LEAR IS A KING born to command, not to ask questions. His first words give the order that the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy are to attend the ceremonious division of the kingdom. The questions Lear asks in the beginning of the play could just as well be put as imperatives. The fateful “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” is not really an inquiry but an order to his daughters to protest their quantity of love. But love is a subject in which quality means everything, and therefore Cordelia, as she announces in an aside, will not answer a question so wrongly posed: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.” When asked by Lear what she can say “to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters,” she replies, “Nothing.” This is the first unexpected answer Lear receives; unbelievably, he asks Cordelia to repeat it. It is an answer that strikes at his value system, and similarly upsetting answers are to follow. Thus, contrary to Lear’s expectation, the King of France replies affirmatively to the question whether he will accept Cordelia in marriage without dowry; he disregards the absence of a quantitative endowment because of her possession of a qualitative one, her lack of riches for her owned sincerity.

After Lear has divested himself of power, he receives a different kind of unexpected answers. Lear’s questions tend to become rhetorical now, based as they are on the conception of himself as a powerful monarch and beloved father. Only the faithful Kent, banished by Lear but still ready to serve him in disguise, accepts the king on these terms. When Lear asks him, “Dost thou know me, fellow?” he answers, “No, sir; but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master” (I.iv.27). Those that go the way the world goes do not assess Lear any longer by the authority imprinted on his face. The disrespectful Oswald answers Lear’s question “Who
am I?” with the insolent “My lady’s father” (I.iv.78). Lear’s evil daughters give him an identity entirely different from the one he gives himself; they call him a weak old man who should adjust to his age and become wise, and they do not accept his self-image of a powerful king surrounded by a large troop of retainers. With a hint at Lear’s lack of self-knowledge, Goneril suggests that he should have only such men around him “which know themselves and you” (I.iv.251). Goneril and Regan apply the kind of quantitative reasoning to their father that he had demonstrated in arranging the love protest; they wish him to “disquantity” his train and to know himself for what he is, that is, in measurable terms, “nothing.” With a semblance of truth on her side, Goneril asks her father to “put away / These dispositions which of late transport you / From what you rightly are” (I.iv.220–22). But the Fool, with his remark about the ass’s not knowing when the cart draws the horse, puts the situation in a different perspective and induces Lear’s first identity crisis: “Does any here know me? This is not Lear. / . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (I.iv.225–29). The rhetorical questions have led to an existential one.

The answers the others give to Lear’s questions place them in a moral scheme. Kent answers as a loyal courtier, Oswald as a time-server and opportunist, and Goneril and Regan as ungrateful and disloyal daughters. The valuing of the selves has begun. And with it, Lear begins to re-evaluate. The process is speeded up but also made more bitter for Lear by the Fool, who rubs his wounds with the salve of truth, a simple commonsense truth in rhymes, songs, and sayings. Lear first threatens to whip him; but he nevertheless listens to him. When the disrespectfully treated king asks who can tell him who he is, the Fool’s ready answer, “Lear’s shadow,” does not produce another threat of whipping from Lear but the relatively gentle remark that he would fain learn why he should be a shadow since he has daughters. The Fool becomes a teacher for Lear: “Lad; teach me” (I.iv.138), Lear says. And so the Fool does, setting his master to the school of men, fools, and ants.

Lear’s progress in education that began with imperative questions, to which he thought the answers self-evident but found them totally unexpected, and continued with rhetorical questions, to which the answers were impertinent, has led to a profoundly disturbing existential question. His educational progress will lead finally to questions on the nature of man, questions that he had never posed in his
life and of which the answers involve moral and metaphysical values. As Lear becomes unsure of his identity, he loses his certainty of the identity of men and gods. He becomes an alien in the world he once dominated, and man appears to him an alien in the world he claims to rule. In the storm on the heath, feeling no better than a naked animal and worse equipped to defy the elements, he poses his culminating question: "Is man no more than this?" (III.iv.101 ff.). As he strips himself naked, he exposes the naked self of man.

From his first question on his personal identity to this question on the identity of man, Lear follows unconsciously a program of self-examination as it was implied for the humanists in the injunction nosce teipsum. The general process has been well described by Professor Jorgensen. Lear's is not a consistent, clearly progressive procedure, and the insights he attains are momentary and partial; they come to him at the threshold of madness, in lucid intervals, and as lightning-strokes in the night of madness. But there is yet behind them a method and a philosophy that bring to fruition the concepts in Shakespeare's earlier plays. In order to illuminate this method and this philosophy, I shall examine Lear's self-questioning by reference to a book that makes schematic and explicit what Lear does tentatively and unsystematically. This work, which has been previously mentioned, is Sir James Perrott's The First Part of the Consideration of Human Condition (1600). It is a slender book of sixty pages; but, in the words of its subtitle, it promises no less than "the moral consideration of man's self as what, who, and what manner of man he is."  

"Consideration" is for Sir James a program of the total assessment of man as a species and as an individual in relationship to everything that is under him, next to him, and above him. The program thus aims at gaining wisdom by perspective, one that comes from seeing man in the place he takes in the total picture of the universe. To consider man in this fashion means to meditate on his human, political, and divine nature and his relationship to the material and spiritual domains; it means to ask the right questions. Sir James not only poses these but also answers them unequivocally. In his scheme, all questions man must ask are subsumed under three major ones: what is man, who is man, and what manner of man is he. The answers to these questions require subsidiary questions. To know what man is, one must ask what his main components are, where he takes his origin and how he ends, and what the purpose of a life is that leads
from one of these stations to the other. Perrott answers in orthodox humanistic fashion with a strong touch of *contemptus mundi*: man is primarily a soul chained to a body for a short period; his beginning and end are painful; and the in-between is short and uncertain. Only death is certain, but it also offers the hope of immortality. Sir James's second main question, who man is, requires an examination of his material condition; the state of his body, its health or sickness; the nature of his possessions, his wealth or poverty; and his worldly status, his calling, profession, and authority. The answer to this question must be given with the understanding that all these material qualities depend on the impermanent parts of man, which are inferior to those deriving from his immortal soul. To understand who man is, one must take into consideration what he is so as not to overestimate the importance of temporal achievements. The answer to Perrott's final question, what manner of man somebody is, probes the differences in intellect, character, and temperament by which men become individuals. The doctrine of the humors and the system of the virtues are here evoked, but with a hortatory note: no inclinations, complexions, and traits must negate the demand that man fulfill his essence and be what he ought to be. That means he must search for wisdom and control the perturbations of his mind.

If the questions of *The Consideration* are used as a standard test for humanistic self-examination, as, I believe, they can be, they show how woefully deficient the early Lear is in self-knowledge. In the first scene of the play, the king fails all three questions. His "nothing can come of nothing" shows that he does not know what man is, that is, he does not know his origin. Truth and Scripture, as Perrott explained, said "that the world was made of nothing . . . and of this nothing, made something, was man at the first created, as Holy Writ doth testify; for he was made of no other mould than of the dust of the earth, a weak and slender beginning for a high and haughty mind, but most fit to set forth the great might of the almighty creator" (p. 11).

But Lear also shows immediately that he does not know who he is because he is unmindful of the warning given to the great of the earth:

> If thou be noble-born, then commonly pride and presumption catch hold and lay such violent hands on thy will, thy affection, and thy understanding that they can hardly be removed from thee till they have removed thee from the knowledge of thyself, who thou art.
For thy presumptuous pride and self-liking affection will make thee believe that thou art much better than indeed thou art. (p. 29)

Obviously, Lear is also ignorant of what manner of man he is. His anger against Cordelia and Kent, instances of the wilfulness that, according to Regan, has always been characteristic of him, violates the postulates of self-control and wisdom; Kent's calling him mad and foolish punctuates his temperamental and intellectual weakness. Lear is of the choleric temperament that Perrott, in the wake of the physicians, describes at length; his anger is of the kind The Consideration warns of against reason when a man is angry with himself "because he cannot do that which he would or cannot have that which he desireth, being things either impossible or unprofitable to be performed, or else unlawful or unmeet to be desired" (p. 58).

Goneril, who is blind to the larger aspects of Lear's lack of self-knowledge because they have an affinity to her own, yet recognizes the physical component of Lear's self-ignorance, his excess of choler; in conformance with the humors theory, she predicts that he will grow more wrathful with increasing age. And it appears that her prediction will be fulfilled as the king's wrath waxes in volume and intensity until in the storm he vies with the raging elements. This anger expresses itself against all kinds of persons and objects; it assumes the spectrum analyzed in The Consideration according to which there are five shades: the anger of man against himself, of man against man, of man against God, of man against inferior beings, and of man against things without life (pp. 57-58). And Lear's anger explodes into madness, as Perrott warned unprofitable and unmeet anger would. But, and here Shakespeare's portrayal differed from that of Perrott, Lear's wrath is also an impetus to self-discovery. It has, perhaps, an element of what the theologians called "just anger"; at any rate, Lear's questions ride on a tide of wrath, and as it rises, advances his progress not only toward madness but also toward self-awareness. Lear does not gain whatever self-knowledge he acquires primarily through an intellectual process, but through a predominantly volitional and emotional one. In his baroque plays, as we have had occasion to observe, Shakespeare presented men not as beings whose psyche can be divided into neat categories but as dynamic organisms in whom intellectual and emotional powers are inextricably mixed.
After Lear meets with neglect and disrespect, his questions are as much outrages as inquiries. His reactions are generally much more vehement than the situation warrants; until Goneril and Regan exclude Lear from shelter in the storm, they show themselves as egotistic and callous, but not as the cruel monsters Lear calls them and they later turn out to be. Yet from his excessive anger about lack of respect come Lear’s first questions about his identity: “Who am I, sir?” “Who can tell me who I am?” This is not as yet a serious inquiry, and the answer he receives serves as much to increase his irritation as his curiosity. From anger with himself and others, Lear turns to attacking the gods and their injustice and what Perrott calls “things without life”; in the storm, he curses the raging elements, to whom he feels enslaved, as “servile ministers” of his ungrateful daughters. Yet with his increasing irrationality comes also an advance in the kind of questions he asks about man; from questions that fall under Perrott’s “who is man” category, he proceeds to those of the “what is man” type: “Is man no more than this?” “Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” “What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes.”

Lear never explicitly asks Perrott’s third question, what manner of man he is; but he begins to answer it, together with the “what is man” question, in the storm. His ignorance about this latter subject was directly responsible for his outbreak of anger against Cordelia and Kent, and it appears now to him that the question he did not ask himself is being demanded of him by the raging elements that arrogate to themselves the roles of judges by joining with his two pernicious daughters: “Here I stand, your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak, and despis’d old man” (III.ii.19–20).

But, as much as he approaches an answer to the question of what manner of man he is, he lacks the humility a man must have who knows who and what he is. Defiantly, he wrestles with his gods, and they keep silent. And when he calls himself “a man / More sinned against than sinning” (59–60), self-pity is in his voice. Just as it is not Edgar’s theorizing about misfortune but his empathy with his father that takes him a step further, so it is Lear’s genuine concern for the welfare of the Fool, a concern that grows out of his own deprivation, which advances his reeducation. As the Fool feels cold, so does Lear; it is his first altruistic emotion. The last step in Lear’s progress to the answer of what manner of man he is comes much
later, in the lucid interval when he kneels before Cordelia and acknowledges humbly:

I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.

(IV.vii.60–63)

For an audience that was acquainted with the general method of self-examination implied in the Renaissance injunction of nosce teipsum, there were implications in what Lear says that we are apt to miss. The Renaissance attitude toward self-knowledge was, for one thing, determined by the basic postulate to understand the nature of body and soul, of matter and spirit, and of their relationship. In the first scene of the play, Lear showed his ignorance of these fundamentals. His "nothing from nothing" axiom denies the existence of a spiritual realm in which the greatest somethings come from nothing. Lear is ignorant of the love that arises from the soul. But it turns out that he does not even realize what the axiom means in the limited, material field to which it applies. In a world in which physical nature reigns, such as the world of Goneril and Regan, nothing comes from nothing: where there is no power there is no respect and authority. The Fool, with his needling, childish songs and commonplace wisdom, drives home this lesson:

Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?

Lear. Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing.

Fool. [To Kent.] Prifthee tell him, so much the rent of his land comes to.

(I.iv.130–32)

And again:

Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now:
I am a fool, thou art nothing. [To Gon.] Yes, forsooth, I will hold
my tongue; so your face bids me, though you say nothing.

(192–94)

Lear gradually learns what it is to be materially nothing; he is taught a lesson about the physical needs of the body. This initiation
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into wisdom is quite in agreement with his nature; from the beginning he has a strong sense for, one might say even an obsession with, the physical nature of man. He severs, for instance, his ties with Cordelia by disclaiming his "propinquity and property of blood" in her (I.i.113). In his horror about Goneril's ingratitude, he calls her a disease in his flesh and prays to nature to make her womb sterile (IV.278). But Lear has to realize that he shares this property of blood with all humanity, that, to speak with Sir Thomas Elyot, a gentleman and a carter are made of the same clay. And he learns. As in the storm he is subjected to deprivation, he experiences on his own body what *The Praise of Nothing* calls "the affinity . . . between nothing and the poverty of men." Poverty, says the author of this tract, is "necessary for the knowledge of ourselves that are by the contrary most insolent and intolerable." The suffering Lear acquires an empathy with his fellow sufferers, with the naked Edgar and with the houseless poverty of other poor wretches. He feels now the same needs that others have, the basic needs of human beings badly equipped for the struggle with nature.

Lear's concern with the needs of nature points from the physical to the psychic realm and is foreshadowed earlier in the play. When Goneril and Regan dispute Lear's idea about his need of retainers and Regan bests her sister in asking him why he wants even one attendant, Lear reacts with the outcry, "O reason not the need!" If one allows nature no more than nature needs, he lectures her, man's life is as cheap as that of a beast and her gorgeous clothes are therefore superfluous. Rage makes him choke in the middle of this disquisition, and he realizes that he too has needs: "patience, I need" (II.iv.270). Although Lear appears to be thinking here only of the necessity of controlling himself, he touches on one of the most basic permanent psychic needs the moralists of Shakespeare's age proclaimed. To quote two of the *Disticha Catonis* by which Shakespeare was introduced to this postulate early in grammar school:

The commodity of nature thee never faileth
If thou be content with that that need requires.
If thou be in poverty, see patiently that thou take it,
And think how, into the world, you came all naked.

Lear is in the process of learning a lesson on the physical and moral needs of man, of which patience is one of the greatest, and that
presumably makes him feel darkly in his madness that he is no longer a mere learner, but can be now a teacher of patience to Gloucester: "Thou must be patient" (IV.vi.179). Gloucester has been deficient in patience, but it is Lear who has the greatest need.

It is through the inquiry into physical needs that Lear advances most toward self-knowledge. In agreement with the moralists' program of self-consideration, Lear probes both theoretically and practically the essential nakedness of man. When the boundless cruelty of man makes him the equal of the lowest of mankind, he defiantly rejects his coverings as symbolic of all the trappings of the civilization he has come to loathe. This moment is emphasized by his most dramatic gesture in the play, his stripping himself naked. He thus imitates Edgar, his quintessential man. The speech that accompanies Lear's gesture is his last clearly sane one before he misidentifies Edgar as a philosopher; in it, he gives the needs-of-nature theme its most pessimistic accent: man's life is as cheap as a beast's but it is more miserable, and man, natural man, is worse equipped to cope with his condition than an animal:

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.

Pessimistic as Lear's assessment of the physical condition of man is, it is quite in the tradition of humanistic self-consideration, which had pagan as well as Christian precedents. These are amply rehearsed by Perrott, according to whom a man wanting to know what he is must first answer the question of "what thou art in thy conception and natural constitution." And here one must start with the body and consider it in comparison with the animals—the passage is worth quoting at some length:

But if thou wilt enter farther into the consideration of thy natural constitution of body after thou art born, thou shalt find that, as thou art born naked, so thou dost still of thyself remain naked, having by nature no other covering or any defense save only thy bare body, but that thou dost borrow helps of other creatures, which thou accountest but as base and vile. For thou clothest and keepest thyself warm with the garments made of wool, being but the covering of
silly sheep; with skins, the natural garments of brute beasts; thou deckest thyself with silk, being but the excrements of poor worms. . . all which the needy, naked man doth borrow of beasts and of other creatures to cover, to maintain, and to adorn his weak and all-wanting body. But thou, not being content to use the help of those natural creatures, for the supply of thy natural defects, dost yet therewith take occasion to be proud, like the beggar, who, having borrowed a new coat, should therewith presently fall into liking of himself and scorn all the rest of his fellow beggars. So doth the naked unconsiderate man borrow, of birds, feathers; of beasts, skins, wool, with other coverings. . . . And, having all these helps not of himself but of other creatures, he useth them as instruments to increase his pride rather than to sustain his necessities.

(pp. 12-13)

Perrott's contrasting comparison of man and animals derives from Pliny. Shakespeare, it has been suggested, read it in a passage of Montaigne, beginning, " Truly when I consider man all naked." It might be noted, however, that Perrott's version of the commonplace has equivalents for the "worm," "sheep," and "hide" of Shakespeare's version, but Montaigne does not; Perrott, it is true, lacks an equivalent for "perfume," which Montaigne has. In this as in other significant statements of man, Shakespeare, just like Perrott and Montaigne, seems to have made his own commonplace from various sources of the particular topos. These, besides Pliny, included a biblical-theological tradition of consideration in which to "consider" is the key word, deriving from Hebrews 2:6: "What is man that thou shouldst be mindful of him? or the son of man that thou wouldst consider him!" (Genevan only; Bishops has "thou visitest him.") The likening of man's condition to beasts comes from a related passage, Ecclesiastes 3:18-19: "I considered in mine heart the state of the children of men that God had purged them; yet to see too they are in themselves as beasts. For the condition of the children of men and the condition of beasts are even as one condition unto them. As the one dieth, so dieth the other; for they have all one breath, and there is no excellence of man above the beast; for all is vanity." When Lear says to Edgar—it is this sentence that sets him off on his consideration of man—that he were better in his grave, he refers to this temporal condition of man.

This condition was deeply probed in the contemptus mundi tradition and in the new naturalism of the later sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries, which borrowed some of its colors from tradi-
tional Christian pessimism. “Let man then, with tears, consider whereof he is made, what he doth and what he meaneth to do” is George Gascoigne’s rendering of one of the first sentences of Pope Innocent’s *De Humanae Miseriae Conditione.* Pierre Boaistuau’s *Theatrum Mundi*, a later product of this tradition, “considered” man very similarly, repeatedly using this key word. In one passage it serves to introduce the same Plinian commonplaces used by Shakespeare:

Now therefore—having well considered the universal state of man—it is requisite to make a most ample discourse of this matter and to contemplate man more near, to the end that he learn to humble himself under the hand of his God. . . . among all the heathen, Pliny, as me seemeth, hath most worthily philosophied of our nature. . . . Let us consider a little, saith he, how it behooveth a man to cover his body at the dispensation of beasts, who, being favorable of their natural liberality, bring even from the belly of their dams some, feathers; others, hair, skin, scales; and others, wool.

Thus, to sum up this discussion of the general sources of Lear’s consideration-of-man speech, it uses a pagan’s, that is, Pliny’s images on the physical insufficiency of man, images that were thought appropriate for illustrating Christian ideas. When Lear asks the question whether man is no more than this, he introduces a familiar *topos*, which he labels by exhorting himself to “consider” man well. This prefix was expected in a pessimistic account of the material condition of man, just as Hamlet’s “what a piece of work is a man” was expected to introduce a balanced assessment of man, body and soul. As a statement on the *teipsum* that is the body, Lear’s consideration exposes, according to approved recipes, the naked self of man. And the presence of Edgar, as we have noted, makes the consideration of what man is into an object lesson.

In terms of self-search, Lear’s stripping on the heath can be said to lead only to a partial discovery. It might even be said that in seeing himself as animal-like, he approaches the naturalistic basis from which Edmund proceeds. But that would be stressing the mere outward likeness; there are indications, as in his struggle for patience even when it ironically highlights his impatience (“I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing”), that Lear reaches toward a higher wisdom.

According to humanistic prescriptions of self-knowledge, Lear
could not be said to have attained a sufficient perspective unless he gained some understanding of the nature of the soul. Virtuous pagans were expected to realize the immortality of the soul and its role in the achievement of human happiness. If Lear's questioning is to bear fruit in the sense in which the moralists thought it should, his concern with the flesh must lead to an understanding of the nature of the soul and its relationship to the body. The full spiritual significance of these matters could hardly be revealed to a pagan like Lear, but even pagans could attain good parts of this knowledge. Aristotle had developed theories about the natural soul that were approved of, and Plato, Cicero, and others had anticipated Christians in understanding the immortality of this divine essence.

I think it can be shown that Lear does concern himself in a dim, tentative way with his soul, and that this concern is the most subtle and allusive part of Lear's quest for self-knowledge. In the same sense in which Lear's initiation to poverty can be said to be the beginning of his understanding of the nature of the flesh and the body, his realization of what it is to be ill is the key to his understanding of the soul. That affliction and sickness could promote such knowledge was often noted by moralists. As Thomas Rogers said, "Sickness is necessary to bring a man to the mindfulness of himself when health hath brought forgetfulness. . . . Plato is reported never to have favored philosophy before sickness made him to know himself." 10 And The Defence illustrated by this notable example the paradox "That it is better to be sick than always healthful" (Declaration 10):

Plato, the philosopher, because he felt himself strong and overmighty in nature to follow his study as he ought, chose for his place of abiding a watery, marshy ground, a discontented air, where heaven showed none other but dark and pitchy clouds, that thereby he might become sick and so have means to refrain the tedious and perilous assaults of the flesh wherewith he felt himself sometimes pricked and moved. For his advice was that a good mind could not flourish if first of all the flesh was not overmastered.11

Lear demonstrates early in the play an interest in illness, conceiving it as a dominance of the flesh; but later in the storm, suffering grievously in his own body, he contradicts this explanation with one that more nearly approaches that of The Defence. When—this is the first instance—Cornwall refuses to receive him, the old man protests furiously that as a king and father he deserves better
treatment, but then he seeks to excuse the earl by what he thinks he knows of physical matters:

May be he is not well.
Infirmity doth still neglect all office
Whereunto our health is bound; we are not ourselves
When nature, being oppress'd, commands the mind
To suffer with the body.

(II.iv.103-7)

Although this may seem a simple statement, it touches on the much-discussed problem of the interaction of body and soul, and it does so in highly technical language. There were, one might say, two divergent attitudes: that of Aristotle and the Aristotelians, according to which the body influences the mind; and that of Plato and the Stoics, supported by The Defence, according to which the mind must reject such influence. The wording of Lear's excuse reflects these two attitudes though siding with Aristotle. From Plato comes the idea that "nature commands the mind" (although the Platonic "nature" commands the mind to control the body rather than to suffer with it). As George Gascoigne translated (without acknowledgment) the well-known passage from Phaedo (86 A), "The body and the mind being in one, nature doth yet command the body to be governed, to serve, and to be subject. But it commandeth the mind or the soul to rule and bear dominion." Lear uses the first part of this statement, that nature commands the mind, but he disregards the Platonic injunction that the mind should rule the body. Instead, he finishes his explanation by borrowing from the Aristotelian (or, as it is now assumed, pseudo-Aristotelian) De Physiognomica. This work begins with a sentence that John Woolton translated as follows:

For there is such a sympathy between the body and soul that the inclination of the soul followeth the constitution of the body and is affected with the motions thereof, as it may be evidently seen in gluttony, drunkenness, and diseases of the body, when the mind is oppressed with dullness and sorrow.

On the following page, Woolton paraphrased "sympathy" as "compassions and suffering of the soul and body together," a phrase that resembles Lear's "the mind to suffer with the body." Clearly, Lear's words show Shakespeare's knowledge, in whatever way
acquired, of the psychological terminology that goes back to Plato and Aristotle.

But the point is not that Lear is accurate in his terminology, nor even that the application of the Aristotelian doctrine of the sympathy of body and soul to Cornwall is quite meaningless, since Cornwall is not physically ill—like Regan and Goneril, of course, he does suffer from a worse illness, that of the soul. The point is rather that Lear before the storm signally stresses the physical above the psychic and spiritual elements, and that Aristotle's conception of the soul as a physically oriented phenomenon was, to the moralists, one-sided. Brysket explained that

Aristotle in his books *De Anima* spoke of the soul as she was natural and the form of the body, performing her operations together with the body, and as she was the mover of the body and the body moved by her, but not as she was distinct or separate from the body. And right true it is that, while she is tied to the body, she cannot understand but by the means of the senses; but, that being free and loosed from the body, she has not her proper operations, that is most false.\(^\text{14}\)

Lear could hardly be expected to realize the freedom of the soul in its immortality, the sense in which Brysket uses the word "free"; but it is significant that in the storm he discovers the distinctness and separateness of the soul in a way that directly contradicts what he said at Cornwall's door—an indication that he has, in the words of *The Defence*, "overmastered the flesh." Exposed to the elements, but yet suffering even more cruelly mentally, Lear learns how much worse psychic pain is than physical torture. His mental strain reaches such intensity that it all but obliterates his physical discomfort. In raging with the elements, he denies what he said about Cornwall and proclaims the dominance of the mind:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm } \\
\text{Invades us to the skin; so 'tis to thee, } \\
\text{But where the greater malady is fix'd } \\
\text{The lesser is scarce felt. . . . } \\
\text{When the mind's free } \\
\text{The body's delicate; the tempest in my mind } \\
\text{Doth from my senses take all feeling else, } \\
\text{Save what beats there.}
\end{align*}
\]

(III.iv.6–14)
Sir John Davies said similarly, "when the body's strongest sinews slake, / Then is the soul most active, quick, and gay." And Lear's advocacy of the hegemony of the soul is the same Platonic one as in Tommaso Buoni's *Problems of Beauty and All Human Affections* (trans. 1606), where the body-soul interactions are discussed in a series of "problems" (numbers 101-7). Buoni asked and tentatively answered such questions as why the grief of the body is communicated to the mind, and the grief of the mind to the body, and why grief in general is "more sensible and violent in soft and delicate bodies." And, again apropos of Lear, Buoni asked in problem 103: "Why are the griefs of the mind far greater than those of the body?" What Buoni took for granted, Lear discovers through suffering.

A recognition of the immortality of the soul might have come next in Lear's discovery, but Shakespeare did not provide it, or, he did not quite provide it. However, I believe that Lear's prayer on the heath does have some intimations of immortality, that is, some indications in the wording and the imagery that he dimly feels the soul's immortality. He approaches the notion through a widening of his sympathies, through a realization that there is something in others, even in the lowest of mankind, that deserves protection and help. The boundless cruelty of those from whom he had most right to expect gratitude frees him from the human and social limitations of his position, from the arrogance into which he grew and which was fed by the flattery around him. When the winds in their fury catch his white hair and make "nothing" of it, he experiences the paradox of nothing, of being nothing in the eyes of the world, but yet being much better than he was before. He becomes the equal of the lower, suffering part of mankind; he feels the needs of others. He urges Kent and the Fool to enter the protection hovel first, quite contrary to the order of rank of which Shakespeare's audience was more conscious than we are. Gloucester, interestingly, makes a similar altruistic gesture and directly associates it with the care of the soul when he asks that clothes be given to the almost naked Edgar: "And bring some covering for this naked soul" (IV.i.45).

And Gloucester, like Lear, follows his act with a prayer for a better distribution of commodities.

Lear's prayer, at first sight, seems to be lacking any indication that he seeks for a spiritual meaning, addressed as it is to physical needs and to the establishment of social justice. But the first part of the prayer contains some subtle spiritual notes:
Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these?

(III.iv.28-32)

For an audience brought up on the Bible, as the Jacobeans were, this house-garment imagery would surely have provided an intimation that Lear is groping his way toward an understanding not merely of the body but also of the soul. In 2 Corinthians 5:2-5, Paul described naked man as sighing for being “clothed with our house, which is from heaven.” Elizabethan moral literature accustomed Shakespeare’s contemporaries to associate house-garment metaphors with the body, the earthly house and covering of the soul, and with heaven, its ultimate home and garment. These were metaphors that, with warnings against luxury, must have sounded from many an Elizabethan pulpit. 16 Although Lear’s prayer has no explicit Christian reference, it uses evocatively a traditional religious imagery associated with the soul and thus makes Lear’s prayer significant not only in his struggle for social justice but also for a greater awareness of the needs of his soul.

Lear must, after all, seek to establish his own measure of the soul, as he must seek to gauge the depth of hell and the distance of heaven; he is not in the possession of Perrott’s reassuring handbook. His probing of these outer limits is beyond the confines of this study. But we may touch, at least for a moment, on the awesome Centaur speech, which has implications not only for Lear’s hell but also for that of man in general. It is a mad speech, with its virulent attack on the lasciviousness of women and their simpering hypocrisy, and, most of all, with the reference to that hell beneath their girdle—that “sulphurous pit—/ Burning, scalding, stench, consumption” (IV.vi.128-29). The vivid image suggests that this hell has always been a disturbing reality in Lear’s imagination; the ounce of civet he asks now to sweeten it is an ironically inadequate means. Lear, it appears, has never been able to love wisely either paternally or sexually (but to be wise and love exceeds man’s might). What the speech may imply about Lear’s earlier sexuality or his conception of heaven and hell we can only guess; as Lear is raving, we can be sure only that it is a continuation, in a more strident key, of the crusade against the flesh that he began when he was still sane.
We are on safer, more conventional nosce teipsum grounds when Lear probes the condition of man between birth and death—what man is. In the voice of the preacher, he harangues Gloucester:

Thou must be patient; we came crying hither.
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee. Mark.
Glou. Alack, alack the day!
Lear. When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.

(IV.vi.179–84)

Shakespeare here has Lear turn a simple moral commonplace into a reason-in-madness lesson on the wisdom that comes from seeing mankind in perspective. Lear’s “text” is biblical, one often quoted by the moralists to illustrate what man is by his natural condition: “And when I was born, I received the common air and fell upon the earth, which is of like nature, crying and weeping at the first as all the others do. . . . For there is no king that has any other beginning of birth. All men have one entrance unto life and a like going out” (Wisdom 7:3–6). Lear’s metaphor of the world as a stage, a Renaissance topos, evolves naturally from the biblical figure of the entrance and exit of life. If the actors on Lear’s stage are fools, so were they for Erasmus’s Stultitia: “Good Lord, what a theater is this world? How many and diverse are the pageants that fools play therein.” 17 Lear’s, like Stultitia’s, is a peculiar perspective on life, but one that has analogues in the moral literature concerned with self-knowledge. Pierre Boaistuau, for instance, explained at length in his Preface that men, born naked and crying, develop many different roles for themselves in the theater of life until death comes and “maketh an end of this bloody tragedy. . . . And then the Lord that is in Heaven laugheth at their foolish enterprises and vanities—as the Prophet David witnesseth—but with such a dreadful laughter that he maketh us quake for fear and the earth to shake.” 18 What looks like a tragedy from below is a comedy, albeit a bitter one, when seen from above as by Boaistuau’s God. And the mad Lear forcefully tries out the divine perspective.

Only for one short moment does Lear’s vision of truth become sane and strong, in the fourth act, as he awakens from the curative sleep imposed upon him by the doctor. Lear is on the rack of this tough world; he feels as if he came out of a grave and were bound
Upon a wheel of fire. As he dimly sees Cordelia before him, he thinks of her as “a soul in bliss.” And when she asks him the identity question, “Sir, do you know me?” Lear answers, “You are a spirit, I know. / Where did you die?” (IV.vii.48–49). He is in the twilight zone between sanity and insanity; he is still “far wide,” as Cordelia says, but he is also never closer to the truth. Man is but a soul or a spirit and that divine creature is most poignantly one. Lear’s visionary insight is accompanied by a new and true humility, in which he kneels and confesses to be a foolish, fond old man. For a moment, a precious moment, Lear knows—or, better, feels—who, what, and what manner of man he is. This is his anagnorisis and the summa epitasis of the play.

In its inward turn, Lear’s anagnorisis is a much less intellectual process than the self-recognition of Perrott’s Consideration. Of all those in Shakespeare’s plays, it is the most dream-like and precarious. It demonstrates Shakespeare’s turn toward fideism, a turn that also agreed with the baroque tendency to see the strongest kind of experience as an emotional condition. Of the descriptions of states of the soul by Renaissance moralists and physicians, Lear’s self-discovery approaches most that of the supersanity of a trance. In such a state, the soul was said to rely on its “inward sense” with little help from the outer ones. As Sir John Davies put it, the soul sees with “a power above the senses.”

Timothy Bright argued that this state was an anticipation of the separation of soul and body. The soul could also experience this anticipation in some dreams that are “a kind of ecstasy or trance and separation of the soul from this bodily society, in which it hath been in old time instructed of God by revelation and mysteries of secrets revealed unto it, as then more fit to apprehend such divine oracles than altogether enjoying awake the corporal society of these earthly members.”

If the diagnosis be accepted that Lear’s self-recognition is an initiation into a “mystery of secrets” in the sense that Lear’s soul intuitively grasps its needs and experiences the value of goodness, something can also be said in explanation of the state of his soul when he sinks into madness again, without attributing to him either a blabbering idiocy or a vision of an impending salvation for himself and Cordelia. As Lear and Cordelia are led captive onto the stage, the latter asks whether they shall now see “these sisters and these daughters,” and Lear shrinks from the evil reality. The fourfold “no,” which anticipates the fivefold “never” just before his death, be-
trays his desire to cling to his happy vision. He would rather withdraw to the prison as to a birdcage and warble, birdlike, an escapist dream:

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too—
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out—
And take upon's the mystery of things
As if we were gods' spies; and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

(V.iii.8-19) 21

Lear's speech has an almost surrealistic quality. The curious idea of singing with Cordelia like birds in a cage hints that for Lear the prison will be the house of madness from which even laughing at gilded butterflies can bring no deliverance; Lear craves in vain for the happiness of a bird. But there is still a soft echo of his former search for more important goals. The prison or cage was after all the conventional symbol of the body that fettered the soul—it is so in Richard's speech at Pomfret Castle—and birds were symbolic of the imprisoned soul. There is, for instance, a plethora of such images in Thomas Walkington's *The Optic Glass of Humors* (1606), in which the body is described as a "darksome cage" and the soul as "not so blind as a bat; yet is it like an owl," and, freed from its prison, like "a high-soaring eagle." 22 For Palingenius, the soul, "Like as the goldfinch while in cage, her doleful destiny / With sundry sorts of pleasant tune doth seek to pacify." 23

When Lear would like to beguile his time in this bird-like existence by taking upon himself and Cordelia "the mystery of things," the irony between his expectation and the hope of its fulfillment appears overwhelming. I doubt that the words have blasphemous overtones, as Professor Elton suggests; 24 Lear is not concerned with an overcurious inquiry, thought unlawful by some, into the mystery of nature. It is more natural to associate this wish with his happy, dream-like state at his reunion with Cordelia. In dreams, said John
Davies of Hereford, the soul often “doth wakeful thoughts conceive, / Making the mind beyond itself to spy” 25—an analogue that serves Davies to support the legitimacy of visionary experiences of the soul. Whatever the mystery is Lear seeks to spy into, it is clear that in its permanence it contrasts with the pseudo-achievements of “packs and sects of great ones / That ebb and flow by th’ moon.” There is a hint here of Lear’s desire to leave the world of mutability for the higher regions above the moon. Palingenius, speaking about the soul in the prison of the body, asked his readers to “mind these mysteries I tell: / All things are good and never fade above the moon that dwell.” 26 But Lear cannot fly to this region; he must live below the moon where all is “naught and ill.” Just when Lear appears to be at the point of establishing a saving intercourse with his true self, madness irrevocably engulfs him. His desire to learn of “the mystery of things” is merely a pathetic echo of his former search for self-knowledge.

His last entrance with the dead Cordelia in his arms is heartbreaking, and one wishes with Kent that one might let him pass and vex not his ghost. Surely no further revelation of either self-knowledge or divine knowledge can be read into his speeches. He has passed beyond them. Neither Gloucester nor he dies into love, joy, or knowledge. Gloucester’s heart breaks in a conflict it is too weak to sustain. If one took the usual position of Renaissance moralists, one might call his death a warning against excessive joy as well as grief. But that would be mere pedantry. The ending is stark, tragic—an apocalyptic vision that conjures up an image of the end of a decaying world. Lear tortures himself as much with the vain hope that Cordelia may be alive as with the conviction that she is “dead as earth” (V.iii.261). Why a dog, a horse, a rat should have life and Cordelia no life at all is finally unanswerable. Lear’s despair is cosmic, and his five-times repeated “never” denies any consolation. Whatever he may see on Cordelia’s face when he utters his final “look there,” even if it were a sign of life or an escaping breath, does not matter; it is at best an illusion; at worst, the reality. In either case, our normal reaction is to feel heartbroken that now, when he has fathomed the value of Cordelia, he cannot live with her. His final pathetic request, “Pray you undo this button,” recalls in ironic contrast his earlier defiant divesture of his clothes in the storm. Once he could strip the self of man; now he has to seek help to breathe more easily.

What this starkly tragic ending does to the meaning of the play
is a much-debated question. Perhaps no universally valid answer can be given; we are addressed here too personally and individually. We may say with Kent—and it appears to be the first and most natural reaction—that all is cheerless, dark, and deadly. Or we may say something similar by quoting Gloucester’s earlier words that men are like flies to the gods, who kill them for their sports. Certainly, if one is affected by this play at all, he cannot come away from it “feeling good” about man and his place in the scheme of things. But somehow, an unlimited pessimism is an incomplete reaction to the ending and to the play; taking this attitude means accepting the point of view of a character who has grown prematurely old in his sympathetic suffering with the greatest of the play’s sufferers and who is destined soon to depart on another “journey,” and it means echoing the passionate outcry of an old man driven into temporary despair by the pain inflicted on him by man’s cruelty. These are partial reactions, and they are only partially valid. For these characters, pessimism is a personal response; for us, it is a much too external one like counting the dead, commenting on the absurdity of fate, and going about our business. Somehow, we are asked to say (I am almost tempted to say “do”) more: we are asked to say what we feel, and thus to assimilate our attitude in some manner to the speaker’s, Edgar’s, sympathetic humanity. And what we have come to feel about Lear is very much influenced not only by his suffering but also by the ethical transformation, however incomplete and finally negated, we have seen him undergo. The material values on which he put his trust, his power and authority, have proved insubstantial; the spiritual values, which he rejected as nothings, have given him whatever small and dim consolation he achieves. And we have seen him suffer and, in his suffering, have gauged the potential greatness of his soul. We have experienced a similar regenerative movement in the weaker Gloucester’s struggle for patience. Lear’s plunge into madness and death and the cracking of Gloucester’s heart make their moments of sanity and strength stand out even more saliently.

Shakespeare does not permit his characters to spy into the mystery of things, if by that is meant the way of the gods or of God with men, nor does he explain this mystery to us. Neither does he altogether explain some human mysteries. Palingenius said that man cannot know God’s mysteries, he can only know himself.27 But by the time of Lear, Shakespeare had grown away from the definiteness of the “know” in this statement. Not only the design of the universe but
also the springs of man's actions had become more mysterious to him. I have contended that Lear does spy a little into the inner mystery, that of the human soul; but it is certainly much more significant that both he and Gloucester and other characters in the play have experienced a mystery in themselves and in others: the mystery of evil and good. If we are to say what we feel at the end of the play, we must speak of the mystery of evil; but we must also pay tribute to the mystery of goodness: to the miraculous goodness of Cordelia, the loyal goodness of Kent, the just goodness of Albany, the active goodness of Edgar, and, not the least, the growing toward goodness of Lear. That there is so much goodness in the darkest and greatest tragedy of Shakespeare is one of the most remarkable paradoxes.