

Tolstoy Leo

Tolstoy on Shakespeare: A Critical Essay on Shakespeare



Leo Tolstoy

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Leo Tolstoy

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PART I TOLSTOY ON SHAKESPEARE

I

Mr. Crosby's article¹ on Shakespeare's attitude toward the working classes suggested to me the idea of also expressing my own long-established opinion about the works of Shakespeare, in direct opposition, as it is, to that established in all the whole European world. Calling to mind all the struggle of doubt and self-deceit, – efforts to attune myself to Shakespeare – which I went through owing to my complete disagreement with this universal adulation, and, presuming that many have experienced and are experiencing the same, I think that it may not be unprofitable to express definitely and frankly this view of mine, opposed to that of the majority, and the more so as the conclusions to which I came, when examining the causes of my disagreement with the universally established opinion, are, it seems to me, not without interest and significance.

My disagreement with the established opinion about Shakespeare is not the result of an accidental frame of mind, nor of a light-minded attitude toward the matter, but is the outcome of many years' repeated and insistent endeavors to harmonize my own views of Shakespeare with those established amongst all civilized men of the Christian world.

I remember the astonishment I felt when I first read Shakespeare. I expected to receive a powerful esthetic pleasure, but having read, one after the other, works regarded as his best: "King Lear," "Romeo and Juliet," "Hamlet" and "Macbeth," not only did I feel no delight, but I felt an irresistible repulsion and tedium, and doubted as to whether I was senseless in feeling works regarded as the summit of perfection by the whole of the civilized world to be trivial and positively bad, or whether the significance which this civilized world attributes to the works of Shakespeare was itself senseless. My consternation was increased by the fact that I always keenly felt the beauties of poetry in every form; then why should artistic works recognized by the whole world as those of a genius, – the works of Shakespeare, – not only fail to please me, but be disagreeable to me? For a long time I could not believe in myself, and during fifty years, in order to test myself, I several times recommenced reading Shakespeare in every possible form, in Russian, in English, in German and in Schlegel's translation, as I was advised. Several times I read the dramas and the comedies and historical plays, and I invariably underwent the same feelings: repulsion, weariness, and bewilderment. At the present time, before writing this preface, being desirous once more to test myself, I have, as an old man of seventy-five, again read the whole of Shakespeare, including the historical plays, the "Henrys," "Troilus and Cressida," the "Tempest," "Cymbeline," and I have felt, with even greater force, the same feelings, – this time, however, not of bewilderment, but of firm, indubitable conviction that the unquestionable glory of a great genius which Shakespeare enjoys, and which compels writers of our time to imitate him and readers and spectators to discover in

¹ This essay owes its origin to Leo Tolstoy's desire to contribute a preface to the article he here mentions by Ernest Crosby, which latter follows in this volume. – (*Trans.*)

him non-existent merits, – thereby distorting their esthetic and ethical understanding, – is a great evil, as is every untruth.

Altho I know that the majority of people so firmly believe in the greatness of Shakespeare that in reading this judgment of mine they will not admit even the possibility of its justice, and will not give it the slightest attention, nevertheless I will endeavor, as well as I can, to show why I believe that Shakespeare can not be recognized either as a great genius, or even as an average author.

For illustration of my purpose I will take one of Shakespeare's most extolled dramas, "King Lear," in the enthusiastic praise of which, the majority of critics agree.

"The tragedy of Lear is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare," says Dr. Johnson. "There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed, which so much agitates our passions, and interests our curiosity."

"We wish that we could pass this play over and say nothing about it," says Hazlitt, "all that we can say must fall far short of the subject, or even of what we ourselves conceive of it. To attempt to give a description of the play itself, or of its effects upon the mind, is mere impertinence; yet we must say something. It is, then, the best of Shakespeare's plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest."

"If the originality of invention did not so much stamp almost every play of Shakespeare," says Hallam, "that to name one as the most original seems a disparagement to others, we might say that this great prerogative of genius, was exercised above all in 'Lear.' It diverges more from the model of regular tragedy than 'Macbeth,' or 'Othello,' and even more than 'Hamlet,' but the fable is better constructed than in the last of these and it displays full as much of the almost superhuman inspiration of the poet as the other two."

"'King Lear' may be recognized as the perfect model of the dramatic art of the whole world," says Shelley.

"I am not minded to say much of Shakespeare's Arthur," says Swinburne. "There are one or two figures in the world of his work of which there are no words that would be fit or good to say. Another of these is Cordelia. The place they have in our lives and thoughts is not one for talk. The niche set apart for them to inhabit in our secret hearts is not penetrable by the lights and noises of common day. There are chapels in the cathedrals of man's highest art, as in that of his inmost life, not made to be set open to the eyes and feet of the world. Love, and Death, and Memory, keep charge for us in silence of some beloved names. It is the crowning glory of genius, the final miracle and transcendent gift of poetry, that it can add to the number of these and engrave on the very heart of our remembrance fresh names and memories of its own creation."

"Lear is the occasion for Cordelia," says Victor Hugo. "Maternity of the daughter toward the father; profound subject; maternity venerable among all other maternities, so admirably rendered by the legend of that Roman girl, who, in the depths of a prison, nurses her old father. The young breast near the white beard! There is not a spectacle more holy. This filial breast is Cordelia. Once this figure dreamed of and found, Shakespeare created his drama... Shakespeare, carrying Cordelia in his thoughts, created that tragedy like a god who, having an aurora to put forward, makes a world expressly for it."

"In 'King Lear,' Shakespeare's vision sounded the abyss of horror to its very depths, and his spirit showed neither fear, nor giddiness, nor faintness, at the sight," says Brandes. "On the threshold of this work, a feeling of awe comes over one, as on the threshold of the Sistine Chapel, with its ceiling of frescoes by Michael Angelo, – only that the suffering here is far more intense, the wail wilder, and the harmonies of beauty more definitely shattered by the discords of despair."

Such are the judgments of the critics about this drama, and therefore I believe I am not wrong in selecting it as a type of Shakespeare's best.

As impartially as possible, I will endeavor to describe the contents of the drama, and then to show why it is not that acme of perfection it is represented to be by critics, but is something quite different.

II

The drama of "Lear" begins with a scene giving the conversation between two courtiers, Kent and Gloucester. Kent, pointing to a young man present, asks Gloucester whether that is not his son. Gloucester says that he has often blushed to acknowledge the young man as his son, but has now ceased doing so. Kent says he "can not conceive him." Then Gloucester in the presence of this son of his says: "The fellow's mother could, and grew round-wombed, and had a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed." "I have another, a legitimate son," continues Gloucester, "but altho this one came into the world before he was sent for, his mother was fair and there was good sport at his making, and therefore I acknowledge this one also."

Such is the introduction. Not to mention the coarseness of these words of Gloucester, they are, farther, out of place in the mouth of a person intended to represent a noble character. One can not agree with the opinion of some critics that these words are given to Gloucester in order to show the contempt for his illegitimacy from which Edmund suffers. Were this so, it would first have been unnecessary to make the father express the contempt felt by men in general, and, secondly, Edmund, in his monolog about the injustice of those who despise him for his birth, would have mentioned such words from his father. But this is not so, and therefore these words of Gloucester at the very beginning of the piece, were merely intended as a communication to the public – in a humorous form – of the fact that Gloucester has a legitimate son and an illegitimate one.

After this, trumpets are blown, and King Lear enters with his daughters and sons-in-law, and utters a speech to the effect that, owing to old age, he wishes to retire from the cares of business and divide his kingdom between his daughters. In order to know how much he should give to each daughter, he announces that to the one who says she loves him most he will give most. The eldest daughter, Goneril, says that words can not express the extent of her love, that she loves her father more than eyesight, space, and liberty, loves him so much that it "makes her breath poor." King Lear immediately allots his daughter on the map, her portion of fields, woods, rivers, and meadows, and asks the same question of the second daughter. The second daughter, Regan, says that her sister has correctly expressed her own feelings, only not strongly enough. She, Regan, loves her father so much that everything is abhorrent to her except his love. The king rewards this daughter, also, and then asks his youngest, the favorite, in whom, according to his expression, are "interest'd the vines of France and the milk of Burgundy," that is, whose hand is being claimed by the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy, – he asks Cordelia how she loves him. Cordelia, who personifies all the virtues, as the eldest two all the vices, says, quite out of place, as if on purpose to irritate her father, that altho she loves and honors him, and is grateful to him, yet if she marries, all her love will not belong to her father, but she will also love her husband.

Hearing these words, the King loses his temper, and curses this favorite daughter with the most dreadful and strange maledictions, saying, for instance, that he will henceforth love his daughter as little as he loves the man who devours his own children.

"The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour'd, pitied, and relieved.
As thou, my sometime daughter."

The courtier, Kent, defends Cordelia, and desiring to appease the King, rebukes him for his injustice, and says reasonable things about the evil of flattery. Lear, unmoved by Kent, banishes him under pain of death, and calling to him Cordelia's two suitors, the Duke of Burgundy and the

King of France, proposes to them in turn to take Cordelia without dowry. The Duke of Burgundy frankly says that without dowry he will not take Cordelia, but the King of France takes her without dowry and leads her away. After this, the elder sisters, there and then entering into conversation, prepare to injure their father who had endowed them. Thus ends the first scene.

Not to mention the pompous, characterless language of King Lear, the same in which all Shakespeare's Kings speak, the reader, or spectator, can not conceive that a King, however old and stupid he may be, could believe the words of the vicious daughters, with whom he had passed his whole life, and not believe his favorite daughter, but curse and banish her; and therefore the spectator, or reader, can not share the feelings of the persons participating in this unnatural scene.

The second scene opens with Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, soliloquizing on the injustice of men, who concede rights and respect to the legitimate son, but deprive the illegitimate son of them, and he determines to ruin Edgar, and to usurp his place. For this purpose, he forges a letter to himself as from Edgar, in which the latter expresses a desire to murder his father. Awaiting his father's approach, Edmund, as if against his will, shows him this letter, and the father immediately believes that his son Edgar, whom he tenderly loves, desires to kill him. The father goes away, Edgar enters and Edmund persuades him that his father for some reason desires to kill him. Edgar immediately believes this and flees from his parent.

The relations between Gloucester and his two sons, and the feelings of these characters are as unnatural as Lear's relation to his daughters, or even more so, and therefore it is still more difficult for the spectator to transport himself into the mental condition of Gloucester and his sons and sympathize with them, than it is to do so into that of Lear and his daughters.

In the fourth scene, the banished Kent, so disguised that Lear does not recognize him, presents himself to Lear, who is already staying with Goneril. Lear asks who he is, to which Kent answers, one doesn't know why, in a tone quite inappropriate to his position: "A very honest-hearted fellow and as poor as the King." – "If thou be as poor for a subject as he is for a King, thou art poor enough – How old art thou?" asks the King. "Not so young, Sir, to love a woman, *etc.*, nor so old to dote on her." To this the King says, "If I like thee no worse after dinner, I will not part from thee yet."

These speeches follow neither from Lear's position, nor his relation to Kent, but are put into the mouths of Lear and Kent, evidently because the author regards them as witty and amusing.

Goneril's steward appears, and behaves rudely to Lear, for which Kent knocks him down. The King, still not recognizing Kent, gives him money for this and takes him into his service. After this appears the fool, and thereupon begins a prolonged conversation between the fool and the King, utterly unsuited to the position and serving no purpose. Thus, for instance, the fool says, "Give me an egg and I'll give thee two crowns." The King asks, "What crowns shall they be?" – "Why," says the fool, "after I have cut the egg i' the middle, and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i' the middle, and gavest away both parts, thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt: thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one away. If I speak like myself in this, let him be whipp'd that first finds it so."

In this manner lengthy conversations go on calling forth in the spectator or reader that wearisome uneasiness which one experiences when listening to jokes which are not witty.

This conversation was interrupted by the approach of Goneril. She demands of her father that he should diminish his retinue; that he should be satisfied with fifty courtiers instead of a hundred. At this suggestion, Lear gets into a strange and unnatural rage, and asks:

"Doth any here know me? This is not Lear:
Does Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied. Ha! 'tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?"

And so forth.

While this goes on the fool does not cease to interpolate his humorless jokes. Goneril's husband then enters and wishes to appease Lear, but Lear curses Goneril, invoking for her either sterility or the birth of such an infant-monster as would return laughter and contempt for her motherly cares, and would thus show her all the horror and pain caused by a child's ingratitude.

These words which express a genuine feeling, might have been touching had they stood alone. But they are lost among long and high-flown speeches, which Lear keeps incessantly uttering quite inappropriately. He either invokes "blasts and fogs" upon the head of his daughter, or desires his curse to "pierce every sense about her," or else appealing to his own eyes, says that should they weep, he will pluck them out and "cast them with the waters that they lose to temper clay." And so on.

After this, Lear sends Kent, whom he still fails to recognize, to his other daughter, and notwithstanding the despair he has just manifested, he talks with the fool, and elicits his jokes. The jokes continue to be mirthless and besides creating an unpleasant feeling, similar to shame, the usual effect of unsuccessful witticisms, they are also so drawn out as to be positively dull. Thus the fool asks the King whether he can tell why one's nose stands in the middle of one's face? Lear says he can not. —

"Why, to keep one's eyes of either side 's nose, that what a man can not smell out, he may spy out."

"Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?"

"No."

"Nor I either; but I can tell why a snail has a house."

"Why?"

"Why, to put his head in; not to give it away to his daughters and leave his horns without a case."

"— Be my horses ready?"

"Thy asses are gone about 'em. The reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason."

"Because they are not eight?"

"Yes, indeed: thou would'st make a good fool."

And so on.

After this lengthy scene, a gentleman enters and announces that the horses are ready. The fool says:

"She that's a maid now, and laughs at my departure,
Shall not be a maid long, unless things be cut shorter."

The second part of the first scene of the second act begins by the villain Edmund persuading his brother, when their father enters, to pretend that they are fighting with their swords. Edgar consents, altho it is utterly incomprehensible why he should do so. The father finds them fighting. Edgar flies and Edmund scratches his arm to draw blood and persuades his father that Edgar was working charms for the purpose of killing his father and had desired Edmund to help him, but that he, Edmund, had refused and that then Edgar flew at him and wounded his arm. Gloucester believes everything, curses Edgar and transfers all the rights of the elder and legitimate son to the illegitimate Edmund. The Duke, hearing of this, also rewards Edmund.

In the second scene, in front of Gloucester's palace, Lear's new servant, Kent, still unrecognized by Lear, without any reason, begins to abuse Oswald, Goneril's steward, calling

him, – "A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; – the son and heir of a mongrel bitch." And so on. Then drawing his sword, he demands that Oswald should fight with him, saying that he will make a "sop o' the moonshine" of him, – words which no commentators can explain. When he is stopped, he continues to give vent to the strangest abuse, saying that a tailor made Oswald, as "a stone-cutter or a painter could not have made him so ill, tho they had been but two hours o' the trade!" He further says that, if only leave be given him, he will "tread this unbolted villain into mortar and daub the wall of a jakes with him."

Thus Kent, whom nobody recognizes, altho both the King and the Duke of Cornwall, as well as Gloucester who is present, ought to know him well, continues to brawl, in the character of Lear's new servant, until he is taken and put in the stocks.

The third scene takes place on a heath. Edgar, flying from the persecutions of his father, hides in a wood and tells the public what kind of lunatics exist there – beggars who go about naked, thrust wooden pricks and pins into their flesh, scream with wild voices and enforce charity, and says that he wishes to simulate such a lunatic in order to save himself from persecution. Having communicated this to the public, he retires.

The fourth scene is again before Gloucester's castle. Enter Lear and the fool. Lear sees Kent in the stocks, and, still not recognizing him, is inflamed with rage against those who dared so to insult his messenger, and calls for the Duke and Regan. The fool goes on with his jokes.

Lear with difficulty restrains his ire. Enter the Duke and Regan. Lear complains of Goneril but Regan justifies her sister. Lear curses Goneril, and, when Regan tells him he had better return to her sister, he is indignant and says: "Ask her forgiveness?" and falls down on his knees demonstrating how indecent it would be if he were abjectly to beg food and clothing as charity from his own daughter, and he curses Goneril with the strangest curses and asks who put his servant in the stocks. Before Regan can answer, Goneril arrives. Lear becomes yet more exasperated and again curses Goneril, but when he is told that it was the Duke himself who ordered the stocks, he does not say anything, because, at this moment, Regan tells him that she can not receive him now and that he had best return to Goneril, and that in a month's time she herself will receive him, with, however, not a hundred but fifty servants. Lear again curses Goneril and does not want to go to her, continuing to hope that Regan will accept him with the whole hundred servants. But Regan says she will receive him only with twenty-five and then Lear makes up his mind to go back to Goneril who admits fifty. But when Goneril says that even twenty-five are too many, Lear pours forth a long argument about the superfluous and the needful being relative and says that if man is not allowed more than he needs, he is not to be distinguished from a beast. Lear, or rather the actor who plays Lear's part, adds that there is no need for a lady's finery, which does not keep her warm. After this he flies into a mad fury and says that to take vengeance on his daughters he will do something dreadful but that he will not weep, and so he departs. A storm begins.

Such is the second act, full of unnatural events, and yet more unnatural speeches, not flowing from the position of the characters, – and finishing with a scene between Lear and his daughters which might have been powerful if it had not been permeated with the most absurdly foolish, unnatural speeches – which, moreover, have no relation to the subject, – put into the mouth of Lear. Lear's vacillations between pride, anger, and the hope of his daughters' giving in, would be exceedingly touching if it were not spoilt by the verbose absurdities to which he gives vent, about being ready to divorce himself from Regan's dead mother, should Regan not be glad to receive him, – or about his calling down "fen suck'd frogs" which he invokes, upon the head of his daughter, or about the heavens being obliged to patronize old people because they themselves are old.

The third act begins with thunder, lightning, a storm of some special kind such as, according to the words of the characters in the piece, had never before taken place. On the heath, a gentleman tells Kent that Lear, banished by his daughters from their homes, is running about the heath alone,

tearing his hair and throwing it to the wind, and that none but the fool is with him. In return Kent tells the gentleman that the dukes have quarrelled, and that the French army has landed at Dover, and, having communicated this intelligence, he dispatches the gentleman to Dover to meet Cordelia.

The second scene of the third act also takes place on the heath, but in another part of it. Lear walks about the heath and says words which are meant to express his despair: he desires that the winds should blow so hard that they should crack their cheeks and that the rain should flood everything, that lightning should singe his white head, and the thunder flatten the world and destroy all germens "that make ungrateful man!" The fool keeps uttering still more senseless words. Enter Kent. Lear says that for some reason during this storm all criminals shall be found out and convicted. Kent, still unrecognized by Lear, endeavors to persuade him to take refuge in a hovel. At this point the fool pronounces a prophecy in no wise related to the situation and they all depart.

The third scene is again transferred to Gloucester's castle. Gloucester tells Edmund that the French King has already landed with his troops, and intends to help Lear. Learning this, Edmund decides to accuse his father of treason in order that he may get his heritage.

The fourth scene is again on the heath in front of the hovel. Kent invites Lear into the hovel, but Lear answers that he has no reason to shelter himself from the tempest, that he does not feel it, having a tempest in his mind, called forth by the ingratitude of his daughters, which extinguishes all else. This true feeling, expressed in simple words, might elicit sympathy, but amidst the incessant, pompous raving it escapes one and loses its significance.

The hovel into which Lear is led, turns out to be the same which Edgar has entered, disguised as a madman, *i. e.*, naked. Edgar comes out of the hovel, and, altho all have known him, no one recognizes him, – as no one recognizes Kent, – and Edgar, Lear, and the fool begin to say senseless things which continue with interruptions for many pages. In the middle of this scene, enter Gloucester, who also does not recognize either Kent or his son Edgar, and tells them how his son Edgar wanted to kill him.

This scene is again cut short by another in Gloucester's castle, during which Edmund betrays his father and the Duke promises to avenge himself on Gloucester. Then the scene shifts back to Lear. Kent, Edgar, Gloucester, Lear, and the fool are at a farm and talking. Edgar says: "Frateretto calls me, and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness..." The fool says: "Tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman?" Lear, having lost his mind, says that the madman is a king. The fool says no, the madman is the yeoman who has allowed his son to become a gentleman. Lear screams: "To have a thousand with red burning spirits. Come hissing in upon 'em," – while Edgar shrieks that the foul fiend bites his back. At this the fool remarks that one can not believe "in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath." Then Lear imagines he is judging his daughters. "Sit thou here, most learned justicer," says he, addressing the naked Edgar; "Thou, sapient sir, sit here. Now, you she foxes." To this Edgar says: "Look where he stands and glares! Wantest thou eyes at trial, madam?" "Come o'er the bourn, Bessy, to me, – " while the fool sings:

"Her boat hath a leak
And she must not speak
Why she dares not come over to thee."

Edgar goes on in his own strain. Kent suggests that Lear should lie down, but Lear continues his imaginary trial: "Bring in their evidence," he cries. "Thou robed man of justice, take thy place," he says to Edgar, "and thou" (to the fool) "his yoke-fellow of equity, bench by his side. You are o' the commission, sit you too," addressing Kent.

"Purr, the cat is gray," shouts Edgar.

"Arraign her first, 'tis Goneril," cries Lear. "I here take my oath before this honorable assembly, she kicked the poor king, her father."

"Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?" says the fool, addressing the seat.

"And here's another," cries Lear. "Stop her there! arms, arms, sword, fire! Corruption in the place! False justice, why hast thou let her 'scape?"

This raving terminates by Lear falling asleep and Gloucester persuading Kent, still without recognizing him, to carry Lear to Dover, and Kent and the fool carry off the King.

The scene is transferred to Gloucester's castle. Gloucester himself is about to be accused of treason. He is brought forward and bound. The Duke of Cornwall plucks out one of his eyes and sets his foot on it. Regan says, "One side will mock another; the other too." The Duke wishes to pluck the other out also, but some servant, for some reason, suddenly takes Gloucester's part and wounds the Duke. Regan kills the servant, who, dying, says to Gloucester that he has "one eye left to see some mischief on him." The Duke says, "Lest it see more, prevent it," and he tears out Gloucester's other eye and throws it on the ground. Here Regan says that it was Edmund who betrayed his father and then Gloucester immediately understands that he has been deceived and that Edgar did not wish to kill him.

Thus ends the third act.

The fourth act is again on the heath. Edgar, still attired as a lunatic, soliloquizes in stilted terms about the instability of fortune and the advantages of a humble lot. Then there comes to him somehow into the very place on the heath where he is, his father, the blinded Gloucester, led by an old man. In that characteristic Shakespearean language, – the chief peculiarity of which is that the thoughts are bred either by the consonance or the contrasts of words, – Gloucester also speaks about the instability of fortune. He tells the old man who leads him to leave him, but the old man points out to him that he can not *see* his way. Gloucester says he has no way and therefore does not require *eyes*. And he argues about his having stumbled when he *saw*, and about defects often proving commodities. "Ah! dear son Edgar," he adds, "might I but live to *see* thee in my touch, I'd say I had *eyes* again." Edgar naked, and in the character of a lunatic, hearing this, still does not disclose himself to his father. He takes the place of the aged guide and talks with his father, who does not recognize his voice, but regards him as a wandering madman. Gloucester avails himself of the opportunity to deliver himself of a witticism: "'Tis the times' plague when madmen lead the blind," and he insists on dismissing the old man, obviously not from motives which might be natural to Gloucester at that moment, but merely in order, when left alone with Edgar, to enact the later scene of the imaginary leaping from the cliff.

Notwithstanding Edgar has just seen his blinded father, and has learnt that his father repents of having banished him, he puts in utterly unnecessary interjections which Shakespeare might know, having read them in Haronet's book, but which Edgar had no means of becoming acquainted with, and above all, which it was quite unnatural for him to repeat in his present position. He says, "Five friends have been in poor Tom at once: of lust, as Obidient; Hobbididance, prince of dumbness; Mahu, of stealing; Modo, of murder; Flibbertigibbet, of mopping and mowing; who since possesses chambermaids and waiting women."

Hearing these words, Gloucester makes a present of his purse to Edgar, saying:

"That I am so wretched
Makes thee the happier; heavens, deal so still,
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he doth not feel, feel your power quickly.
So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough."

Having pronounced these strange words, the blind Gloucester requests Edgar to lead him to a certain cliff overhanging the sea, and they depart.

The second scene of the fourth act takes place before the Duke of Albany's palace. Goneril is not only cruel, but also depraved. She despises her husband and discloses her love to the villain Edmund, who has inherited the title of his father Gloucester. Edmund leaves, and a conversation takes place between Goneril and her husband. The Duke of Albany, the only figure with human feelings, who had already previously been dissatisfied with his wife's treatment of her father, now resolutely takes Lear's side, but expresses his emotion in such words as to shake one's confidence in his feeling. He says that a bear would lick Lear's reverence, that if the heavens do not send their visible spirits to tame these vile offenses, humanity must prey on itself like monsters, etc.

Goneril does not listen to him, and then he begins to abuse her:

"See thyself, devil!
Proper deformity seems not in the fiend
So horrid as in woman."

"O vain fool," says Goneril. "Thou changed and self-cover'd thing, for shame," continues the Duke:

"Be-monster not thy feature. Were't my fitness
To let these hands obey my blood,
They are apt enough to dislocate and tear
Thy flesh and bones; howe'er thou art a fiend,
A woman's shape doth shield thee."

After this a messenger enters, and announces that the Duke of Cornwall, wounded by his servant whilst plucking out Gloucester's eyes, had died. Goneril is glad but already anticipates with fear that Regan, now a widow, will deprive her of Edmund. Here the second scene ends.

The third scene of the fourth act represents the French camp. From a conversation between Kent and a gentleman, the reader or spectator learns that the King of France is not in the camp and that Cordelia has received a letter from Kent and is greatly grieved by what she has learned about her father. The gentleman says that her face reminded one of sunshine and rain.

"Her smiles and tears
Were like a better day; those happy smiles
That play'd on her ripe lip seem'd not to know
What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence,
As pearls from diamonds dropp'd."

And so forth.

The gentleman says that Cordelia desires to see her father, but Kent says that Lear is ashamed of seeing this daughter whom he has treated so unkindly.

In the fourth scene, Cordelia, talking with a physician, tells him that Lear has been seen, that he is quite mad, wearing on his head a wreath of various weeds, that he is roaming about and that she has sent soldiers in search of him, adding that she desires all secret remedies to spring with her tears, and the like.

She is informed that the forces of the Dukes are approaching, but she is concerned only about her father and departs.

The fifth scene of the fourth act lies in Gloucester's castle. Regan is talking with Oswald, Goneril's steward, who is carrying a letter from Goneril to Edmund, and she announces to him that she also loves Edmund and that, being a widow, it is better for her to marry him than for Goneril to do so, and she begs him to persuade her sister of this. Further she tells him that it was very unreasonable to blind Gloucester and yet leave him alive, and therefore advises Oswald, should he meet Gloucester, to kill him, promising him a great reward if he does this.

In the sixth scene, Gloucester again appears with his still unrecognized son Edgar, who (now in the guise of a peasant) pretends to lead his father to the cliff. Gloucester is walking along on level land but Edgar persuades him that they are with difficulty ascending a steep hill. Gloucester believes this. Edgar tells his father that the noise of the sea is heard; Gloucester believes this also. Edgar stops on a level place and persuades his father that he has ascended the cliff and that in front of him lies a dreadful abyss, and leaves him alone. Gloucester, addressing the gods, says that he shakes off his affliction as he can bear it no longer, and that he does not condemn them – the gods. Having said this, he leaps on the level ground and falls, imagining that he has jumped off the cliff. On this occasion, Edgar, soliloquizing, gives vent to a yet more entangled utterance:

"I know not how conceit may rob
The treasury of life when life itself
Yields to the theft; had he been where he thought,
By this had thought been past."

He approaches Gloucester, in the character of yet a different person, and expressing astonishment at the latter not being hurt by his fall from such a dreadful height. Gloucester believes that he has fallen and prepares to die, but he feels that he is alive and begins to doubt that he has fallen from such a height. Then Edgar persuades him that he has indeed jumped from the dreadful height and tells him that the individual who had been with him at the top was the devil, as he had eyes like two full moons and a thousand noses and wavy horns. Gloucester believes this, and is persuaded that his despair was the work of the devil, and therefore decides that he will henceforth despair no more, but will quietly await death. Hereupon enters Lear, for some reason covered with wild-flowers. He has lost his senses and says things wilder than before. He speaks about coining, about the moon, gives some one a yard – then he cries that he sees a mouse, which he wishes to entice by a piece of cheese. Then he suddenly demands the password from Edgar, and Edgar immediately answers him with the words "Sweet marjoram." Lear says, "Pass," and the blind Gloucester, who has not recognized either his son or Kent, recognizes the King's voice.

Then the King, after his disconnected utterances, suddenly begins to speak ironically about flatterers, who agreed to all he said, "Ay, and no, too, was no good divinity," but, when he got into a storm without shelter, he saw all this was not true; and then goes on to say that as all creation addicts itself to adultery, and Gloucester's bastard son had treated his father more kindly than his daughters had treated him (altho Lear, according to the development of the drama, could not know how Edmund had treated Gloucester), therefore, let dissoluteness prosper, the more so as, being a King, he needs soldiers. He here addresses an imaginary hypocritically virtuous lady who acts the prude, whereas and, saying this, Lear screams and spits from horror. This monolog is evidently meant to be addressed by the actor to the audience, and probably produces an effect on the stage, but it is utterly uncalled for in the mouth of Lear, equally with his words: "It smells of mortality," uttered while wiping his hand, as Gloucester expresses a desire to kiss it. Then Gloucester's blindness is referred to, which gives occasion for a play of words on *eyes*, about blind Cupid, at which Lear says to Gloucester, "No *eyes* in your head, nor no money in your *purse*? Your *eyes* are in a *heavy* case, your *purse* in a *light*." Then Lear declaims a monolog on the unfairness of legal judgment, which is quite out of place in the mouth of the insane Lear. After this, enter a gentleman with

attendants sent by Cordelia to fetch her father. Lear continues to act as a madman and runs away. The gentleman sent to fetch Lear, does not run after him, but lengthily describes to Edgar the position of the French and British armies. Oswald enters, and seeing Gloucester, and desiring to receive the reward promised by Regan, attacks him, but Edgar with his club kills Oswald, who, in dying, transmits to his murderer, Edgar, Goneril's letter to Edmund, the delivery of which would insure reward. In this letter Goneril promises to kill her husband and marry Edmund. Edgar drags out Oswald's body by the legs and then returns and leads his father away.

"The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't
With a more riotous appetite.
All women inherit the gods only to the girdle
Beneath is all the fiend's" —

The seventh scene of the fourth act takes place in a tent in the French camp. Lear is asleep on a bed. Enter Cordelia and Kent, still in disguise. Lear is awakened by the music, and, seeing Cordelia, does not believe she is a living being, thinks she is an apparition, does not believe that he himself is alive. Cordelia assures him that she is his daughter, and begs him to bless her. He falls on his knees before her, begs her pardon, acknowledges that he is as old and foolish, says he is ready to take poison, which he thinks she has probably prepared for him, as he is persuaded she must hate him. ("For your sisters," he says, "have done me wrong: you have some cause, they have not.") Then he gradually comes to his senses and ceases to rave. His daughter suggests that he should take a walk. He consents and says: "You must bear with me. Pray you now forget and forgive: I am old and foolish." They depart. The gentleman and Kent, remaining on the scene, hold a conversation which explains to the spectator that Edmund is at the head of the troops and that a battle must soon begin between Lear's defenders and his enemies. So the fourth act closes.

In this fourth act, the scene between Lear and his daughter might have been touching if it had not been preceded in the course of the earlier acts by the tediously drawn out, monotonous ravings of Lear, and if, moreover, this expression of his feelings constituted the last scene. But the scene is not the last.

In the fifth act, the former coldly pompous, artificial ravings of Lear go on again, destroying the impression which the previous scene might have produced.

The first scene of the fifth act at first represents Edmund and Regan; the latter is jealous of her sister and makes an offer. Then come Goneril, her husband, and some soldiers. The Duke of Albany, altho pitying Lear, regards it as his duty to fight with the French who have invaded his country, and so he prepares for battle.

Then Edgar enters, still disguised, and hands to the Duke of Albany the letter he had received from Goneril's dying steward, and tells him if he gains the victory to sound the trumpet, saying that he can produce a champion who will confirm the contents of the letter.

In the second scene, Edgar enters leading his father Gloucester, seats him by a tree, and goes away himself. The noise of battle is heard, Edgar runs back and says that the battle is lost and Lear and Cordelia are prisoners. Gloucester again falls into despair. Edgar, still without disclosing himself to his father, counsels endurance, and Gloucester immediately agrees with him.

The third scene opens with a triumphal progress of the victor Edmund. Lear and Cordelia are prisoners. Lear, altho no longer insane, continues to utter the same senseless, inappropriate words, as, for example, that in prison he will sing with Cordelia, she will ask his blessing, and he will kneel down (this process of kneeling down is repeated three times) and will ask her forgiveness. And he further says that, while they are living in prison, they will wear out "packs and sects of great ones"; that he and Cordelia are sacrifices upon which the gods will throw incense, and that

he that parts them "shall bring a brand from heaven and fire them like foxes; that he will not weep, and that the plague shall sooner devour his eyes, flesh and fell, than they shall make them weep."

Edmund orders Lear and his daughter to be led away to prison, and, having called the officer to do this, says he requires another duty and asks him whether he'll do it? The captain says he can not draw a cart nor eat dried oats, but if it be men's work he can do it. Enter the Duke of Albany, Goneril, and Regan. The Duke of Albany wishes to champion Lear, but Edmund does not allow it. The daughters take part in the dialog and begin to abuse each other, being jealous of Edmund. Here everything becomes so confused that it is difficult to follow the action. The Duke of Albany wishes to arrest Edmund, and tells Regan that Edmund has long ago entered into guilty relations with his wife, and that, therefore, Regan must give up her claims on Edmund, and if she wishes to marry, should marry him, the Duke of Albany.

Having said this, the Duke of Albany calls Edmund, orders the trumpet to be sounded, saying that, if no one appears, he will fight him himself.

Here Regan, whom Goneril has evidently poisoned, falls deadly sick. Trumpets are sounded and Edgar enters with a vizar concealing his face, and, without giving his name, challenges Edmund. Edgar abuses Edmund; Edmund throws all the abuses back on Edgar's head. They fight and Edmund falls. Goneril is in despair. The Duke of Albany shows Goneril her letter. Goneril departs.

The dying Edmund discovers that his opponent was his brother. Edgar raises his vizar and pronounces a moral lesson to the effect that, having begotten his illegitimate son Edmund, the father has paid for it with his eyesight. After this Edgar tells the Duke of Albany his adventures and how he has only just now, before entering on the recent combat, disclosed everything to his father, and the father could not bear it and died from emotion. Edmund is not yet dead, and wants to know all that has taken place.

Then Edgar relates that, while he was sitting over his father's body, a man came and closely embraced him, and, shouting as loudly as if he wished to burst heaven, threw himself on the body of Edgar's father, and told the most piteous tale about Lear and himself, and that while relating this the strings of life began to crack, but at this moment the trumpet sounded twice and Edgar left him "tranced" – and this was Kent.

Edgar has hardly finished this narrative when a gentleman rushes in with a bloody knife, shouting "Help!" In answer to the question, "Who is killed?" the gentleman says that Goneril has been killed, having poisoned her sister, she has confessed it.

Enters Kent, and at this moment the corpses of Goneril and Regan are brought in. Edmund here says that the sisters evidently loved him, as one has poisoned the other for his sake, and then slain herself. At the same time he confesses that he had given orders to kill Lear and to hang Cordelia in prison, and pretend that she had taken her own life; but now he wishes to prevent these deeds, and having said this he dies, and is carried away.

After this enters Lear with the dead Cordelia in his arms, altho he is more than eighty years old and ill. Again begins Lear's awful ravings, at which one feels ashamed as at unsuccessful jokes. Lear demands that all should howl, and, alternately, believes that Cordelia is dead and that she is alive.

"Had I your tongues and eyes," he says "I'd use them so that heaven's vault should crack."

Then he says that he killed the slave who hanged Cordelia. Next he says that his eyes see badly, but at the same time he recognizes Kent whom all along he had not recognized.

The Duke of Albany says that he will resign during the life of Lear and that he will reward Edgar and Kent and all who have been faithful to him. At this moment the news is brought that Edmund is dead, and Lear, continuing his ravings, begs that they will undo one of his buttons – the same request which he had made when roaming about the heath. He expresses his thanks for this, tells everyone to look at something, and thereupon dies.

In conclusion, the Duke of Albany, having survived the others, says:

"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."

All depart to the music of a dead march. Thus ends the fifth act and the drama.

III

Such is this celebrated drama. However absurd it may appear in my rendering (which I have endeavored to make as impartial as possible), I may confidently say that in the original it is yet more absurd. For any man of our time – if he were not under the hypnotic suggestion that this drama is the height of perfection – it would be enough to read it to its end (were he to have sufficient patience for this) to be convinced that far from being the height of perfection, it is a very bad, carelessly composed production, which, if it could have been of interest to a certain public at a certain time, can not evoke among us anything but aversion and weariness. Every reader of our time, who is free from the influence of suggestion, will also receive exactly the same impression from all the other extolled dramas of Shakespeare, not to mention the senseless, dramatized tales, "Pericles," "Twelfth Night," "The Tempest," "Cymbeline," "Troilus and Cressida."

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