de!—Bless thee from whirlwinds, star-blasting, and taking . . . the foul fiend vexes! (Thunder off.

Lear: What! Have his daughters brought him to this pass?—

Get-Ready Man: Get ready! Get ready!

Edgar: Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill:—Halloo, halloo, loo, loo! (Lightning flashes.

Get-Ready Man: The Worllld is com-ing to an End!

Fool: This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen!

Edgar: Take heed o' the foul fiend: obey thy paren–

Get-Ready Man: Get rea-*dy!*

*Edgar: Tom's a-*cold!

Get-Ready Man: The Worr-*uld is coming to an end! . . .*

They found him finally, and ejected him, still shouting. The Theatre, in our time, has known few such moments.

—*James Thurber, from "The Car We Had to Push" in* My Life and Hard Times

In King Lear *everything tends toward a conclusion that does not occur; even personal death, for Lear, is terribly delayed. Beyond the apparent worst there is a worse suffering, and when the end comes it is not only more appalling than anybody expected, but a mere image of that horror, not the thing itself. The end is now a matter of immanence; tragedy assumes the figurations of apocalypse, of death and judgement, heaven and hell; but the world goes forward in the hands of exhausted survivors. Edgar haplessly assumes the dignity; only the king's natural body is at rest. This is the tragedy of sempiternity; apocalypse is translated out of time into the* aevum. *The world may, as Gloucester supposes, exhibit all the symptoms of decay and change, all the terrors of an approaching end, but when the end comes it is not an end, and both suffering and the need for patience are perpetual.*

—*Frank Kermode, from* The Sense of an Ending

1. The Promised End

The tragedy of Lear, deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare, is commonly regarded as his greatest achievement. I submit that *King Lear* is so because it is the greatest achievement of his audience, an audience of theatrically unaccommodated men. If an audience's achievement in surviving the harrowing experience of *King Lear* could ever reasonably have been doubted, it has been taken for granted since this superbly forthright note on *King Lear* in Samuel Johnson's edition of Shakespeare: "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor."[1] If my sensations could add anything to Johnson's, I might relate that I myself first read the last scenes of *King Lear* while undergoing a sophomore survey course in which I was taking on a full semester's reading in the twenty-four hours immediately preceding the final examination; it was about three o'clock on a spring afternoon, and I sat in a chair in a stuffy library and cried. I had already read a pound and a half of certified masterpieces that day; I read as much more before dawn; but with this one exception I was moved by nothing beyond the sophomoric ambition to become a junior. Further testimony to the singular power of the last scenes of *King Lear* is presumably unnecessary. An effort to account for that singularity may well seem just as unnecessary, but I think the reasons why we are so upset by the end of *Lear*—specifically by the death of Cordelia—appear to be more obvious than they are.

The context in which Johnson introduces his personal response suggests that his distress was ethical; Johnson took Shakespeare's purpose to be

> to impress this important moral, that villany is *never at a stop*, that crimes lead to crimes, and *at last terminate* in ruin.
>
> But though this moral be incidentally enforced, Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles. . . . A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it

> is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or, that if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue.
>
> In the present case the publick has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. [VIII, 704; the italics are mine]

Disappointment of our hopes and of our natural ideas of justice accounts handsomely for our shock at Cordelia's death; that explanation makes perfect sense. But—in the unlikely event that *King Lear* has anything to teach us—it may be the necessity of recognizing that what makes sense may not be true. Literature abounds in instances in which virtue miscarries—Little Eva, Little Nell, Little Emily, little Macduff, the little princes in the Tower—but, though we may be moved by disasters that befall innocents, our emotion does not ordinarily spill over into terror at the works that contain those disasters. If the power and intensity of our responses to the last moments of *King Lear* do not result from *what* happens, they may result from *when* and *where* it happens.

These are the last words of Act IV; the speaker is Kent: "My point and period will be thoroughly wrought, / Or well and ill, as this day's battle's fought" (IV.vii.96–97). This speech—which functions similarly to similar ones in *Julius Caesar* (V.i.112–25), *Othello* (V.i.128–29), and *Macbeth* (V.iv.16–21)—virtually announces something the play has been telling us for over an hour: as Dover has been the destination of the characters, the inevitable battle there is the destination of the play.

At the beginning of V.iii, the last scene, that battle is over, and Lear and Cordelia are led away as captives; they are in urgent danger of death at the hands of Edmund's henchman. When Albany enters with Goneril and Regan, the play is clearly far from over. Although Albany's speech to Edmund ("Sir, you have showed to-day your valiant strain . . ." V.iii.40–45) starts out in the standard fashion of victorious generals putting final touches to plays, Albany immediately turns his attention to the object of ours: he demands that Edmund turn Lear and Cordelia over to him. Edmund's smooth answer increases our fears for them; Edmund urged speed on the assassin, and now he says, "they are ready / To-morrow, or at further space, t'appear / Where you shall hold your session" (52–54). We fear that Albany may be diverted from his purpose; we have no reason to suspect that we will ourselves forget about the greatest unfinished business of the play. Albany is indeed diverted. He is not taken in by Edmund, but he does forget Cordelia and Lear to challenge Edmund's presumption. Thereupon the play and our attention imperceptibly skew toward the superimposed love-triangles (Edmund/Goneril/Regan; Edmund/Goneril/Albany):

> *Albany.* Sir, by your patience,
> I hold you but a subject of this war,
> Not as a brother.
> *Regan.* That's as we list to grace him.
> . . . . . .
> *Goneril.* Not so hot!
>
> [59-61, 66]

The focus of our attention now is Edmund. And we are smoothly led into the ceremonial conclusion Edgar has arranged and for which he has carefully prepared us: Edgar's trial-by-combat against Edmund. Edgar's victory—the triumph of virtue—has the feel of dramatic conclusion, and the lines that follow it offer an anthology of familiar signals that a play is ending: Edmund confesses and emphasizes the finality of his situation: "What you have charged me with, that have I done, / And more, much more. The time will bring it out. / 'Tis past, and so am I" (163–65). Edgar reveals himself (170), and passes a hollow but summary-sounding moral:

> The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us.
> The dark and vicious place where thee he got
> Cost him his eyes.
>
> [171–74]

The easy readiness of Edmund's agreement ("Th' hast spoken right; 'tis true"—174) combines with the brothers' exchange of charity (166–67) to give their dialogue a quality comparable to the resolution at the end of a piece of music. Edmund then makes an almost explicit announcement that the dramatic entity is complete: "The wheel is come full circle; I am here" (175). Albany sounds like any

one of dozens of rejoicing personages tying off the ends of a play by inviting narration of the events leading up to the hero's epiphany:

Albany. Methought thy very gait did prophesy
A royal nobleness. I must embrace thee.
Let sorrow split my heart if ever I
Did hate thee, or thy father.
Edgar. Worthy prince, I know't.
Albany. Where have you hid yourself?
How have you known the miseries of your father?
Edgar. By nursing them, my lord. List a brief tale;
And when 'tis told, O that my heart would burst!

[176–83]

Edgar's account concludes with information new to us; he tells us once and for all what becomes of Gloucester:

. . . some half hour past, when I was armed,
Not sure, though hoping of this good success,
I asked his blessing, and from first to last
Told him our pilgrimage. But his flawed heart—
Alack, too weak the conflict to support—
'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly.

[194–200]

Edgar's narrative is obviously complete. But five lines later he continues—in a passage whose superfluity the Folio text can seem accidentally to vouch for by omitting it.[2] He begins on a line that summarizes my point, "This would have seemed a period":

Edgar. This would have seemed a period
To such as love not sorrow; but another,
To amplify too much, would make much more,
And top extremity.
Whilst I was big in clamor, came there in a man,
Who, having seen me in my worst estate,
Shunned my abhorred society; but then, finding
Who 'twas that so endured, with his strong arms
He fastened on my neck, and bellowed out
As he'd burst heaven, threw him on my father,
Told the most piteous tale of Lear and him
That ever ear received; which in recounting

His grief grew puissant, and the strings of life
Began to crack. Twice then the trumpets sounded,
And there I left him tranced.
Albany. But who was this?
Edgar. Kent, sir, the banished Kent; who in disguise
Followed his enemy king and did him service
Improper for a slave.

[205–22]

This passage—in which Edgar begins with the events of "some half hour past" and works back to the beginning of Kent's history—is a chiasmic reprise of Edgar's chronological account of his own activities in disguise (it even echoes the word *burst* and the idea of bursting, which framed the earlier account). The passage winds up and ties off Kent's story as the previous one had Gloucester's, and, although Edgar never says that Kent is dead, the parallelism—particularly that between the substance and placement of the assertion that Gloucester's heart "Burst smilingly" (200) and the assertion that the strings of Kent's life "Began to crack" (218)—*does* say so. The Kent story is over.

Eight lines later, as the fates of Goneril and Regan are being reported, Edgar casually says, "Here comes Kent"; Kent enters, and a finished chapter continues.

Kent's first sentence violently aborts the ceremony of theatrical conclusion that began when Albany called the herald to supervise the formal combat between Edgar and Edmund:

Kent. I am come
To bid my king and master aye good night.
Is he not here?
Albany. Great thing of us forgot!

[235–37]

Albany's ridiculously phrased (and thus disconcertingly comic) cry of surprise is curiously appropriate to an improbable theatrical situation in which the characters onstage have forgotten all about the focal figures of the scene.

That we, the audience, could also have forgotten about Lear and Cordelia seems even more improbable, but I think audiences do just that. For the audience, the smooth ceremony of conclusion presumably collapses only moments before Kent ends it for the characters. As

Edgar was putting a precise period to Kent's history, a gentleman entered with a bloody knife:

Gentleman. Help, help! O, help!
Edgar. What kind of help?
Albany. Speak, man.
Edgar. What means this bloody knife?
Gentleman. 'Tis hot, it smokes.
It came even from the heart of—O, she's dead
[22–25)

Edgar's questions are our questions and open our minds to a forgotten need for help (note that the gentleman, whose message is that Goneril and Regan are dead, has no practical use for the help he asks). The imperfection of the gentleman's response to Edgar's questioning invites an audience to supply "Cordelia" to complete the interrupted phrase "from the heart of." When the gentleman does explain his distress—and when the play ambles on to sum up the careers of Goneril and Regan—the audience, though of course relieved that its immediate fears for Cordelia have not been realized, is likely to remain upset about Lear and Cordelia—perhaps not only upset in its concern for two virtuous characters in danger, but also upset in being the only party to the play that *is* concerned. Some nebulous uneasiness for the audience may also result from a sense of having gathered itself mentally in preparation for leaving a theatre where a play has formally concluded while its substance is still in urgent progress.[3]

Even after the characters have remembered that the main business of the play is unfinished, the audience's travail continues. All the different plots and subplots have tumbled out on the stage at once, and the characters leap from focus to focus like the mad Lear of earlier scenes. The frustration of the audience—which alone can focus its attention on the one vital action to be taken—is scrupulously intensified by Shakespeare; his care is epitomized by the parenthetic plea for haste with which Edmund delays the syntactic completion of "quickly send to the castle":

Edmund. I pant for life. Some good I mean to do,
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send—
Be brief in it—to th' castle, for my writ
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.
Nay, send in time.

Albany. Run, run, O run!
Edgar. To who, my lord? Who has the office? Send
Thy token of reprieve.
Edmund. Well thought on. Take my sword;
Give it to the captain.
Edgar. Haste thee for thy life.
[*Exit Officer.*]
[244–52]

A moment later: *Enter Lear, with Cordelia in his arms,* and the most terrifying five minutes in literature have begun for the audience.

I submit that audiences are not shocked by the fact of Cordelia's death but by its situation and that audiences grieve not for Cordelia's physical vulnerability, or for the physical vulnerability of humankind, but for their own—our own—mental vulnerability, a vulnerability made absolutely inescapable when the play pushes inexorably beyond its own identity, rolling across and crushing the very framework that enables its audience to endure the otherwise terrifying explosion of all manner of ordinarily indispensable mental contrivances for isolating, limiting, and comprehending. When Lear enters howling in the last moments of the play, Shakespeare has already presented an action that is serious, of undoubted magnitude, *and complete;* he thereupon continues that action beyond the limits of the one category that no audience can expect to see challenged: Shakespeare presents the culminating events of his *story* after his *play* is over.

2. Something More to Say

An audience's experience of *King Lear* persistently reflects its characters' experience of the events depicted in it. The play makes its audience suffer *as* audience; the fact that *King Lear* ends but does not stop is only the biggest of a succession of similar facts about the play. The parallel between tests of the audience's theatrical endurance and the trials of the characters is illustrated in the two limp little speeches that intervene between Edgar's account of his father's death and his postscript on Kent. The first is by Edmund, and its lifelessness evokes a sense of unwarranted continuation:

This speech of yours hath moved me,
And shall perchance do good; but speak you on—

You look as you had something more to say.
[V.iii.200–02]

In the second speech Albany explicitly takes up the threat of "more":

If there be more, more woeful, hold it in,
For I am almost ready to dissolve,
Hearing of this.
[203–05]

Edmund's speech both is and promises a burdensome and superfluous appendage to the audience's immediate theatrical experience; Albany protests the threat of augmentation, but—of course—protests it in the dimension of the dramatized events rather than of the dramatization.

Almost from the beginning, both the characters and the audience of *King Lear* must cope with the fact that the idea of the ultimate is *only* an idea, a hope, a working convenience.

The first speeches of *King Lear* are full of comparatives ("had more affected the Duke of Albany," "no dearer in my account," "know you better," "darker purpose," "no less loving son"). Lear introduces the superlative ("which of you shall we say doth love us most") and triggers an inflation in language and in its aspirations. Goneril begins her answer with comparatives and progresses toward the absolute (I.i.55–61); Regan outdoes her ("she comes too short . . . I profess / Myself an enemy to all other joys"—72–73). Cordelia's "Nothing" is the ultimate among ultimates; it makes retreat to relativism futile:

Cordelia. . . . I love your Majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less.
Lear. How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little . . .
[92–94]

On the other hand, the realm of the absolute is paradoxically wanting in substitutes for the relative but serviceable sureness (definition, limitation, finality) available in the comfortable confines of comparison. Cordelia can say nothing "to draw / A third more opulent" than her sisters, but she *does* say, "Nothing": she cannot literally "love and be silent"—any more than Lear's hyperbole ("I disclaim all my parental care," "we have no such daughter") can literally obliterate

Cordelia's daughterhood or remove her from the category "daughter" in his speeches. Moreover, Cordelia *does* attempt to measure her love for Lear. The terms of her speech are relative ("That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry / Half my love with him"—101–02); the speech is, in fact, an overt rejection of absolutes ("Sure I shall never marry like my sisters, / To love my father all"—103–04). But the rejection is itself an absolute, an absolute that collapses when she assents to Lear's response, "But goes thy heart with this?" (105). *Heart* in Lear's question is potentially a precise synonym for *love* in Cordelia's "carry half my love with him," but *love* (affection) in Cordelia's phrase is not synonymous with *heart* in Lear's question (a question that means "But do you really mean what you have just said?"). Cordelia does and does not contradict herself; her absolute allegiance to relativism is final, definitive, absolute—but only relative to the contextually, and thus tenuously, determined meaning of words.

That was a very abstruse example, offered only to suggest the depth to which the impossibility of finality permeates the play. For a simpler but equally incidental example, consider IV.vii.61, the line in which Lear specifies his age with absolute and absolutely ineffectual precision: "Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less." However, to see that the characters constantly and vainly strive to establish the limits of things, we need look at nothing more recondite than Edgar's stoic platitudes in the first lines of IV.i and the revision he offers after the entrance of the newly mutilated Gloucester a moment later (note the comfortable, comparative-like assumption of limits inherent in Edgar's use of superlatives in, "The lamentable change is from the best; / The worst returns to laughter"; like several other confident assertions in *King Lear,* this one reflects the idea of the wheel of fortune,[4] and a wheel is, above all, finite):

Yet better thus, and known to be contemned,
Than still contemned and flattered. To be worst,
The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,
Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.
The lamentable change is from the best;
The worst returns to laughter. Welcome then,
Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace:

The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst
Owes nothing to thy blasts.
Enter Gloucester and an Old Man.
But who comes here?
My father, poorly led? . . .
. . . . . .
O gods! Who is't can say 'I am at the worst'?
I am worse than e'er I was.

[1–10, 25–26]

Lear's confident reservation of a hundred knights exemplifies a fruitless quest for definition of another sort. His initial scheme and his later dream of retirement in a walled prison with Cordelia exemplify yet another. The play is full of such quests, and the lines I quote for other purposes will include all the evidence one could wish. I prefer to turn my attention to the audience's similar efforts and frustrations. Those, too, come in many sizes and shapes. Take, for example, the experience of listening to the speech in which Lear first mentions the hundred knights. First, he makes an apparently absolute donation of everything ("I do invest you . . ."), *then,* after he has nothing, he tacks on his provisos:

Peace, Kent!
Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery.—Hence and avoid my sight!—
So be my grave my peace as here I give
Her father's heart from her! Call France. Who stirs!
Call Burgundy. Cornwall and Albany,
With my two daughters' dowers digest the third;
Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.
I do invest you jointly with my power,
Preeminence, and all the large effects
That troop with majesty. Ourself, by monthly course,
With reservation of an hundred knights,
By you to be sustained, shall our abode
Make with you by due turn. Only we shall retain
The name, and all th' addition to a king. The sway,
Revenue, execution of the rest,
Beloved sons, be yours; which to confirm,
This coronet part between you.

[I.i.121–39]

I have quoted the whole speech because it is also the first of the many instances where Lear leaps suddenly from one topic to another. The first four speeches of *King Lear* are an orderly, efficient, and symmetrical introduction to two distinct plot lines in the play; the two plots are never distinct again, and from the time of Kent's first effort to interrupt Lear, *no* two things are ever distinct again. The scenes in which Lear's mind pounces upon one and then another topic are only exaggerated manifestations of the audience's constant difficulty in knowing where one topic ends and another begins.

The problem of knowing where something ends is, of course, a variation on the problems of knowing *if* something ends and whether it will ever end. Not ending is a primary characteristic of *King Lear.* The last sixteen lines of the play provide a brief sample of the varieties of inconclusiveness in *Lear;* an audience's experience of them is emblematic of the experience of the whole:

Lear. . . . Look there, look there—
He dies.
Edgar. He faints. My lord, my lord—
Kent. Break, heart, I prithee break!
Edgar. Look up, my lord.
Kent. Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.
Edgar. He is gone indeed.
Kent. The wonder is he hath endured so long;
He but usurped his life.
Albany. Bear them from hence. Our present business
Is general woe.
[*To Kent and Edgar*] Friends of my soul, you twain
Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain.
Kent. I have a journey, sir, shortly to go.
My master calls me; I must not say no.
Edgar. 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.

The play began in doubt about who would rule; the three final speeches, a reprise of the division of the kingdom in I.i, leave us in new doubt about who will rule: Albany? Albany, Kent, and Edgar?

Kent and Edgar? Albany and Edgar? Edgar? Other varieties of inconclusiveness are exemplified in Kent's "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go. / My master calls me; I must not say no." It makes literally endless the endless succession of inconclusive journeys in *King Lear;* it echoes Kent's banishment in I.i and that of Cordelia, who said no. It also echoes and seems to repeat the substance of the sentence on which Kent entered this last scene, but—where "I am come / To bid my king and master aye good night" (235-36) said "I come to bid farewell to King Lear, my master, before I die"—this speech, where "master" fits both Lear and God,[5] conflates the separated, finite world and the infinite one referred to in the earlier speech; as a result, the promise of an afterlife acts upon the audience not to put a comfortable footnote to the lives we see ending but to extend our uncertainty into infinity.

These final speeches are also theatrically inconclusive. After the last speech, the Folios provide an urgently necessary stage direction, *Exeunt with a dead march.* This is the only one of the tragedies where the last lines do not point to an immediate offstage destination and invite the remaining characters to repair to it. The last lines of *King Lear* leave the survivors just to walk off the stage.

But my principal reason for focusing on these last sixteen lines is their substance. They dwell on the extreme *length* of Lear's suffering, and, in "shall never see so much," the last sentence comes close to pointing out the audience's parallel ordeal: *King Lear* is too long, almost unendurably so.

That sounds like an adverse criticism and ordinarily would be, but it is not so here, where I am arguing that the greatness of *Lear* derives from the confrontation it makes with inconclusiveness—arguing that the greatness of *King Lear* (in the metaphoric sense of "greatness") derives, at least in part, from its greatness (in the literal sense of "greatness"), its physical extent, its great duration. *King Lear* is not the longest of Shakespeare's plays, but—in ways comparable to those by which he makes Polonius, who does not speak much, seem always to be talking, and makes the verbose Coriolanus seem tight lipped—Shakespeare uses great and demonstrable technical skill to stretch his audience out upon the rack of this tough play.

The way of our escape and Lear's are one. We *want* Lear to die, just as, almost from the beginning, we have wanted the play to end. That

does not mean that we are unfeeling toward Lear or that we dislike the play: watching *Lear* is not unlike waiting for the death of a dying friend; our eagerness for the end makes the friend no less dear. In his first speech Lear promises to die: he will, he says, "Unburdened crawl toward death" (I.i.41); for the progress of the play, *crawl* becomes the operative word. Even while the plot still offers, indeed promises, the happy ending the story has in all tellings previous to Shakespeare's, Lear's death is our only way out of a play that has been ready to end since it began. By its kind, the story of Lear and his three daughters promises a happy ending in which the virtuous youngest child proves herself so and the parent sees his error; but the play refuses to fulfill the generic promise inherent in its story.

After scene i the story of Lear and his daughters lacks only three quick steps to its conclusion: Goneril will show her colors; Regan will show hers; Cordelia will prove true.[6] Scene ii delays the predictable advance by opening up an echoing situation in Gloucester's family. In scene iii we see Goneril obviously preparing to do her duty by literary genre; in scene iv she does it. Lear now sees her as we see her, curses her, says "Away, away!" and exits (I.iv.280). Goneril has played out her part, and Lear is done with her. Four lines later Lear comes back onstage: "What, fifty of my followers at a clap? / Within a fortnight?" Both the reentrance and the new indignity Lear suffers are *extra;* the fact that Lear discovers the new and unexpected wrong offstage and discovers it to us only obliquely heightens our sense that the five-line resumption of his curse on Goneril (290–95) is excessive. It is theatrically excessive. We cannot pause to reason its need, and we do not grumble like Polonius listening to the player, but—as Lear curses on, doing again what was over and done with—we endure the slow passage of time like criminals in the stocks. When King Lear, the character, says "I'll resume the shape which thou dost think / I have cast off for ever" (I.iv.300–01), his hollow threat echoes the action of *King Lear,* a play that persists in resuming completed incidents and relapsing into past circumstances. In terms of our real experience, the experience of watching a play, we are, like Lear, oppressed beyond reasonable limits, even though the oppression is scaled to a three-hour stay at the theatre.

It takes Shakespeare about twenty minutes to get us to Regan and the next necessary step; but, when it does come, it is, appropriately,

an intensified repetition of Lear's confrontation with the elder wicked sister. In II.iv.84–115, we are presented with an echo of Goneril's feigned sickness (I.iv.49) and with a variation on Oswald's negligence and refusal to come when Lear calls for him (I.iv.43–54, 75–79). Then, when Regan is on the point of teleological fulfillment, *Enter Goneril* (II.iv.184)—and we take a half-step back in our progress toward Cordelia, just when we seemed about to complete a step forward.

Similarly, Lear's meeting with Cordelia—which does not occur until IV.vii—is systematically delayed from IV.iii onward. (One reason, perhaps a main reason, why the meeting of Lear and Gloucester in IV.vi is so moving is that it is narratively superfluous).

A complete index of phenomena that avoid available means of concluding would note that Edgar and Kent continue to masquerade well after need has passed, and would include the curious fact that Lear's madness remains an impending event of the near future long after we have concluded that he is mad; but exhaustive demonstration is probably unnecessary. I will, however, discuss the part of *King Lear* that perennially prompts critics to talk about endurance: Lear's night on the heath.

Forty-five lines into III.ii, Lear's first scene in the storm, Kent says this:

> Since I was man,
> Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
> Such groans of roaring wind and rain, I never
> Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry
> Th' affliction nor the fear.
>
> [45–49]

No audience that has both heard Lear described in III.i as "contending with the fretful elements" and seen him do so at the beginning of this scene needs Kent's iterative and iteratively structured testimony to the horrors of the night and of Lear's situation. I think the power of the storm scenes derive not from the events portrayed but from contemplation of those events in combination with a real trial of our own endurance. Lear's agony and the audience's are totally different both in scale and kind, but they have the same remedy: Lear must "come out o' th' storm" (II.iv.304), must enter the hovel.

In his next speech after evaluating the storm, Kent tells us about the hovel (and does so in a scene that has so far been crowded with language of shelter, coverings, and roofs):

> Gracious my lord, hard by here is a hovel;
> Some friendship will it lend you 'against the tempest.
> Repose you there . . .
>
> [61–63]

Lear agrees immediately and with an unusual constancy of general focus:

> My wits begin to turn.
> Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
> I am cold myself. Where is this straw, my fellow?
> The art of our necessities is strange,
> And can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.
> Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart
> That's sorry yet for thee.
>
> [67–73]

The Fool sings a song; Lear says, "True, boy. Come bring us to this hovel" (78), exits with Kent, and—once the Fool concludes the seventeen-line prophecy with which he lengthens the scene—III.ii is over.

The next time we see Lear, Kent, and the Fool is in III.iv; they are still outdoors. The scene begins thus:

> *Enter Lear, Kent, and Fool.*
> *Kent.* Here is the place, my lord. Good my lord, enter.
> The tyranny of the open night's too rough
> For nature to endure.
> *Storm still.*
> *Lear.* Let me alone.
> *Kent.* Good my lord, enter here.
> *Lear.* Wilt break my heart?
> *Kent.* I had rather break mine own. Good my lord, enter.
>
> [III.iv.1–5]

Lear continues to rage, echoing the manner he abandoned when he agreed to seek the hovel and stressing his need of shelter ("In such a night / To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure"—17–18). Kent

again urges Lear to enter the hovel—exit the stage and thereby end the scene. Kent gets Lear's attention. Lear says he will not go in; then says he will; then sends the Fool in "In, boy; go first"—26) and resumes his address to the whirlwind. One character, the Fool, has at last achieved shelter, but that achievement is counterproductive; the stage does not begin to empty but to fill. The Fool discovers Poor Tom; both come out into the storm; Gloucester arrives to second Kent's urging; Lear continues to delay ("First let me talk with this philosopher"—145). Finally—175 lines from Kent's "Here is the place" and a quarter-hour after a hovel hard by was offered to the expectations of the audience—Lear goes in.[7]

James Thurber's account of the Get-Ready Man is a fitting epigraph for an essay on *King Lear:* the Get-Ready Man was on the right track, but his prediction was really only wishful thinking—wishful thinking raised to assertion by a confidence in limits that can be maintained only by fanatics. Every time *King Lear* is performed, the theatre knows moments far more disquieting than the ones the Get-Ready Man shaped for the cultural elite of Columbus, Ohio.

3. *Identity and Definition*

What we ask of art is similar to what Lear asks of life: we ask that art have sure identity, which is to say, distinct, self-assertive limits. The greatness of Shakespeare derives, I believe, from his special use of literary tools that focus, isolate, and limit. He uses them so abundantly, and therefore so intensely, that they weigh sufficiently upon our consciousness to balance correspondingly intense counterforces, forces that repeatedly and insistently acknowledge: (1) that anything "cool reason ever comprehends" has "local habitation and a name" —exists in comprehensible form—*only* as it is arbitrarily isolated from the mass of experience; and (2) that in the blink of even a fanatic's eye it can and will rejoin that mass. A literary artist's means for defining his materials, fixing them in a relationship with one another and isolating them from other relationships, are of two, often overlapping, kinds: external—physical, chronological, and ideational boundaries; and internal—patterns of echoing situations, actions, ideas, words, and sounds that intensify the pertinence of the component parts to one another.

In *King Lear,* which gives up or disables all its external means of definition except the story line (and, in effect, gives that up too), the internally unifying devices of repetition are more material and more efficient than usual. For instance, the unifying effect of the two perceptibly distinct intertwined plots far outweighs the disunifying effect and is far greater than that of similarly echoing plots in plays where external boundaries operate conventionally. That is true even though the characters constantly undermine our sense of the likeness between the two family situations (and question the validity of the intellectual grasp derived from perceiving the likeness) by overstating and misreading the parallelism ("Gloucester's bastard son / Was kinder to his father than my daughters / Got 'tween the lawful sheets"—IV.vi.113–15).

I said earlier that the experience of the last sixteen lines of *King Lear* is emblematic of the experience of the whole. So is our experience of numerous other incidents, speeches, and smaller phenomena of the play. Paradoxically, the effect of this multiplicity is to contradict (and thus to counter, to balance, and to offset) the very quality that is duplicated: repeated evocation of a sense of indefiniteness generates a sense of pattern and thus of the wholeness, the identity, of the play. Similarly, as the play systematically destroys the intellectual comfort available from faith in kinds, it uses our perception of kind—shows us characters, events, speeches, and ideas that resemble one another—to compensate artistically for the intellectual terror that the same phenomena generate by illustrating the impossibility of definition.

For example, the play both contains and is contained by a vast network of overlapping and disparate likenesses among characters. Each major character is pointedly similar in some respect to several other characters to whom in some other respect he contrasts. Edgar, to take just one, echoes qualities of Cordelia (they are innocents wronged by their fathers); of Kent (each demeans, disguises, and endangers himself to serve his wronger); of Edmund (they are brothers with nearly interchangeable names, Edmund imitates a Bedlam beggar [I.ii.131–33] several scenes before Edgar does, and—for very different ends—both brothers practice upon their father's gullibility); of Gloucester (they are Edmund's victims, and he overtly equates them as foolishly credulous); of Goneril and Regan (they are elder children, who by the various rules of primogeniture are entitled to

more than their siblings are, and who by the laws of fairy tales are entitled to less); of the Fool (both pretend simple-mindedness, and both follow a great man in decline); of Lear (Lear and Poor Tom are wandering, naked madmen); of Oswald (Poor Tom says that he was formerly "a servingman, proud in heart and mind; that . . . served the lust of [his] mistress' heart" [III.iv.81–83]); and of Albany (both evoke contempt from wicked characters who sneer at their virtuous ineffectuality).

Similarly, minor characters often gratuitously remind us of major ones whom they do not generally resemble; for instance, when Edmund's hired hangman says, "I cannot draw a cart, nor eat dried oats— / If it be man's work, I'll do't" (V.iii.38–39), he echoes lines spoken earlier by Kent (I.iv.10–34), by the Fool (II.iv.120–21), and by Edgar (III.iv.121–31). One cannot make sense of such correspondences, but one *feels* sense and order behind them.

The intensity of patterning in *King Lear* compensates for the equal intensity of its demonstration that the characters', the audience's, and all human perception of pattern is folly: the omnipresent, never-quite-circumscribable patterns testify—as faith in a religious metaphysic might—that a governing idea for the play, a lodestone for our values, exists just beyond our mental reach, that the play is faithful to it, and that our responses would prove similarly faithful and consistent if only we could interpret the oracular truths we feel but cannot see. That would explain our all-but-desperate need to believe that Lear learns something between Act I and his death, and the solemn vigor with which critics will fix on (and demand that the play be midwife to) a single pregnant phrase like "Ripeness is all"—even though it is manifest that in *King Lear* ripeness is next to nothing. ("Ripeness is all" has been the most popular of all candidates for the office of one-line kernel at the core of *King Lear;* if one must nominate a line, I suggest Gloucester's final one, his response to "Ripeness is all": "And that's true too"—V.ii.11).[8]

The ways in which pattern coexists with and compensates for inconclusiveness are well demonstrated at the most inconclusive point in the play. Shakespeare balances our sense that the "great thing of us forgot" is a structurally extraneous continuation of a completed action in two different ways. He fills the last minutes of the play with echoes that reach back and attach themselves to the body of the play (for

instance, Lear's efforts to coax life from Cordelia echo Cordelia's ministrations to him in IV.vii; and Cordelia's death is both urgently extraneous and the echo and fulfillment of the suggestion we heard moments earlier when the gentleman said that the bloody knife "came even from the heart of—O, she's dead"). More importantly, the internal patterning of the lines between Lear's entrance with Cordelia in his arms and the end of the play gives them an identity so insistent that their inevitability is no more easily denied than our obvious need to know what happens to Lear and Cordelia.

The last seventy lines cohere so tightly that any illustratively designed division must falsify their effect. I want to concentrate on the largest of the patterns, what might be called a "now-dead, now-alive" pattern; it is established in Lear's first speech over Cordelia and last repeated (in reverse order) at Lear's own death, when Edgar first thinks Lear has fainted and then realizes he is dead. Its first statement, however, includes a subpattern—a pair of three-speech fragments, ineffectual interruptions of Lear's agony, first a line and a half shared by Kent, Edgar, and Albany, then a line and a half shared by Kent, Lear, and Edgar:

> *Lear.* Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones.
> Had I your tongues and eyes, I'ld use them so
> That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever.
> I know when one is dead, and when one lives.
> She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass.
> If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
> Why then she lives.
> *Kent.* Is this the promised end?
> *Edgar.* Or image of that horror?
> *Albany.* Fall and cease.
> *Lear.* This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so,
> It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
> That ever I have felt.
> Kent. O my good master.
> *Lear.* Prithee away.
> *Edgar.* 'Tis noble Kent, your friend.
>
> [V.iii.258–69]

The first speech in the foregoing quotation also presents an incidental pattern in "you are men of stones" in the first lines and "stone," used

as a synonym for "looking glass" at the end of the speech—a pattern that offers one more instance of casual likeness between disparate things. Moreover, in addition to the ideationally insignificant verbal link between the two uses of the word *stone*, the two unrelated uses of the word sustain the larger pattern of violent alternation between evidence of certain lifelessness and evidence of life: in "you are men of stones" (a conflation of the synonymous assertions "you are men of stone" and "you are stones"), *stone* is emblematic of lifelessness; on the other hand, the same word describes the looking glass on which Lear hopes to register signs of life.[9]

The larger pattern, the one evoked in alternating conviction that Cordelia is dead and hope that she is alive, recurs in Lear's next speech:

> A plague upon you murderers, traitors all;
> I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever.
> Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little. Ha,
> What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
> Gentle, and low—an excellent thing in woman.
> I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee. [270–75]

The first line and a half echo the accusation and the conditional mood of the opening of the preceding passage, and "she's gone for ever" in line 271 is a simple repetition of the same words in line 260. In the earlier speech Lear had proposed a test for signs of life in Cordelia ("If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why then she lives") and then read the results of an improvised test on a related principle ("This feather stirs; she lives"). Now, again on the basis of what passes Cordelia's lips, he listens for and thinks he hears her voice. As the tests echo one another, they also echo the test at the beginning of the play, the test in which Cordelia could not heave her heart into her mouth (I.i.91–92). As he did in the first scene of the play, Lear strains to hear Cordelia speak and hears nothing.

The next thirty lines are densely patterned. The pattern in which Lear is certain that Cordelia is dead and then just as certain that she lives is echoed in reversed order in his response to the question about the whereabouts of Kent's alter ego, Caius ("He's a good fellow, I can tell you that. / He'll strike, and quickly too. He's dead and rotten")

and then extended when Kent says, "No, my good lord; I am the very man":

> . . . I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.
> *Gentleman.* 'Tis true, my lords, he did.
> *Lear.* Did I not, fellow?
> I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
> I would have made them skip. I am old now,
> And these same crosses spoil me. Who are you?
> Mine eyes are not o' the' best, I'll tell you straight.
> *Kent.* If Fortune brag of two she loved and hated,
> One of them we behold.
> *Lear.* This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?
> *Kent.* The same:
> Your servant Kent; where is your servant Caius?
> *Lear.* He's a good fellow, I can tell you that.
> He'll strike, and quickly too. He's dead and rotten.
> *Kent.* No, my good lord; I am the very man.
> *Lear.* I'll see that straight.
> *Kent.* That from your first of difference and decay
> Have followed your sad steps.
> *Lear.* You are welcome hither.
> *Kent.* Nor no man else. All's cheerless, dark, and deadly.
> Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves,
> And desperately are dead.
> *Lear.* Ay, so I think.
> *Albany.* He knows not what he says; and vain is it
> That we present us to him.
> *Edgar.* Very bootless.
> *Enter a Messenger*
> *Messenger.* Edmund is dead, my lord.
> *Albany.* That's but a trifle here.
> You lords and noble friends, know our intent.
> What comfort to this great decay may come
> Shall be applied. For us, we will resign,
> During the life of this old Majesty,
> To him our absolute power; [*to Edgar and Kent*] you to your rights,
> With boot and such addition as your honors
> Have more than merited. All friends shall taste

> The wages of their virtue, and all foes
> The cup of their deservings.—O, see, see!
>
> [275–305]

These lines offer additional mental comfort in minor patterns. For instance, in the last speech of the thirty-line passage, Albany—again in response to a development in the Gloucester plot—sets out again to speak the last lines of a tragedy, and—in a situational echo of the earlier effort he made to finish the play, when, a hundred and twenty lines back, Edgar revealed himself and Lear and Cordelia were still unaccounted for—his effort to speak "what we ought to say" proves to be just what he says Edmund's death is: "but a trifle here." In "*King Lear:* The Final Lines," an essay that has not had the attention it deserves, John Shaw writes eloquently about Albany's speech:

> This speech of Albany's, beginning 'You lords and noble friends', has all the characteristics of a ceremonial closing address. It follows upon the news of the death of Edmund, the final ***necessary*** event of the tragedy, and one which might be expected to wind it all up . . . . Following the strict pattern of the other endings of tragedies, this speech, proclaimed by the man in authority, Albany, consciously re-established formal order. Lear will be restored. The good will be rewarded, the offenders punished, just as the Duke, for example, announces at the conclusion of ***Romeo and Juliet:*** 'Some shall be pardoned, and some punished'. . . . But the cadence with which Albany is trying to end the tragic events of *King Lear* turns out to be false, or, more accurately, 'interrupted'. . . . And we might imagine Albany uttering this speech—saying 'what we ought to say' . . . as if the tragedy were drawing to its close. For the speech is, after all, a formal declaration:
>
> You lords and noble friends, know our intent!
>
> With its usual formula of just distribution of reward and punishment, the speech apparently is moving toward its clinching couplet:
>
> All friends shall taste
> The wages of their virtue, and all foes
> The cup of their deservings [bitter woes].
>
> We may well imagine both Albany's and the audience's shock, then, to behold a sudden change passing over the features of Lear, so that Albany must break off just at the expected couplet:
>
> The cup of their deservings . . . O see, see![10]

In a sentence I omitted from the foregoing excerpt, Shaw remarks on Albany's persistence "in hoping to bring some 'comfort' to 'this great decay' by restoring . . . 'absolute power' " to Lear. "Nothing," Shaw justly says, "could be farther from the point" (p. 264). The ultimately petty social and political comforts in which Albany has faith are indeed irrelevant— but only to the situation dramatized. The speech and its interruption by considerations that dwarf it are, I think, to the point in that they offer quiet, unobserved comfort to an audience. They—as opposed to the substance they purvey—vouch for an orderliness in the play *as* play that persists even in defeat. The comfort I refer to is, surprisingly enough, of the kind formally inherent in the Book of Job, where—even as the sequence of events is devastating human belief in a morally ordered universe and, indeed, belief that there is any humanly comprehensible order to the universe—the narrative *is* orderly and thus a comfort. The rhymelike repetitions of "and I only am escaped alone to tell thee" that conclude each tale of woe make the experience of reading the Book of Job an exception to the rule the narrative exemplifies, the rule that there is no humanly perceptible rule by which the world works. There is similar comfort in the orderly process by which the orderly succession of Job's discomfortable comforters effectively exhaust the range of possible variations on "comfort that does not comfort."

The reason for my surprise at the likeness between the intellectual comfort provided by pattern in the Book of Job and the similar comfort that derives to an audience from the mere repetition of Albany's efforts to end *King Lear* is, of course, that in *Lear* regularity collapses not only in Lear's world—the fictional world in which, since it so resembles the real world, we are asked to see reality—but in the audience's own immediate world—the "world" the audience is familiar with from its previous theatrical experience. The glory of *King Lear* as an experience for its audience is in the fact that the play presents its morally capricious universe in a play that, paradoxically, is formally capricious and *also* uses pattern to do exactly what pattern usually does: assert the presence of an encompassing order in the *work* (as opposed to the world it describes). Albany's restitution speech and the inadequacy it acknowledges when Albany breaks off and says, "O, see, see!" embody the paradox precisely: both in substance and kind Albany's speech proclaims a return to order and gratifies one's as-

sumptions that the norms of society and the norms of plays can be counted on; both Albany and his speech fail of their promised ends, and yet the mere repetition of the two kinds of failure balances and qualifies the effect of one of them, the failure of form.

The thirty-line passage that ends with Albany's speech also offers the comfort of lesser and simpler patterns. For example, consider the repetitions of *straight* and *boot;* the concentration of words related to seeing; and the sentence "Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves, / And desperately are dead"—the report of a fact which echoes both the substance and language of the fraud reported immediately before Lear's entrance, when Edmund revealed a plot to hang Cordelia and "lay the blame upon her own despair / That she fordid herself" (255–56).

But the same thirty lines take our minds across a crazy quilt of frames of reference—all pertinent, all reasonable, none deniable. From the time of his first defeat by Goneril, we have heard Lear slip from the contexts of particular topics of discussion into the pervasive context of his relation to his children. Here, in the oppressive presence of Cordelia's dead body, we are as Lear has been; we share Lear's inability to focus on revelations of identity and reports on the outcome of various plot lines ("That's but a trifle here").[11]

In addition, Shakespeare constructs dialogue that detaches from one pertinent evaluation system (or from an ostensible topic) and drifts into others. For example, when Lear says he killed the slave that was hanging Cordelia, we have just heard several minutes of evidence that he does not know what is real and what is imaginary. Kent and Edgar have refused to participate in Lear's moments of hope, and we have concluded that Lear is right when he says "She's gone forever" and wrong when he says "she lives." If the incidental gentleman did not bear instant witness to its truth, we would be inclined to put the claim to have killed the hangman with Lear's other fantasies. Earlier in the same speech Lear has said, "I might have saved her" (which implies not only that he did not save her but that, in effect at least, he was powerless against Edmund's henchman). Now we know for a fact that Lear killed the henchman while he was hanging Cordelia (which should imply that Cordelia was saved, and is certain evidence that Lear was not powerless). What we have here is a single action, two facts (Cordelia is dead, and the hangman is dead), and two related

implications of the action, of which one accords with the facts and the other does not: although Lear is still a formidable swordsman and succeeded in his attack on the hangman, he failed in the purpose for which he attacked.

When Lear responds to the gentleman's testimony, he complicates the matter to a point where it becomes almost literally unthinkable:

> Did I not, fellow?
> I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
> I would have made them skip. I am old now,
> And these same crosses spoil me.

These lines pertain to Lear's general condition but not to the specifics that evoke them. The speech begins in pride of this day's accomplishment as a swordsman, but it goes on, still pridefully, to boast of his past prowess in a way appropriate to a man frustrated by his impotence in combat and not by the larger impotence revealed in his failure to save Cordelia and in his incapacity to comprehend his situation.[12] As we listen to these speeches our mental state is as Lear's is and has been since his favorite daughter pleased him least and his less-loved daughters pleased him most, and since he ceased to rule and remained a king: what makes sense to us in one respect does not make sense in another.

The problem of Lear's success and failure against the hangman (which, by the way, presents a muted echo of, and participates in, the pattern made by Lear's vacillating certainty about Cordelia's death), is never resolved or even acknowledged. Lear's mind, after all, is gone. As earlier events moved forward before Lear could unravel their causes and effects, so this speech (where Lear himself is the inevitable force powered by multiple logics and we are the hopeless comprehenders), moves on inexorably, abruptly abandoning one line of thought and —in the moment of violent discontinuity—picking up others. Lear says, "Who are you?" and the dialogue proceeds toward his recognition of Kent and a discussion of the identity and present condition of Caius. When Lear abandons the topic of his swordsmanship, his sudden shift of topic recalls a pattern of mad behavior to which we became accustomed as we watched his progress from Goneril's house to Gloucester's to the heath to Dover. We are reminded that we are listening to a madman, and the reminder is a particularized

justification of Lear's protestations of disability. Moreover, Lear's new topic, Kent's identity, is a reassuring recurrence to Kent's ignored self-revelation of a few moments before:

> Who are you?
> Mine eyes are not o' th' best, I'll tell you straight.
> *Kent.* If Fortune brag of two she loved and hated,
> One of them we behold.
> *Lear.* This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?

On the other hand, Kent's lines on Fortune throw our minds into yet another situation where assertions adhere to more than one logic. Kent's comment, while effectively clear enough in substance, is roundabout in a way that puts a listener through a miniature maze from which the listener emerges only by shrugging the comment off as rhetorical fancywork. When we hear of two that Fortune loved and hated, we are looking at two such: Lear and Cordelia. It doesn't matter that we do not know why Kent specifies two, why he then limits our concern to one, or why he fails to specify which one; we cannot pause to worry; we just take the sentence as another comment on Lear's pitiful state. The sentence does, however, exercise its listener's consciousness in one more experience of perceiving an arbitrarily fixed object of concern which is then arbitrarily redefined in a way that undoes the whole action of definition.

As we watch and hear the play, it persists in veering violently from its course, but in doing so it offers straws for the understanding to sense or clutch at ("loved" and "hated," for instance, are *two,* and Lear and Cordelia appear here only as objects of *one* of Fortune's two specified emotions, her hatred). Moreover, since the play observes so many patterns of repetition, most discontinuities are also reassuring continuations of one or more patterns other than the one broken. Consider, for example, the next sequence of lines. Lear's "This is a dull sight" has no clear, fixed referent. Following immediately upon Kent's comment on what "we behold," "This" seems to mean the sight before us ("this is a melancholy sight to behold"), and since the principal object of our view and Lear's is Cordelia, "This" also suggests the corpse. On the other hand, although "This" is unlikely to say "mine" to an audience, "This is a dull sight" comes to suggest "My eyesight is dull"—a meaning evoked by the completed line

("This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?") and seconded by the distant and syntactically improbable antecedent provided by "Mine eyes are not o' th' best, I'll tell you straight" (280) and its echo in "I'll see that straight" (288)—which continues the language of eyesight by using "see" to mean "understand" and conflates the sense of one sentence—"Mine eyes are not o' th' best"—from the earlier line and the structure and diction of the other—"I'll tell you straight." If, however, we may reasonably say that—having heard Lear talk about eyesight and having heard "Are you not Kent?"—an audience can understand "This is a dull sight" as a comment on Lear's difficulty in seeing through tears, it is just as reasonable to remember that this audience is used to Lear's sudden shifts of focus, and is prepared to hear the assertion about sight in ideational isolation from the question to Kent.

As Kent strives to reveal his history, Lear's mental dislocation becomes increasingly complete:

> *Lear.* This is a dull sight. Are you not Kent?
> *Kent.* The same:
> Your servant Kent; where is your servant Caius?
> *Lear.* He's a good fellow, I can tell you that.
> He'll strike, and quickly too. He's dead and rotten.
> *Kent.* No, my good lord; I am the very man.
> *Lear.* I'll see that straight.
> *Kent.* That from your first of difference and decay
> Have followed your sad steps.
> *Lear.* You are welcome hither.
> *Kent.* Nor no man else. All's cheerless, dark, and deadly.
> Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves,
> And desperately are dead.
> *Lear.* Ay, so I think.
> *Albany.* He knows not what he says; and vain is it
> That we present us to him.
> *Edgar.* Very bootless.
> [283–95]

Albany's and Edgar's comments sum up Lear's situation, but, as they work to pin down the cause of the discontinuity of the preceding dialogue, they account only for *a* cause. They confirm and objectify our conclusions about Lear's erratic answers; they ignore Kent's "Nor