THE LACK OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE is treated tragically in King Lear, as it is in Othello. The theme is, of course, the spring for most of Shakespeare's plays. Even the comic plots generally evolve around men's failures to know themselves and their conditions; but they deal with this subject more lightly, and the flaw is corrected in time. In the plays of Shakespeare's mannerist phase, the problem of man's understanding of himself is associated with that of man's insecurity, and it is treated in the larger frame of the difficulty of understanding the truth in general. This context is also present in the baroque tragedies, but the lack of self-knowledge is here intensified and shown to have gigantic consequences because of the tremendous will and passion of the heroes. Hamlet is puzzled, thwarted, and disillusioned as he seeks for truth in an environment that hides and obscures it; Othello, in a situation more open to rational solution, accepts an absolute falsehood as truth, a falsehood that becomes the guiding force of his whole being. Macbeth equally resolutely excludes the possibility of facing the imperative of moral action and goes on to violate it in one senseless murder after another. But Lear's lack of self-knowledge even by comparison with Othello's and Macbeth's is monumental and its consequences are devastating. With no outside persuader or extraordinary temptation to blind and seduce him, the king foolishly accepts his false daughters as true and his true daughter as false, and, as a result, he is subjected to a gigantic suffering of body and soul; he disintegrates while the world that he once ruled trembles and shakes.

The first scene of King Lear makes the strongest statement about lack of self-knowledge anywhere in Shakespeare, so strong a statement that it comes close to being psychologically improbable. A
man who arranges a contest of love protestations among his daughters and, as a result, disinherits his favorite at the spur of the moment may be thought, from the point of view of strict realism, to be too foolish to be a tragic hero; and, indeed, the great realist Tolstoy preferred the somewhat less irrational Leir of Shakespeare’s source play to him. Shakespeare disdained to give his king even the kind of feeble motivation he has in the old play, where the rejection of the favorite daughter is somewhat prepared for in the six scenes that precede it. Here the idea of dividing the kingdom was not the old king’s but that of a trusted counselor, reluctantly agreed to by Leir because it gave him an opportunity to provide dowries for his daughters to make them marriageable. The contest had the special purpose of tricking his favorite Cordelia into marriage; she had so far refused to marry, wanting to do so only if she could love. Confidently expecting Cordelia to outdo her sisters in affirming her devotion, Leir plans to take the opportunity to elicit from her the promise to marry the Duke of Brittany as a pledge of her love. His disappointment, a mild passion compared to Lear’s terrifying wrath, is rooted in a father’s frustration over his failure to provide for his daughter.

By contrast, Shakespeare has his king commit a well-nigh inexplicable blunder, enhanced by a public display of gigantic wrath. The love declarations, a private matter in the old play, become a ceremonious rite of kingship arranged for no better purpose than the satisfaction of Lear’s ego after the fait accompli of the division of his kingdom. His outbreak of anger is punctuated by the violent oath with which he disclaims propinquity and paternal care of Cordelia:

... by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecat and the night;
By all the operation of the orbs
From whom we do exist and cease to be.

(I.i.108-11)

Lear’s folly is underlined by his parallel reaction to Kent’s courageous warning to “see better.” When Lear swears “by Apollo,” the asseveration must have struck many in Shakespeare’s audience as ironic because the ancients had thought that nosce teipsum emanated from this very Apollo. As Kent says, Lear swears his gods in vain. The truth, which Lear says shall be Cordelia’s dowry, is irreconcil-
able with the demands of his ego. His lack of self-knowledge is monumental.

The setting of the first scene is a ritual, ceremonious and splendid; but the public show is punctured by elemental passions. The moral and emotional coloring is heightened above realism. Goneril and Regan protest their loves in hyperbolically hypocritical ways; Cordelia, confessing her love for her father in asides, is uncompromisingly forthright in her insistence that she can say nothing to compete with her sisters; Kent minces no words when he calls Lear "mad" and "old man." Will impacts on will, and the clashing forces—evil and good, treachery and loyalty, self-seeking and altruism, hate and love—are irreconcilable. Between these stands Lear, as extreme in his passion as is Cordelia in her low-voiced patience. He is an elementary human force, a creature of a distant and pagan past; when he casts Cordelia from his heart as if she were a "barbarous Scythian," he characterizes himself as barbaric, primitively irrational in his hatred. But this hatred betrays an equally elemental love from which it springs, an unreasonable, egotistic love that demands what it has no right to ask. We cannot but accept Regan's judgment: he has ever but slenderly known himself.

Not enough is one such demonstration of folly; the second scene presents a similarly gigantic blunder (although put into a somewhat lower key because the scene is in prose, except for Edmund's soliloquy). On the basis of the forged letter given to him by his bastard son, the Earl of Gloucester concludes that his legitimate son is a villain who seeks to conspire against him to bring about his death. Edmund pushes the unbelievability of the situation to the degree that he alleges this letter was thrown into his window in what, from a realistic point of view, must appear to be an unnecessary and inexplicable conspiratorial furtiveness. But Gloucester accepts this monstrous lie as truth; he trusts where he should suspect and suspects where he should trust. Even on Edgar, who enters almost immediately after Gloucester leaves, the villainous practices of Edmund ride easily. The tragedy of Gloucester, which will vie in intensity with Lear's, has begun.

As Lear sharply contrasts good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, patience and passion, so it groups the major characters according to their capacity or incapacity to reevaluate, to suffer, and to learn. Obviously, the irremediably evil ones, Regan, Goneril, Edmund, and Cornwall, do not learn. They "understand them-
selves" in the sense in which Iago does; they cannot comprehend that feelings and thoughts beyond egotistic desires have beauty and value. Yet, Shakespeare was never simple and schematic, and he gave at least Edmund a last-minute change of mind and perhaps of heart when, against his "nature," he tries to save Cordelia, whose death he has ordered. Yet even this seeming inconsistency helps to point up the destructive consequences of learning nothing or learning too little and too late: Cordelia is already dead. Contrasted with the wicked who refuse to learn are those characters who are sent to school: Lear, Edgar, Gloucester, and Albany. Each of them can be said to fail a test: Lear and Gloucester that of recognizing truth and falsehood, loyalty and treachery; Edgar that of courage and cowardice; Albany that of decision and indecision. Yet each of them also progresses beyond the lowest point, most spectacularly Edgar, who becomes a teacher of patience to his father and, in the end, the prosecutor and judge of the wicked. Two characters need not learn since they already possess truth and goodness, the old Kent and the young Cordelia. They represent virtue by what they are.

The learning processes, which include partial discoveries, hesitations, reversals, and (in the case of Edgar) full achievement, take on a cosmic dimension through the characters' pagan theologies. This is a subject which has been fully explored in William Elton's pains-taking study, but we need to examine its bearing on the theme of self-knowledge. Incontrovertibly, Lear is a paganized version of the same story to which the old Leir had given a pious Christian coloring. Jupiter, Apollo, Hecate, and Nature are invoked, but not the Christian God. As the characters, in agony and despair, in horror and awe, in anger and grief, and (rarely) in hope and joy, view themselves and others, they express their reactions by addressing the gods, invoking, questioning, rejecting, and accepting them. Thus the theologies give the characters a metaphysical extension and help to place them into psychological and philosophical categories.

But I do not think that the views the characters express about the gods detract attention from the human predicament the play depicts; they do not do so for us, and neither, I think, would they have done so for the Christians (and these, from lukewarm to orthodox, surely constituted the overwhelming majority) of Shakespeare's audience. I shall argue that—paradoxical as it may sound—the pagan climate was likely to have increased their interest in the theme of self-knowledge. In order to understand the implications of a strongly pagan treat-
ment of a story for the theme of self-knowledge in Shakespeare's time, one should realize that the theologians, regardless of their attitude toward possible salvation for pagans, found meritorious whatever moral excellence these possessed; in fact, they found it more meritorious than the virtue of Christians, who had the guidance of the true faith. And though pagans could not know the ultimate goodness, that is, God, they could understand the springs of virtue in the human soul. Deprived of the spiritual light as they were, they were examples of how far men may go by the light of reason alone in practicing virtue. If they demonstrated self-knowledge, they could serve as exemplars for Christians, whose faith provided them with much greater incentive. Thus, the theologian Thomas Rogers explained that he had illustrated his *Anatomy of the Mind* "with many examples of heathen men, to the bettering, I hope, of dissembling Christians, which—if not by wholesome sermons of godly men, yet by the notable example of others destitute of those gifts and graces which we are adorned with—may know themselves, be ashamed of their ungratefulness, embrace virtue, and increase in godliness." 2

Thus the pagan frame of a story could serve to give *nosce teipsum* precedence over *nosce Deum*, as I think does Lear. It is the merit of Professor Elton's study to have shown that Lear is not a play about purification leading toward salvation in a benevolent world order, as it has often been interpreted, and to have demonstrated the characters' complex relationships to the gods as well as the analogies these relationships suggest to Christian conceptions of God. But the play is not an examination of pagan religion, or an examination of religious skepticism, or an evocation of the horror of existential nothingness, although it does contain such elements or keeps them at the edges of the characters' experiences. Neither, of course, is Lear a sermon, although it does contain much homiletic material. And I shall not claim that it is a program for the achievement of self-knowledge; but I shall argue that it draws on such programs and that they are a major constituent element in the tragic vision imprinted on the action and the thought.

I should like to go a step further and say that the program of self-knowledge inherent in this tragic vision is humanistic in the two major, and not always compatible, senses in which the word is used for Shakespeare's period. The program is humanistic in the sense of this study inasmuch as it contains values championed by the Christian humanists; but it is also humanistic in the sense that
the way to self-knowledge is not illuminated by a theologically con­ceived universe that cooperates in man's plan. The Deus absconditus who, according to Mr. Elton, is enthroned over Lear's England, does not reveal his design. Some time before Lear, as we have noted, Shakespeare had dissociated the search for self-knowledge from the purposes of the universe and the dispositions of heaven. But Lear, like other plays of Shakespeare, does measure men, not with a divine measurement but with one obtained by a sympathetic and yet firm view of humanity. Much of this measuring is done by the way the characters are compared and contrasted with one another. Man, in Lear, is as he values himself and others and is valued by them.

In Lear, more than elsewhere, the measuring and valuing proceeds by way of paradoxes. The most sympathetic characters often take positions that contrast with common opinion, and they make us take their perspective. The action itself is constructed on the pattern of a huge paradox that tests the characters by turning them into the opposites of what they were or appeared to be at first. A powerful king, whose every word is a command, becomes a despised old man subjected to the inclemencies of the weather. From the center of his kingdom, he is thrust to its periphery; from a demigod, he plunges to being hardly more than a naked animal. Analogous paradoxical transformations, arising from Lear's and Gloucester's follies, are undergone by others. The two daughters whom Lear has enriched turn against him in boundless cruelty, and the one he has deprived and rejected becomes his last joy. Cordelia, at first Lear's most-loved daughter, then his most hated, is, in his deprivation, his consoler and temporary healer. Kent, the king's favorite nobleman, is made into an outlaw; then, in disguise, he becomes the faithful companion of the king who outlawed him. Gloucester, who like Lear is part-agent of his downfall, descends from a mighty duke to a blind old man, pursued by the bastard son whom he has made his heir, but saved and guided by the legitimate son whom he has disinherited. Edmund, the treacherous bastard, becomes "the legitimate," and, at least briefly, Earl of Gloucester. Edgar, the true and loyal son, finds himself a man without a name, a fugitive who masquerades as a crazed beggar. Yet when all seems lost, he turns into an executor of justice who, although he cannot prevent the death of innocents, exposes the evil-doers and brings about their punishment. This outcast of society, Edgar, becomes in the end the ruler of England.

These outward paradoxes are associated with, and accompanied
King Lear: Valuing the Self

by, inner ones. To these even critics who deny that the physical sufferings of Lear and Gloucester are accompanied by, or bring about, ethical or religious purification react in some fashion. Although Swinburne wanted to have nothing to do with finding atonement, reconciliation, requital, redemption, amends, equity, explanation, pity, and mercy in Lear, he saw its pessimism as carrying a paradoxical message: "Nature herself, we might say, is revealed—and revealed as unnatural."

L. L. Schucking, who wished to see Lear as a play of the stage only and thought the king attains few insights in madness, yet found him a paradox: his weaknesses are complements of his strength; what makes him so majestic and powerful, that is, his consciousness of authority and greatness, are the main elements in the rigidity that brings about his downfall through wrath.

Swinburne responded to the paradoxical uses of "nature" in the play, and other critics, notably Robert Heilman, have uncovered similar language and image clusters that force statements in terms of thematic paradoxes. As Heilman has shown massively, the method of underlining meaning by symbols and images embraces the play; each of these is a restatement of the central theme on a reduced scale—a restatement that never merely repeats, but amplifies, enriches, supports, and gives a new perspective to the central theme. Thus the paradoxes of Lear go beyond the Renaissance concern with rhetorical devices; they are not merely verbal and formal like the sophistical wit of a Berowne in Love's Labor's Lost or the sentential warnings of a Lucrece to Tarquin. The paradoxes of Lear enter into the plot structure, the character delineation, the thematic strands, the fiber of thought. They are paradoxes of significance, intrinsic to a dramatic and moral strategy that negates in order to affirm, plunges Lear into madness to give him a sense of the human condition, deprives Gloucester of sight to make him see feelingly, causes fools to speak more wisely than the sane and intellectually keen, and strips those that wear gorgeous clothes more revealingly naked than those that have nothing but blankets to hide their skins. These thematic paradoxes turn opinion upside-down, not merely in order to prove it wrong, but also to make us evaluate the characters' actions against a higher truth and wisdom. In this respect, the paradoxes of Lear resemble the technique of baroque artists who created a spatial perspective by taking the viewers' eyes backward and forward from foreground to background and from background to foreground and
who thus achieved "first negation, then strong affirmation, which gives a special illusion of release into 'distance' and 'infinity.'" 8

In creating this perspective, which combines a most painful tragic experience with a profound ethical and metaphysical suggestiveness, Shakespeare drew on a tradition of Renaissance moral paradoxes, which in their Christian-pagan syncretism suited the particular intellectual and spiritual atmosphere of the play. The general indebtedness of Lear to this convention has been well recognized, and Professor Colie has sketched engagingly the paradoxical thought of the play in the context of her work on the Renaissance paradoxical tradition; 7 but in this study we shall do well to reexamine briefly the general sources of Shakespeare's patterns in order to extract the raw materials they rendered to him for the design of his tragedy.

Both the classical and the Christian traditions of self-knowledge were ingrained with paradoxes. Renaissance prescriptions of nosce teipsum generally pointed to Socrates's modest interpretation of the Delphic oracle's pronouncement that he was the wisest of men: he was aware of his own ignorance. And man in general was depicted in Renaissance psychology as a paradox of body and soul, of animal and spirit, as simultaneously the weakest and most conceited being, the most glorious and most abject of earthly creatures. His physical and psychic organisms were composed of antithetical qualities: hot against cold, moist against dry in his humoral constitution; animal passion against angelic reason in his soul; speculative understanding against angelic reason in his mind. He needed to realize that the stars influenced in some way his condition and action, but that his free will made him responsible for his actions. The humanistic school exercises acquainted all educated men with the Stoic paradoxes of the slavery of the supposedly free man and the freedom of the apparently enchained. And educated and uneducated alike were nourished with the biblical, particularly Pauline, paradoxes of the value of the goods of the faith as compared with the riches of the world, of the blindness of those that think they see and the foolishness of those that believe they know.

Eager collectors of the pearls of wisdom hidden in the shell of rhetorical figures as the humanists were, they gathered paradoxes from various sources, adding to them by their own ingenuity and making them subservient to their non-doctrinaire but ethically charged Christianity. They drew into this context even the paradoxes that began as rhetorical sleights of hand, the paradoxical
encomiums, that is, ironical eulogies of minute, or apparently unworthy, or trifling subjects. One large collection of paradoxes, some merely clever, some seriously probing man's condition, was the Italian humanist's Ortensio Landi's *Paradossi* (1543). It was translated, paraphrased, and augmented by Charles Estienne as *Paradoxes* (1553). Twelve of Estienne's twenty-six paradoxes were in turn translated into English by Antony Munday under the title of *The Defence of Contraries: Paradoxes Against Common Opinion* (1593). Some of these paradoxes are of the kind Shakespeare wove into *Lear*: besides the ubiquitous ones that extol foolishness over wisdom and blindness over seeing, there are those that claim the preference of banishment to liberty, of illness to health, of scarcity to abundance, of sterility to fertility (because of the ingratitude of children), and (this latter paradox is merely listed, not developed into an essay) of bastardy to legitimacy.  

Although the primary purpose of *The Defence* was to provide young minds with rhetorical exercises, a secondary one, as the Epistle to the Reader explained, was to teach that truth is a matter of perspective:

> Even as contrary things, compared one with another, do give endeavor of their value and virtue, so the truth of any matter whatsoever appeareth most clearly when the different reasons against the same is equaled or neighbored therewith. . . . For this intent, I have undertaken in this book to debate on certain matters which our elders were wont to call paradoxes, that is to say, things contrary to most men's present opinions, to the end that by such discourse as is held in them opposed truth might appear more clear and apparent.  

I am tempted to think that Shakespeare read *The Defence* and was impressed by its strategy of moral perspective before writing *Lear*; but whether he ever saw the book or not, he was surely familiar with the tradition it reflected.  

As Professor Jorgensen has shown, there is yet another kind of paradox that plays a very special role in *Lear*, an offshoot of the genre of paradoxical encomiums, the praise of that subject of least apparent value, of "nothing."  

A sixteenth-century French poet, John Passeratti, may have started the fashion in a Latin poem, "Nihil."  

An Italian, Francesco Beccuti (Il Copetta), wrote a series of prose reflections in the same vein, *Capitolo ne quale si lodano le Nonce-
This exercise also produced an English offshoot when an E. D., variously identified as Edward Dyer or Edward Daunce, adapted the idea in a small prose pamphlet, *The Praise of Nothing* (1585). E. D.'s attempt at a comico-serious tone is not totally successful, but he does manage to collect an impressive list of the significant "nothings" on which depend all things. Central to his design is the rejection of the claim that "nothing comes from nothing." To refute this axiom is a "mean to attain to the true knowledge of God and of ourselves; of God, who, making all things for man of nothing, is preached to us by the architecture of this mighty engine of the world; of ourselves, who, being made of reasonable souls and bodies, partake of both the nature of angels and brute beasts." 11 Similar statements can be found elsewhere outside of the paradoxical genre. In the light of this commonly held belief, it is clear that Lear's "nothing will come of nothing" would have struck Shakespeare's audience as a falsehood. It is, I think, no less than a symbolic statement of Lear's *hamartia*, which consists of a gigantic lack of self-knowledge.

Because the phrase has become overlaid with commentary, it will be salutary to recall its primary meaning: Lear says that where nothing is given, that is, no declaration of love, there will be no dowry, no land. Lear's axiom is based on a hardheaded, materialistic attitude toward a world in which everything has its price. The phrase symbolizes Lear's procedure in the first scene: he metes out lands and possessions according to protestations of love he expects as a return on his own investment in his daughters. He speaks according to what he thinks is a realistic assessment of the world, of the kind of world described by the Stoic Guillaume du Vair, who says bitterly that those who wish to have honors, favors, and riches must flatter and cheat, suffer injuries, and lose their liberty: "For as the world goeth now, there is nothing to be gotten for bare nothing." 12

However, the nothing-from-nothing phrase had a metaphysical and ethical suggestiveness. Many in Shakespeare's audience would have remembered from grammar school Persius's third satire, in which the ignorant are ridiculed who refuse to be enlightened about "what we are" and who laugh at the axiom *gigni de nihil nihil, in nihilum posse reverti*. But the Renaissance commentators, and thus the pedagogues, proved Persius himself ignorant in this matter, and with him such materialistic philosophers as Democritus,
Epicurus, and Lucretius. The commentators opposed to them the ecclesiastical dogma that God had created the universe as well as man's soul from nothing.\textsuperscript{13} When Shakespeare studied Persius in grammar school, he was very likely told that all important things came from nothing. Besides, the antinomies of "all" and "nothing" were ingrained in the language into which he grew; they were the antipodes to underline the eternal significances of life and death, immortality and mortality.

Lear's "nothing will come of nothing" highlights in its context his ignorance of spiritual and ethical values, in particular his ignorance of the nature of the "all" that arises from man's soul. As Shakespeare's audience knew, God created that sublime essence, man's soul, of nothing. To quote only one of the many statements, from The Anatomy of Sin (1603), "When God inspired a soul into Adam, he made a blast not of his own nature, nor the air round about him, but even of nothing:"\textsuperscript{14} And E. D. was "persuaded that this latter age cannot but acknowledge sundry benefits which rise of nothing, as that which nurseth the godly in the love of virtue and punisheth the transgressors of good laws."\textsuperscript{15} Lear takes a squarely materialistic attitude in a matter that concerns the most immaterial of substances and its qualities. By contrast, Cordelia, Kent, and France take an ethical-spiritual stance in their low opinion of material comforts and possessions valued by the world. Cordelia is ready to live as the nothing that paternal rejection makes her; Kent takes on himself the nothing he must be in exile; and the King of France accepts the Cordelia who, according to Lear, is nothing without her dowry. All three understand that some nothings must be accepted for the sake of keeping and obtaining greater values.

France most strongly denies the truth of nothing from nothing when he refuses to believe in Cordelia's wickedness, a belief, as he paradoxically puts it, which would be "a faith that reason without miracle / Should never plant in me" (222–23). The point, of course, is that he has faith in miracles like Cordelia, a point enlarged upon in the paradoxes in which he acclaims the ideal nothingness of Cordelia, "most rich, being poor; / Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despis'd" (250–51). This speech suggests clearly the Pauline attitude toward the things of this world which are "nothing" (1 Cor. 1) and toward the materially poor but spiritually rich, who, "having nothing," yet possess all things (2 Cor. 6:10). The Genevan sidenote to the former passage explained that the "vile things"
chosen by God are "in man's judgment almost nothing, but taken for abjects and castaways." When France accepts Cordelia in marriage and takes up, as he says, "what's cast away" (253), he shows that he understands, pagan though he is, the quality of nothing. In his contrasting ignorance, Burgundy rejects her on Lear's principle that nothing can come from nothing. This thematic use of the paradox thus points up symbolically Lear's and Burgundy's failures of self-knowledge as rooted in their inability to understand the values of the human soul, and it contrasts this ignorance with the wisdom of Cordelia, Kent, and France.

The resulting suffering of Lear and his painful and thwarted groping toward an understanding of himself and of others will be the subject of the following chapter; at present I shall turn to the subplot, the Gloucester story, a subplot unique in Shakespeare by being of an importance almost equal to that of the main plot. It is indeed possible that the idea of treating the Cordelia-Lear story tragically in contrast to the sources, where it ended happily, came to Shakespeare through the source of the Gloucester plot, the story of the Paphlagonian king in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. For Sidney, the story was a lesson in self-knowledge, demonstrating the danger of breaking the marriage bond and with it the laws that keep man within the bounds of humanity. But the story also was an example of the alleviating influence of true sympathy on suffering. Sidney's king falls prey to the deceit of his wicked bastard son, Plexirtus, who slanders the legitimate son, Leonatus, and makes his father reject him. In "wretched ungratefulness," Plexirtus has his father blinded, usurps his place, and causes him to stray helplessly through the country. In this misery, Leonatus, endowed with "true natural goodness," becomes his father's helper and guide, the king's acknowledged "glass even to my blind eyes." Here was the nucleus for the moral significance of the subplot and for the seeing-in-blindness paradox, which, together with that of wisdom-in-folly, is the major structural paradox of the play.

The two paradoxes of blindness and folly were generally thought to be related. In *The Defence of Contraries*, the claim that ignorance is better than knowledge (Declamation 3) is followed by the assertion that blindness is better than sight, and both make the point that the states of deprivation entail greater wisdom and insight. Thus blindness "gives men leisure and commodity of power, at their own ease, to contemplate celestial beauties and excellencies divine." But
The Defence quickly lapses into absurdity: one of the "advantages" the blind have over the seeing is that the former "have no need of spectacles wherewith to see small things nor of eyeglasses, otherwise called barnacles, when they travel in windy weather." 18

It is possible that this painful jest gave Shakespeare the idea of connecting, by means of the "nothing" leitmotiv, Gloucester's *hamartia* with that of Lear. As Edmund pretends to be surprised by Gloucester and alleges to have been reading "nothing," the Duke queries: "No? What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath no such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (I.ii.32-35). Gloucester's comment plays a variation on Lear's "nothing from nothing" phrase and symbolizes, by its expression of optic myopia, his spiritual blindness. There is also an echo of Lear's materialistic interpretation of "nothing" in Gloucester's order to pursue Edgar: "Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall lose thee nothing" (I.ii.115). This charge follows immediately upon Gloucester's wholesale acceptance of judicial astrology ("These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us"), which corroborates both Gloucester's bent to credulousness, evidenced in his trust of Edgar, and his delusion of knowing all about the ways of the world.

That Gloucester thinks of himself as worldly-wise is evident from the nonchalance with which, at the opening of the play, he speaks to Kent about the pleasant faux pas that produced Edmund. Such inclination to pleasure and lust was, as Lodowyck Brysket explained, a kind of blindness:

> And this ignorance concerning the knowledge of a man's self is the cause that he [the voluptuous man] cannot tell how to use himself. For these unreasonable affections do so darken the light of reason that he is a blind man and giveth himself over to be guided, as one that hath lost the right way, to as blind a guide as himself and so wandereth astray which way soever his bad guide doth lead him.19

Gloucester's credulousness, which is intellectual blindness, and his sensuality, which is moral blindness, make his later loss of sight an external manifestation of his human flaws. Gloucester's blinding parallels and emphasizes Lear's madness, which in turn arises from anger (a passion that, according to the much-quoted Horatian dictum, was a "short madness"). One revolts against considering
Gloucester’s blindness and Lear’s madness as “punishments” because this idea seems so much like taking the part of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan; yet these afflictions have a relationship—if not in degree, at least in kind—to the nature of the follies to which they succeed. Thus Shakespeare conveyed the impression that there are sometimes cause-and-effect relationships between conduct and fate; but, by making the effects excessive, he avoided the false moral that in this world one receives exactly what one deserves.

The act of blinding, even more importantly, demonstrates the sadistic urges of those who in this world set themselves up as the judges of morality but whose hands are stained with greater vices than those whom they condemn. In its questioning of worldly justice, Lear recalls Measure for Measure, but it proceeds from a probing into an accusing mood. Gloucester’s torture is the more painful and raises the greater horror because it is occasioned by his acts of sympathy for his old sovereign, when he shelters him and communicates with Cordelia’s party. In this most wantonly cruel act of the play, Shakespeare demonstrated climactically the boundless cruelty of the wicked who seek to achieve the satisfaction of their egos by naturalistic self-seeking. We identify with the servant’s and with Albany’s horror of this unnatural act and feel that humanity so directed must at least eat up itself. We also identify, momentarily at least, with Albany’s feeling that there are justicers above when the servant kills that most contemptible of villains, Cornwall.

The blindness of Gloucester, first spiritual and then actual, serves to underline the folly of Lear in wrath and in madness. The play encourages continual cross-references between Gloucester and Lear; what one of them does or experiences is in an analogous mode done or suffered by the other. Lear’s rejection of Cordelia can be looked upon as a kind of ethical and spiritual blindness; the imagery of darkness and light, which accompanies the rejection, encourages the analogy. Similarly, Gloucester’s failure to discern truth and falsehood is not only blindness but also foolishness bordering on madness. And as Lear’s insensitivity to “nothing” extends his ignorance of himself, so Gloucester’s superstition gives his spiritual myopia a cosmic dimension. It is not Gloucester but Lear who actually brings up blinding and ironically foreshadows what will happen to the duke (I.iv.301). And while Gloucester never mentions sexuality and its effects again after his initial allusion to the “sport” that went into Edmund’s making, Lear is obsessed with the subject from his denun-
ciation of Goneril—"Into her womb convey sterility . . ." (I.iv. 278 ff.)—to the terrifying Centaur speech (IV.vi.111–31), the latter being delivered in the presence of Gloucester, homo sensualis.

Since Lear's earlier imprecations immediately precede the threat of blinding and are a reaction to Goneril's demand that he disquantity his train, an association between ingratitude, sterility, and blindness is created. This is one of the most pervasive thematic links, and it is therefore worth noting that the same linking occurs in the paradox "that a barren woman is more happy than a bearing" of The Defence of Contraries (Declamation 8). With heavy irony, The Defence recommends sterility as "a sovereign medicine against the private malice of children" and suggests that those who wish to bear children should procure "the divine plant, called Hermetiae, which whosoever useth—if Democritus be not a liar—not only shall engender honest children and well disposed, but likewise fair and gracious." But, says The Defence, this herb may be lost, or Democritus imagined it, or dreamed of it, "after he had put out his own eyes to become thereby the better philosopher." 20 But, regardless of whether there is any influence of The Defence on Lear in this point, the Democritus exemplum serves to remind one that there were precedents for the symbolic meaning of the Gloucester story that physical blindness can mean better spiritual vision. Tiresias, Oedipus, Samson, and Saint Paul come to mind; their blindness was apt to be moralized in the Renaissance as showing that this affliction can bring about understanding and insight.

But perhaps the most relevant example was that of Tobit in the Apocrypha because it pointed a moral much like that Edgar wishes to instill in his father when he asks him to "bear free and patient thoughts" (IV.vi.80). In the words of the Genevan side-note, Tobit was "made blind as an example of patience to his posterity." As Estella put it, "By afflictions . . . assure thyself that thou shalt recover the inward sight as Tobit did by the gall of the fish." 21 The dung that deprived Tobit of his eyesight was generally interpreted to represent the filth of the world and to symbolize punishment for worldly pleasures—a parallel to Edgar's moral that "the dark and vicious place" where Gloucester begot Edmund "cost him his eyes" (V.iii.172–73). Also, Tobit's physical recovery, like the moral regeneration of Gloucester, was aided by a good son, Tobias, who, like Edgar, was believed to have been lost. Tobias's faith, symbolized by the gall of the fish, makes this miracle possible. The story
was well-known; one place among many in which Shakespeare may have been reminded of it was that old Stratford building which is now the Swan Hotel. The message of the mural it harbors was not lost to him as it is to the modern tourist.

But before Gloucester can approach a pattern of patience like that of Tobit, he falls prey to the temptation of his suicide attempt at Dover Cliff, which leads to the pseudo-miracle engineered by Edgar. Shakespeare fashioned the incident from a one-sentence statement in Sidney's *Arcadia* in which the Paphlagonian king asks Leonatus to lead him to the top of a rock so he can take his life by throwing himself down, a demand that Leonatus understandably denies. Shakespeare made Gloucester take a leap; but since it is on level ground and, as a fall from height exists only in Gloucester's imagination (which is aided by Edgar's description), the incident is complex, inaccessible to realistic interpretations, and somewhat baffling in its bearing on the ethical issues.

The lesson Edgar teaches his father at Dover Cliff does not only include the jump but also what immediately precedes and what follows. It is a lesson in visual and spiritual perspective; Edgar becomes the glass to Gloucester's eyes. The elaborateness of Edgar's description of the dizzy height (IV.vi.11 ff.) goes certainly beyond what is required by the dramatic need to create for Gloucester the illusion of standing at the edge of a precipice. In a very similar description in *Cymbeline* (III.iii.11 ff.), the speaker draws the conclusion that "it is place [that is, status and rank] which lessens and sets off." In *Lear*, the moral is more subtle. At first sight, it may appear fanciful to connect Gloucester's downward look with the arguments of skeptic philosophers that the human eye fails to see things truly, that the same objects seen from different sides, or from different angles, or at different places, appear different objects—proof of the unreliability of the senses. Yet a passage in Montaigne's "Apology of Raymond Sebond" developing this topic has been plausibly claimed to have been Shakespeare's source for Edgar's description. Montaigne argued that the senses can dominate a man's imagination and inspire him with such fear as he cannot counteract with his reason: even a philosopher put in a cage on top of Notre Dame could not keep his composure, "but the sight of that exceeding height must needs dazzle his sight and amaze or turn his senses." Montaigne then reported his own experiences in the Alps in words that have some resemblance to Edgar's.
But Montaigne's conclusion is perhaps of even greater interest since it makes the point of the superiority of insight over sight:

And that we cannot, without some dread and giddiness in the head, so much as abide to look upon one of those even and downright precipices: "Ut despici sine vertigine simul oculorum animique non possit: So as they cannot look down without giddiness both of eyes and minds." . . . Therefore was it that a worthy philosopher pulled out his eyes that so he might discharge his soul of the seducing and diverting he received by them and better and more freely apply himself unto philosophy.23

Edgar, like Montaigne, will "look no more; / Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight / Topple down headlong" (IV.vi.22–24). The deficient sight becomes associated with Gloucester's lack of moral perception. He stumbled when he saw, and he walks unsteadily even now. After the Dover Cliff episode, he will walk a little more steadily.

Gloucester's suicide attempt is an outgrowth of the pessimism and fatalism of the we-have-seen-the-best-of-our-time speech of the beginning (I.ii.100 ff.)—a speech associated with his optic and ethical blindness. Up to the moment of his leap, Gloucester believes that his fate is due to the "great opposeless wills" of the gods; in their sight, he seeks to "Shake patiently my great affliction off" (IV.vi.34 ff.). From a Christian point of view (one valid also when it came to judging meritorious pagans), Gloucester's self-knowledge fails him when he assumes his act to be a deliverance. In Brysket's words, he is like a man who is so overcome by happy or unhappy incidents that he does not realize that his passion proceeds from the nature of his mind:

For their cowardice, who suffer themselves to be overcome by such passions, persuades them that such things happen of necessity and through the immutable order of things, and so they make themselves wittingly slaves where they were free, wanting either will or power to use that liberty of their mind, either in the one fortune or the other.24

The thoughts Edgar wishes his father to bear are significantly not merely "patient" but also "free" (80). The most obvious lesson of the incident is thus a rejection of the idea that suicide is permissible under certain circumstances and then constitutes a patient acceptance
of the inexorable laws of the universe—an idea attributed to some extreme Stoics. Edgar teaches his father that suicide is really despair and submission to fate rather than to the will of the gods. He makes Gloucester believe that his life is due to a miracle, a supernatural event that breaks the apparently unbreakable enchainment of causes. And Gloucester indeed does assume a fideistic attitude now; he thinks that the gods, who, as Edgar prompts him, “make them honours / Of men’s impossibilities,” have preserved him.

However, the incident is also fraught with the implications human engineering generally has in Shakespeare: it is a deceit, even though a benevolent one in the manner Thomas Wright recommended it to the “passion mover.” Edgar has a faint similarity to an Iago imprinting his will on Othello by administering to him a dose of “medicine”; it is a calculated dose because it is restricted to an attempt at curing his father from his suicidal urge. Edgar does not reveal his identity to him and thus does not free him from the ignorance this lack of information entails. Why he does not do so is one of the several puzzles of the play. Perhaps he thinks his father’s heart too weak to sustain this truth as, indeed, it proves to be when he reveals it to him. However, by then, this heart has been subjected to further suffering.

But whatever moral ambiguity is attached to Edgar’s conduct in the episode of Dover Cliff is relieved by the irony that this incident and his subsequent guiding of Gloucester is as much or more a testing of the psychic and ethical resources of Edgar than it serves to restructure Gloucester’s philosophy. Edgar cannot prevent his father from subsequently relapsing into despair and from dying in a highly uncertain state of soul—between joy and grief. And the eye-piercing sight of the meeting between the mad king and the blind earl proves almost too much for Edgar himself. He is not “stoical” like Iago, and neither is he superhuman; as he intimates later, he, too, has been tempted to take his own life (V.iii.184–86). But Edgar’s general capacity for feeling and his strength to translate it into sympathetic action make him the most conspicuous learner and teacher; and, in the end, he can be said to have passed all tests. He tries to teach his father how to see “feelingly” and he keeps to the very end his awareness of the alleviating power of human emotion, asking us in the last lines of the play to say what we feel, not what we ought to say.

The transformation of Edgar from an apparently minor figure at the beginning to a dominant one at the end is one of the most
surprising dramatic developments in Shakespeare. The introduction of Edgar by his maliciously histrionic brother—"Pat! he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy" (I.ii.128)—carries a strong irony. Edgar does indeed become the medium for whatever alleviation there is in the end; he provides a "comic catastrophe" at least to the degree of bringing about the punishment of the villains and taking the reins in his hand.

Edgar's vitality and protean role-changes give him a tremendous vitality on the stage, but he assumes even greater significance in thematic analysis. His various roles unite all the important paradoxes that form the schematic pattern of the evaluation of men in Lear. In playing a half-crazed beggar, he shows that foolishness is better than arrogant knowledge, poverty better than unfeeling wealth, scarcity better than careless abundance, and humility better than proud greatness. In his first soliloquy, he declares that he must be a near-nothing in this world; he has become a man without a name, "the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury in contempt of man / Brought near to beast" (II.iii.7-9). The pricks he puts in his bleeding flesh manifest his physical suffering, which, like Lear's, is stifled by the overwhelming mental pain.

Edgar tries to adjust to the "something" he has now become; he adopts a Stoic resignation somewhat in the tenor of the paradox "that a man ought not to be grieved though he be despoiled of his goods and honors" (The Defence, Declamation 6). As he reasons in his second soliloquy, the lowest and most dejected thing in nature has the advantage of expecting a change for the better (IV.i.1-9). There is a touch of Pollyannaism in this Stoic self-consolation, and Edgar's concluding defiance of the unsubstantial air to whose blast he owes "nothing" reads like a _hybris_ in the light of the simultaneous entrance of his blind father led by an old man. Edgar is forced to revise his Stoicism: "The worst is not / So long as we can say 'This is the worst' " (IV.i.27-28). Mere theory, no matter how well intended, breaks down in the inferno of life. Man must feel, suffer, and act rather than theorize. Edgar's empathetic initiation into the human tragedy is marked by his awe at the "mutations" of this world (IV.i.11).

Only after being theoretically negated does Edgar's acceptance of "nothing" prove itself in the heat of fire. He can now assume a new and exemplary identity as a thing first to be wondered at, then to be imitated. When his voice sounds from the tempest-shaken hovel, he
provokes Kent's amazed question: "Who's there? . . . What art thou that dost grumble there i' th' straw?" (III.iv.41 ff.). Lear, himself at the threshold of madness, interrogates him on the reason for his deprivation: "What, has his daughters brought him to this pass? / Could'st thou save nothing? Would'st thou give 'em all?". Immediately following, Lear strips himself naked in emulation to become, like Edgar, a quintessential man ("Consider him well"). And this uncovering takes place during an identity crisis that focuses on Edgar; Lear asks "What hast thou been? . . . What's he?", and Kent and Gloucester join in: "Who's there? What is't you seek? . . . What are you there? Your names?" When Lear subsequently calls Edgar a philosopher, he is mad, but there is a touch of sanity in this madness: if Edgar does not exactly philosophize on some of the big questions, he poses them by what he is. He represents the self-sufficient man, unencumbered by an adulterating civilization; he is the incarnation of the value of "nothing."

At the crucial point of the inception of Lear's madness, Edgar thus becomes for the old king a teacher of the essentials of nature, a kind of Cynic philosopher. Shakespeare's contemporaries were fascinated by this austere sect, whose insistence on frugality and the simple life suggested contemptus mundi attitudes with which they were familiar; Christian asceticism and ancient Cynicism had much in common. Yet since the Middle Ages some theologians thought that the Cynics' asceticism went too far and that they missed the purpose of the effort, which was to demonstrate faith in the true God; they were peculiar combinations of saints and madmen.

One of Lear's titles for Edgar, "good Athenian," would, for Shakespeare's audience, have suggested the Cynic Diogenes, who had a signal place in Renaissance moral thought. He had been put on the stage in Lyly's Campaspe, where his way of life was much like that assumed by Edgar: "A crumb for thy supper, an hand for thy cup, and thy clothes for thy sheets. For Natura paucis contenta" (I.ii.4-5). Lear's other title for Edgar, "learned Theban," also has significant associations. As has been suggested, the address most likely would have evoked the Theban philosopher Crates, a disciple of Diogenes, who loomed almost as large in the anecdotage of the Renaissance as did his teacher. The anecdote of Crates' throwing his patrimony into the sea in order not to be hampered in the study of philosophy was for Thomas Nashe an example of the contrast between the frugal and sensible life of a true man and the luxurious-
ness and wantonness of courtiers who were intent on nothing but "the feeding of their mistress' fancy and the fostering of their law­less lusts, showing under their purple robes and embroidered apparel a heart spotted with all abuses." One is reminded of the way Edgar describes his alleged career as a serving man, "proud in heart and mind; that curl'd my hair; wore gloves in my cap; serv'd the lust of my mistress' heart and did the act of darkness with her" (III.iv.84 ff.). This is the state of average sophisticated depravity Edgar asserts to have overcome in order to be the Crates of Lear. Crates's attacks on women's luxuriousness and inordinate desires would make him also the pattern for Lear in his ragings against the female sex, but the king in his madness exceeds the model in savagery.

Lear's identification of Edgar with a Cynic like Crates also gives Edgar the structural role of exemplifying the paradox that it is better to be a fool than to be wise. The titles "philosopher" and "fool" were sometimes treated as interchangeable in the paradoxical tradition. In The Mirror of Madness (1576), Dame Madness demonstrated that she was the "notablest philosopher" by the argument that "by reason of madness—that is to say, the matter—philosophers' books are esteemed and accounted most excellent" and that "whatever maketh a thing such, the thing whereby it is made is of necessity more such." When Lear comes to mistaking Edgar for a famous philosopher, he does so according to the principle that a philosopher may look like a madman; and there is a justification in his nominating Edgar, who, feigning madness, has actually become the most notable philosopher of the play. Crates, the learned Theban, was a salient example of the wise madness of philosophers; in philosopher's madness he vied with Diogenes, whom Lyly called "a Socrates furious." As Robert Greene said in The Debate Between Folly and Love, "What kind of people that hath been in greater credit than philosophers, and who more fools? . . . Did not Crates in casting his treasure into the sea commit a wise deed?"

The "Cynicism" assumed by Edgar and sensed by Lear becomes an important issue in the paradox that scarcity is better than abundance—an issue touched on in Gloucester's temptation and central to Lear's change of values. Lyly's Diogenes already knew that one should not give nature more than nature needs. And Nashe upheld Crates as exemplifying the axiom that "no vestis sed virtus hominem evehit," and he hoped that the courtiers "would reject all superfluity"
as sinful and "betake themselves to a more temperate moderation in each degree of excess." Edgar's affiance to poverty makes him a catalyst for both Gloucester's and Lear's questioning of themselves on essential human needs in their struggle to gain a perspective on human life. When Gloucester gives money to his disguised son so he will lead him to Dover, he comments on the relativity of a fate that creates happiness for the poor from the wretchedness of the rich, and he commends the heavens for creating greater economic quality in this fashion (IV.i.66–72). A similar note is sounded by Lear, just before he finds Edgar, in his prayer to "naked poverty":

Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

(III.iv.33–36)

On one level, this prayer is a call for greater social justice, a call of the kind increasingly being raised in England during the time of the first performances of Lear. Thus in The Poor Man's Passions and Poverty's Patience (1605), Arthur Warren asked Virtue to protect him with her "sacred providence" by not giving him too much or too little:

Give not abundance lest I should forget
The Giver where such surplusage I see;
The golden mediocrity I crave
To quit the world and me conduct to grave.82

But Lear's is not merely a call for social justice; it is also an anguished outcry against an unjust cosmic order. Out of Lear's suffering, questioning of necessities, and his quarrel with his gods comes a proclamation of human fellowship for the achievement of a distribution more nearly equal of the means for happiness. And yet, as I shall argue in the next chapter, our understanding of the meaning of this prayer would be incomplete without some sense of what it does for Lear's own soul.

But we must return to the major agent of this development. Edgar, who aids the others in their search for self-knowledge, also has to pursue his own quest, and strenuously so. It does not, I think, lead to a certainty of achieving self-knowledge. It does lead, of course, to
success in an outward sense by his finding of himself in a significant role, a greater one, indeed, than could have been envisaged before. He resembles the traditional hero of a legend, who has lost his inheritance and suffered much, but who has won a greater gain. Thus he embodies the paradox of The Defence that “it is better for a man to lose his worldly estates and dignity than himself to be lost and destroyed forever.” But when it comes to describing what Edgar has won, internally, the skeptic reader of the play can hardly be certain. It may be said, perhaps, that he has won “ripeness,” the goal that he holds out to his father when the latter falls once more into his fatalistic despair after the lost battle: “Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither:/Ripeness is all” (V.ii.9–11). But the content of this ideal ripeness is hard to define; it varies according to the perspective from which we approach it. We must think of it presumably as a concept that merges the best of paganism and Christianity, as do other of the values suggested by the play. We may say that ripeness includes a patient but not fatalistic endurance of life, an altruistic conception of man’s role in the world, and a sympathy with all suffering humanity. Admittedly, this is vague; but to go much beyond it is to risk substituting one’s own goals for the vaguer, but also more provocatively suggested, ideals of the play. In Edgar, Shakespeare did not portray a pattern that embodies all the wisdom self-knowledge could be made to include, but he created a dramatic character who struggles, in a particular context and under particular circumstances, for the achievement of such wisdom. It would be presuming too much to say that he achieves it; but his career implies that the struggle does avail. A man may find himself, as much as he ever can be said to, even in the naturalistic world of Lear when character and fortune cooperate. The success of Edgar brightens the otherwise somber and tragic ending and increases the feeling created by the play that learning how to evaluate oneself and others justly is important.

By drawing a lesson of this kind, we respond to tragedy with a moral reaction; we experience a feeling of tragic pleasure (some would call it a catharsis). And this is a paradoxical feeling. As Edith Hamilton has noted, our reaction to great tragedy expresses itself in the way we speak about it: we call pain, sorrow, and disaster depressing, but never tragedy; we say “lift us to tragic heights.” We speak of the depth of pathos, but always of the height of tragedy.

It has been the argument of this chapter that the paradoxes em-
bedded in Lear have much to do with the feeling of tragic pleasure created by this greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies. These paradoxes stimulate us to seek for a meaning in life even at its most cruel. And they suggest that a way to self-knowledge may be found by applying a paradoxical perspective: we should consider the possibility that what appears to be pride is really humility, what seems weakness is really strength, what looks like foolishness is yet wisdom, and what we believe to be misfortune is beneficial to our souls; and we should ponder many similar apparent paradoxes. At the same time, Lear also warns us against simplifying all statements about ourselves and our situations, including paradoxical statements; it invites us to view characters, situations, and incidents from unexpected angles and to revise our opinions in the light of later insights; and it creates the hope that the whole picture eventually will become intelligible. Thus the paradoxes ingrained in Lear help to promote the illusion that this play is like life itself, which forces us to evaluate ourselves and our situations with whatever wisdom we are able to acquire.