CHAPTER FOUR

THE LATER HISTORY OF THE THEME:
DISPLACEMENT OF THE IDEAL IN
HAMLET AND KING LEAR

Less a chronicle play than King Lear, Hamlet is even more remote than Lear in its connections with the history plays and with Antony and Cleopatra. But no account of Shakespeare's development can ignore Hamlet, either as a great work in its own right or as a play that raises questions that are answered only by King Lear. In Shakespeare's development Hamlet and the history plays converge upon King Lear from different directions; and if we are to be concerned eventually with the relation between King Lear and Antony and Cleopatra, then it is important to indicate, however briefly, the place of Hamlet in Shakespeare's development as I have been tracing it.

The ghost in Hamlet, then, is the outgrowth of Caesar's will, the ambiguous dramatic artifact that we must assess rightly in order to keep the issues of the play clearly in focus. Caesar's will, which bears closely upon the problem of political order, a problem common to the history plays as well as to Julius Caesar, is introduced at a time and place at which it breaks the continuity of the action and disorients our thought. But in Hamlet we are made to confront the ghost before anything has intervened, so the ambiguity of its status becomes a very hinge to the plot. Then, while the ghost's identity as a murdered king keeps before us the problem of order in the state, its ambiguous status as a ghost—sent either from heaven or from hell—serves to universalize the temporal into a cosmic problem of the providential structure of the universe itself. Because of the ghost's identity as Hamlet's father, the question of its origin
becomes finally a question of the origin of the doctrine of order; and Hamlet's immediate task, to vindicate order with justice through revenge, constitutes the severest, if most indirect, test of that doctrine that Shakespeare had yet conceived.

*Hamlet* is not so overtly political as the earlier plays I have discussed or the later *King Lear* and *Macbeth*; here the rottenness in Denmark, even as it spreads, is I think an ancillary issue. In the series of correspondences among the cosmos, the state, and the person, the middle term is minimized in comparison to the earlier plays, and the emphasis falls upon the relationship between the other two, particularly upon Hamlet's inner conflict in attempting to discover and then discharge his cosmic duty. In its temporal dimension, that duty is the one which Prince Hal had successfully performed with a severe diminution of his capacity for life, and the one which Antony in *Julius Caesar* had stabbed at uncertainly. Hamlet's duty is to purge and heal the rottenness in Denmark caused by the killing of the king. (Despite Claudius' suave efficiency as a political administrator, Shakespeare makes it increasingly clear in the latter part of the play that the crown sits uneasily upon his head, irrespective of Hamlet's knowledge of his crime.) Hamlet's role as private avenger entails the restoration of order and unity in the commonwealth, and hence the fusion of private and public values. But the fact that this role is enjoined by a ghost who proves to be heaven-sent transforms the temporal duty into a cosmic one and shifts the play's center of interest to Hamlet's inner questioning of that duty as it affects both his relationship to his immediate environment and to life itself.1

If we consider not Hamlet's character but Hamlet as a character called to a strenuous and frightening task, we must recognize that he impulsively tries out different strategies, like Antony moving back and forth between Rome and Egypt, and that this improvisation is itself an organic part of his response. Among his many behaviors is that histrionic self-dramatization, a self-conscious overstatement verging upon self-deception, which is one of the several qualities that link him with Richard and Prince Hal and Brutus. We can see it in his first response to

• 88 •
the ghost's admonition, "Remember me," in his relations with Ophelia and his mother, and in his several comparisons of himself with Fortinbras. But this self-consciousness is never elaborate enough to build up a single false and frozen image of himself. It is interrupted and qualified by some devastating reflections upon himself and his world that leave no room for the easy comfort of self-dramatization, by moments of mindless passion and cruelty, especially toward Ophelia, that cannot be contained by self-dramatization, and by moments of Falstaffian relish for life that he will not let be stunted by self-dramatization. Hamlet's character arises not from a capacity to live by a consistently evasive image of himself but in the opposite capacity to shift rapidly from one attitude to another in an effort to encompass and absorb the full reality of his experience. And with the diminution in histrionic self-consciousness, there is the beginning of that discontinuity in thought and action that is characteristic of Antony and Cleopatra.

In one sense we can say that the self-consciousness that formerly has been prominent in the Shakespearean hero is now spread out over the whole play. The effect of slow motion produced by Hamlet, which is often explained wholly by the hero's delay, results I think from Shakespeare's unusually discursive treatment of his materials. The play is not only very long but long-winded, and not only in its treatment of Hamlet. Polonius' twenty-line speech that repeats Laertes' thirty-five lines of advice to Ophelia to keep her distance from Hamlet, the needlessly complicated employment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, all the arras-hiding and gallery-walking, and the nearly one hundred lines that it takes Claudius and Laertes to hatch their simple plan for the duel, are examples of that orotund dramatic procedure by which the play seems to hold back from itself, as if frightened by the course it is taking. The same effect is produced by the frequency of Hamlet's soliloquies, by his speeches to the players and to the skull of Yorick, and by the play-within-a-play. For all its rapid changes of locale, its eavesdropping and mousetrapping and violent action, Hamlet is enveloped in a self-conscious air of suspended
animation; and this troubled air, no less than Hamlet's personal response to his world, gives the play its pervasive atmosphere of death and its morbid interest in sniffing at mortality.

Hamlet, then, is marked by signs of Shakespeare's intellectual crisis; however, I do not think that the play is an artistic failure. In Shakespeare's intellectual development *Hamlet* represents truly a moment of suspension and not of paralysis; and within that suspension the artistic center holds. This is not the place to illustrate in detail the artistic integrity of *Hamlet*, but one particular example of it will also suggest *Hamlet*'s connection with the earlier plays I discussed, as well as with *King Lear*. It has often been remarked that Hamlet, unable to carry out his revenge, is set in sharp relief by Fortinbras and Laertes, both of whom are prompt to avenge their fathers. Now Fortinbras and Laertes, like Prince Hal's foils, Hotspur and Falstaff, do not merely duplicate each other; rather, they illustrate two opposite ways of being wrong in the same cause. Laertes, for all his French education, is a true slave of passion: he is ready to cut his enemy's throat in the church without bothering to find out who his enemy rightly is, or whether in fact he has one. Fortinbras, of whom Hamlet says that he will "find quarrel in a straw/ When honour's at the stake," is easily deflected from avenging his father's death by a fight with the Polacks over a piece of land too small to hold the corpses of those who are to die in battle. Laertes is too concerned with his father to remember his honor; Fortinbras is too concerned with his honor to remember his father; therefore they both must dream up specious causes and enemies to suit their needs. They constitute the connected poles between which Hamlet's true cause is circumscribed and defined in all its frightening complexity, and the contrast between them provides a coherent artistic context that remains stable no matter how or whether Hamlet succeeds in finding the right way to serve that filial cause which both of them have wronged.

But it is true, nevertheless, that at the very center of things Hamlet—and behind him Shakespeare—cannot find his way, or at best can only stumble upon it inadvertently at the last
minute. Placed between Fortinbras and Laertes, whose roads he knows must not be taken, Hamlet only boggles. No matter how precisely he thinks upon the event, he cannot ascertain what is the right thing to do. But with the careers of Fortinbras and Laertes unfolding before us, we can only honor Hamlet for trying to understand precisely where his duty lies. *Hamlet*, says D. G. James, “is a tragedy not of excessive thought but of defeated thought.” For Hamlet, unlike Laertes and Fortinbras, the means must justify the ends; and, in view of the ghost’s status and injunctions, the ends themselves must be freshly questioned and validated. It is characteristic of Hamlet’s temperament that he should devote himself primarily to this latter task, to finding some ethical, and eventually metaphysical, sanction for revenge that will also sanction his means. Meanwhile, however, he improves the time with whatever means suggest themselves: he puts on his antic disposition, turns away from Ophelia, baits and springs the mousetrap, stabs at the arras, unseals the letters of commission, boards the pirate ship alone, and acts with bloody decisiveness in the duel scene. In all this bustling activity he surely does not delay in taking arms against his troubles. But these various actions are unrelated to each other, or to any coherent plan directed to a particular end; some are premature, and several are in themselves foul means that must taint whatever end they might half-wittingly accomplish. Instead of avoiding the false means of Laertes and Fortinbras, Hamlet thoughtlessly tries first one and then the other. After the players’ scene has certified the ghost, he declares himself ready to “drink hot blood/ And do such bitter business as the day/ Would quake to look on.” Instead he spares Claudius at prayer in order to go tilt with Polacks in his mother’s bedroom. But once there, on the spur of a moment he stabs through the arras without really caring who is on the other side.

Hamlet needs to improvise his disconnected and eventually damning means because, for all his incitement, he is not certain what his troubles are, or whether in fact he ought to take arms against them. He cannot decide upon his immediate ends because
he cannot decide upon the ends of human life itself. This brings us to the pivotal speech in which we see his thought defeated, the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. This speech is not concerned simply and exclusively with suicide. The reasons given why men shear off from suicide are the very same reasons why “enterprises of great pith and moment/ With this regard their currents turn awry.” One such additional enterprise for Hamlet must be avenging his murdered father. The question whether one is “To be or not to be” is more than a question whether to remain physically alive amidst the world’s stale uses or to kill oneself. That is one possible pair of alternatives. But the whole speech implies that it is possible to be physically alive and still “not to be”; so Hamlet’s question is also one of true and false being. Dr. Johnson and D. G. James argue that Hamlet’s “To be” refers to eternal life as against temporal life; I am inclined to agree in this instance with G. Wilson Knight’s more secular emphasis when he says that Hamlet’s “To be” means “not merely to live, to act, but really to be.” But in either view, Hamlet’s fundamental question is how we should live in order that we may really be. The ontological question is inseparable from the ethical question; the issue is not simply whether to face the vicissitudes of life but how to encounter them.

In Hamlet’s very next lines the pair of alternatives for being is followed by a pair of alternatives for conduct; and the syntactical parallelism of the two pairs suggests that at least for this moment, Hamlet, and Shakespeare, are defining “to be” as “to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune,” and are defining “not to be” as “to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them.” Now, this parallelism is not elaborated with any consistency either in the remainder of the soliloquy, where Hamlet goes on to wonder whether he should even live, let alone be, or in the immediately ensuing action of the play, as Hamlet whirs through his improvised efforts to take arms against his troubles. But after all his disconnected efforts have proved fruitless and Hamlet has come home from England spent, he makes a speech that I think rein-
LATER HISTORY OF THE THEME

states in the play the opening idea of the soliloquy and makes it the basis for the climactic action of the duel scene. Hamlet has engaged himself for the duel, but then has confessed to Horatio a premonition of disaster. When Horatio offers to call off the duel, Hamlet replies:

Not a whit, we defy augury; there's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man knows aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be. (V.ii.230 ff.)

In the soliloquy Hamlet looked unsuccessfully for a way to be unafraid of life. Here he finds a way to be unafraid of death, and he sums it up in the words "Let be." Those words appear in the second Quarto but not the Folio; and the Quarto reading, which has been adopted by modern editors, may be taken seriously here because its meaning is integral with the rest of the speech. To be sure, Hamlet is telling Horatio to let the arrangement stand and not to call off the duel. But his "Let be" also implies the definition of "To be" given in the opening lines of the soliloquy: "To be" is indeed to suffer the slings and arrows of fortune, because at the heart of life there is special providence that outmasters Fortune, a divinity rather than a turning wheel that shapes our ends. In the face of that special providence, right conduct requires us to be in a poised state of readiness for death whenever and in whatever form life brings it to us, to keep in continual practice with the sword but not to go stabbing at arrases. Therefore, let the duel be, since that is what life now brings as the providential form in which death, perhaps, will come. Thus, to fight the duel without regard to auguries of Fortune is to participate in true being.

Hamlet is speaking to Horatio, whom he has praised "As one in suff'ring all that suffers nothing": instead of taking arms against Fortune, Horatio has accepted her "buffets and rewards . . . with equal thanks." Now Hamlet proposes to do that same thing and at last becomes eligible to accomplish the revenge. In the last part of Hamlet, when the players' scene and the killing

* 93 *
of Polonius have transferred the initiative to Claudius, two new elements emerge with vivid force. One is that Hamlet displays a more stable and self-contained attitude than we have seen in him before: his behavior exhibits increasingly (though not uninterruptedly) that forbearance and passivity that he elucidates in the "readiness is all" speech. The other is that Claudius, although his smoothly functioning strategy in meeting the Norwegian threat has led us to expect that his designs against Hamlet will be equally successful, is hoist with his own petard and with him Laertes, who confesses, "I am justly killed by mine own treachery." These two elements are inextricably connected: Hamlet, by virtue of his decision to suffer Fortune's blows and still stand ready for life and death as they come, like Edgar in *King Lear*, becomes the instrument by which evil is returned upon its inventors' heads. Providence proves capable not only of catching up with a slippery character like Claudius but of converting Hamlet, after all his impetuous activity, into the willingly passive instrument necessary to its purpose.

The "readiness is all" speech, and the conduct it belatedly causes, serve to revive the idea suggested momentarily by the soliloquy. But as I have indicated, the "readiness is all" speech is not central in the play. The attitude toward life that it recommends has been exemplified in conduct only by Horatio, a bystander, and not by any character directly involved in the unfolding events. All the central characters, and not just Hamlet, have devoted themselves to taking arms against real or imagined troubles. The idea of the speech has had no precedent in action; the relationship with the soliloquy that I have claimed for it has not been made good in the structure of the play. The speech seems almost to have been inserted as a prop, to relieve for a moment the general pallor of death, and to impart some thematic dignity to the mass bloodshed of the final scene. But the speech voices another conception of the conduct of life than we have seen in the earlier plays I have discussed; it breaks fresh intellectual ground, even if that ground is not the center of action. That is why I think it proper to say that Shakespeare, in writing *Hamlet*, has reached in his development a stage of crisis...
but not paralysis. He has made a philosophical advance that has not been dramatically consolidated.

In *King Lear* the central idea of Hamlet's "readiness is all" speech is restated in more concentrated form in Edgar's words to his father when Gloucester, with better reason than Hamlet, contemplates suicide:

What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;
Ripeness is all. Come on. (V.ii.9-11)

But in *King Lear* the speech does not lie askew of the play's center as in *Hamlet*; instead it voices almost the whole meaning of the action. The good characters of the play—Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar—have lived by its precept, and have thereby made possible the purgation, contrition, and exaltation of Lear, and through Lear, of human life. This speech is made not by an admirer but by Edgar himself, who in suffering all has suffered nothing, and who thereby may emerge as the providential destroyer of evil in the deliberate glory of shining armor rather than the unwitting secrecy of a poisoned sword. Edgar's thought, moreover, has been prefigured elsewhere in the play, as a running thread in its intellectual texture; for example, in Lear's remark to Gloucester, "Thou must be patient; we came crying hither." In a word, the philosophic advance made haltingly in *Hamlet* becomes the basis of *King Lear*'s intellectual and emotional power as Shakespeare's greatest play and the fulcrum of his development. This fact gives Hamlet's "readiness is all" speech a retrospective importance far greater than is warranted by its immediate context.

But to look backward for a moment: in the plays before *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was fundamentally concerned with the problem of political order, which led inevitably to a concern with the relation between character and society in the maintenance of order. He began with a ready-made criterion, an official doctrine of order, with which to explore those relationships, and came increasingly to question the adequacy of his criterion. He discovered by his art the restriction and waste of
human vitality, through "ceremony" and self-dramatization, indigenous to a society governed by the doctrine; he was led to imagine, in *Julius Caesar*, a situation in which it becomes questionable whether society can be governed in any case by a doctrine whose precise relevance to the immediate circumstances keeps shifting. In the English plays the order of society was problematic, but the doctrine of order was not; in *Julius Caesar*, the doctrine itself becomes problematic, and *Hamlet* inherits the problem. At this point, necessarily, Shakespeare's center of attention shifts from political order to cosmic order, to the metaphysical sanctions for a temporal doctrine that has come into question. Revenge, unlike rebellion, is concerned directly and immediately with the providential structure of the universe, the cosmic order that allegedly supports the temporal order. In *Hamlet*, the standard doctrine of temporal order just manages to survive this test. There turns out to be a divinity that shapes our ends, certifying the ghost, returning evil upon its authors, and restoring health to the rotted state by providential means beyond man's power to direct and despite his efforts to oppose. But in thus vindicating indirectly the doctrine of order, *Hamlet* does not fully resolve the related problem of conduct, the relation of public to private values, which has been at issue all along. On the one hand, Hamlet is not given to the elaborate posturing of Richard and Prince Hal and Brutus because he is confronting the ethical questions that their histrionics are designed to evade. On the other hand, he cannot achieve the impassivity of Horatio soon enough to make it count because he does not find in time a proper answer to his double-barreled question, "To be or not to be." In the gallery of Shakespeare's heroes, Hamlet wanders back and forth between two types, one not quite dead, the other still unborn; and that is one reason for his fascination as a character. I think it is also one reason why the play is soaked in an atmosphere of death that frequently emanates from Hamlet himself. Unable either to evade his problem by self-dramatization or to resolve it by forbearance, often Hamlet has nothing to do but rail against the world and its uses, in that *de contemptu* imagery of sickness and rot which
has often been remarked. And Hamlet's revulsion from life, in its philosophic bent if not its tone of nausea, anticipates Lear's final wish to be released from the uses of this world and to look down from his comfortably walled prison upon the human comedy as a spy from God.

II

I have made much of the word be in Hamlet; and the importance of nothing in King Lear is well known. It is not too much to say that these two plays constitute Shakespeare's essay on being and nothingness in both the Augustinian and Sartrian meanings of those words. In King Lear Shakespeare completes his long negotiation with the doctrine of order that he inherited from his culture. He finally affirms that doctrine with great conviction, but with a sharply curtailed faith in its scope and importance. In the history plays he had explored the human cost of preserving order, and the discrepancy between public and private values, in a world whose ultimate value was order itself. In Julius Caesar he had questioned whether order can be maintained as a coherent value, either ultimate or proximate, without regard to cost. King Lear answers that question affirmatively, but only by denying that order can be a final value. In the earlier plays order was sought (in the very different ways of Prince Hal, Henry V, Brutus, and Mark Antony) by taking arms against disorder and thereby fragmenting human character by wrenching apart public and private values. In King Lear Shakespeare links the doctrine of order to the doctrine of conduct that he had explored in Hamlet: now at last order is guaranteed by those like Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar, for whom there is no gap between public and private values, and hence no self-dramatization, because they are able to suffer the slings and arrows of fortune on behalf of the traditional principle of order. But this act of forbearance is seen finally as a means and not an end, as a minimum condition of life that preserves us from chaos and dissolution but is not in itself the fulfilment of our humanity. On the one hand, King Lear confirms
what *Hamlet* had anticipated and proves the doctrine of order in the most convincing way possible: it shows a world with an almost unlimited capacity for evil and disorder, providentially brought to rights by those who live according to the traditional doctrine of order. On the other hand, that proof implies an acceptance of the world's enormous potentiality for disorder, a recognition that the problematics of the social order are a permanent condition of life. *King Lear* does not reveal conditions under which social order may become immutable and universal peace be guaranteed indefinitely; the play assures us only that when society falls apart, as it is bound to do from time to time, certain constructive forces of Nature are equally bound to come forward and restore it. Once Shakespeare has earned this assurance by the insight achieved through his art, the problem of order is over for him, and the question arises: Where does life go from here? For the highest powers of human life are not exhausted in the bare maintenance of a social order that contains within it, necessarily, a cyclic potentiality for disruption. In his effort to discover the life beyond politics that yet cannot be free of politics, Shakespeare went on to write *Antony and Cleopatra* and his last plays, which are no less serious than *King Lear*. We must now begin to trace this progression.

None of Shakespeare's tragedies more wholly contains its end in its beginning than *King Lear*; and in the beginning is Lear's self-dramatization. It is often argued that Lear's original mistake, and the source of all his woe, is resigning the kingship and dividing the kingdom among his daughters. According to the traditional doctrine of order, this abrogation is an offense against both divine and natural law from which only chaos can result; and in that respect, *King Lear* certainly bears out the doctrine. But I do not think Shakespeare is performing anything like so mechanical and limited a demonstration of the doctrine at this stage of his maturity. Lear has made his decision to abdicate before the play begins, and in the first scene he proposes to divide the kingdom in a public ceremony whose express purpose is "that future strife/ May be prevented now" and the
peaceful continuity of political order be assured. The first scene goes on to demonstrate, with an unparalleled rigor and amplitude of evidence, that Lear’s mistake lies not in the wish of an eighty-year-old man to resign the burden of kingship but in the histrionic means he chooses to execute his purpose, the speech-making contest that leads inexorably to the rejection of those who truly love him, Cordelia and Kent. This rejection, and not the division of the kingdom, is the mainspring of the action; and it is here that Shakespeare comes to grips with the doctrine of order.

The nature of Lear’s mistake, from which momentous consequences are to follow, is worth being precise about, and, at the risk of seeming to quibble, I must press this argument. It would be wholly uncharacteristic of Shakespeare to allow his protagonist to commit the tragic error offstage before the play begins. Moreover, even if he were so awkwardly obscure, he would not muddy the waters further by devoting the play’s first scene to the protagonist’s second mistake and making it the single cause of universal disapprobation by an eloquent group of choric characters, including the villains of the play. Before the first scene has ended, Cordelia, Kent, France, Goneril, and Regan—fully half the number of people on the stage besides Lear himself—have separately called our attention to Lear’s folly in judging his daughters by their speeches and therefore rejecting Cordelia and Kent. But nobody has said a critical word about Lear’s decision to resign the throne and divide the kingdom. Kent, who is now ready to risk his life in order to convince Lear that he has misjudged Cordelia, originally had the opportunity to confess privately to Gloucester, without risking Lear’s displeasure, whatever misgivings he might have had over Lear’s decision to divide the kingdom. Instead, he only voiced surprise that in the division Lear did not favor Albany over Cornwall, a favoritism that, according to standard doctrine, would have compounded the evil of dividing the kingdom in the first place. Shakespeare’s whole procedure in the first scene not only ignores but implicitly rejects the possibility that Lear’s mistake was the division of the kingdom.
Instead, it is Lear's self-dramatization, first in his anticipation of flattering speeches from his daughters, and then in his response to Cordelia's refusal to gratify him, that causes both the disruption of the state and Lear's personal suffering. In order to soften the stark reality of his final surrender of political power, Lear misappropriates that power to private ends and misuses it to force upon his daughters a false test of filial piety. Once his mistake is exposed by Cordelia's refusal to humor him, he retreats further and further into a false image of himself as wronged omnipotence, like Richard and Prince Hal and Brutus and Caesar under comparable pressures. This is reflected in the vehemence with which he disowns Cordelia, and then in the banishment of Kent:

Hear me, recreant!
On thine allegiance, hear me!
Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow—
Which we durst never yet—and with strain'd pride
To come between our sentence and our power,—
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,—
Our potency made good, take thy reward.
Five days we do allot thee for provision
To shield thee from diseases of the world,
And on the sixth to turn thy hated back
Upon our kingdom. If, on the tenth day following,
Thy banish'd trunk be found in our dominions,
The moment is thy death. Away! By Jupiter,
This shall not be revok'd. (I.i.169-82)

Clearly, the "strain'd pride" is Lear's, since the kingdom is no longer his to defend, and since the arbitrary power he invokes on the flimsiest pretext was not rightfully his even when the kingdom was. But on the ceremonial occasion of surrendering his power, Lear needs desperately to assert his authority, to invoke the image of a king without the humane judgment that befits the conduct of a king. And just as the disowning of Cordelia led to the banishment of Kent, so now Lear becomes entangled in his image of himself as the play unfolds, and increasingly loses touch with the actual circumstances of his life, until the storm and his madness come to purge him.
At the end of the first scene, Shakespeare makes Lear's self-dramatization an excuse for his evil daughters' harshness; ironically, they use "the infirmity of his age" and Lear's "unruly waywardness" as reasons for turning against him. Lear continues to exhibit these qualities by his distracted behavior in Goneril's household; for example, he capriciously engages the disguised Kent in a single speech—"If I like thee no worse after dinner, I will not part from thee yet"—and then goes on to call for his dinner and his fool with childish impatience. If we had not heard Goneril's and Kent's original warnings against her, and if we had not seen Goneril instruct Oswald to insult her father, we could almost side with Goneril when she confronts Lear.

**Lear.** Are you our daughter?

**Gon.** Come, sir,
I would you would make use of that good wisdom
Whereof I know you are fraught, and put away
These dispositions that of late transform you
From what you rightly are.

**Fool.** May not an ass know when the cart draws the horse?
Whoop, Jug, I love thee!

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

**Fool.** Lear's shadow.

**Lear.** I would learn that; for, by the marks of sovereignty,
Knowledge, and reason, I should be false persuaded
I had daughters.

**Fool.** Which they will make an obedient father.

**Lear.** Your name, fair gentlewoman?

**Gon.** This admiration, sir, is much o' th' savour
Of other your new pranks. I do beseech you
To understand my purposes aright.
As you are old and reverend, you should be wise.

*(I.iv.238-61)*

* 101 *
Later the Fool is to echo Goneril and tell Lear he should not have been old before he became wise. Goneril is entirely accurate in identifying Lear's histrionic behavior, and in calling his "admiration" that image of himself by which he must now live, since he has relied upon it in cutting himself off from both his public office and his only loving daughter.

In the history plays self-dramatization was a symptom of public disorder, an unstable reflection through the protagonist's image of himself of some prior maladjustment in his society. Then, in the ambiguous treatment of his materials in Julius Caesar, Shakespeare anticipated the reversal of the relationship between public and private elements that now emerges in King Lear, where the protagonist's self-dramatization, instead of reflecting social disorder, constitutes that very rebellion which produces disruption in the family, the state, and the world. I have stressed the nature of Lear's tragic error partly to indicate the relationship between his histrionics and those of his predecessors, but mostly because of the importance in Shakespeare's development of this reversal in the relationship between social disorder and self-dramatization, a reversal that destroys the earlier monolithic emphasis on public order as the supreme value in human life. The old emphasis had earlier been undermined by the insistence in Julius Caesar upon Rome's indestructibility despite the intrigues of the characters, and by the focus of Hamlet upon the question of private conduct. Now in King Lear, making the hero's conduct a cause and not a reflection of public disorder serves to transfer the weight of Shakespeare's emphasis from politics to ethics. At the same time, Shakespeare does not minimize the problem of order and make it ancillary to the problem of conduct, as in Hamlet and Othello. His protagonist is the king himself, whose personal conduct is the immediate source and warrant for public order. But in basing the play's action on Lear's rebellion through self-dramatization, and in making Lear's histrionic behavior sympathetically appealing in a man of his age and temperament, Shakespeare sees that public order cannot remain indefinitely stable when part of the wonder (and misery) of life lies in the un-
predictable desires of which private men are capable. According to the standard doctrine, Lear's mistake is gratuitous. It is not a political offense like tyranny, playing favorites, or unfair taxation; it does not directly impair the king's function in the commonwealth. It simply undermines the theory by which that royal function is authorized. It is such an act of self-indulgence as any citizen might commit to set off his tragedy. Thus Shakespeare recognizes that personal ethics, whose vulnerability is the permanent source of tragedy, must nevertheless be the permanent source and measure of political order. Order, then, is endlessly subject to tragic dissolution; and this fact, while it excludes the history plays' compulsive concern for the permanence of order, does not diminish but enhances the human importance of the problem of order. By subordinating it to the problem of conduct, Shakespeare transforms the problem of order from a subject for chronicle plays to a subject for tragedy.

The precise manner in which Lear's self-dramatization affronts the doctrine of order is indicated, not surprisingly, by his use of the word "nature" on two occasions during the opening scene. In proposing the speechmaking contest, he asks his daughters,

Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.  (I.1.52-54)

And in the speech already quoted in which he banishes Kent, he says,

Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow—
Which we durst never yet—and with strain'd pride
To come between our sentence and our power,—
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,—
Our potency made good, take thy reward.

The word has a more general reference in the first passage than in the second; but this difference is unimportant next to the fact that in both cases Lear makes a disjunction between "nature" on the one hand and "merit" or "place" on the other.
In the traditional doctrine these three elements are equivalent: man’s human nature is to occupy his cosmic place with merit; his place is merited by his nature; and his merit is his place in nature. To have one of these attributes is to have them all. It is possible, of course, to use the expressions “nature with merit” and “nor our nature nor our place” in a conjunctive sense, in which the two terms in each pair are meant to be synonymous. As the context makes clear, however, that is not what Lear is doing. In asking his daughters for speeches, he makes a fateful disjunction between the nature of children to love their parents and the merit of oratory whose profession of love may not be natural; and then he bets his bounty on the latter. That is why he is doubly surprised when Cordelia refuses to act upon his distinction and insists upon the identity of nature, place, and merit by saying “Nothing.” Cordelia’s plain adherence to the old doctrine affronts him in the headlong pride of his self-dramatization, and all he can manage to do is trap himself in his false distinction by disowning Cordelia.

Now Lear has opened the door of the kingdom to disruption and domination by those characters who base their ethics on his false distinction. Having disowned Cordelia and her “doctrine of nature,” Lear is stuck with his own and that of Edmund. Edmund’s soliloquy, which states the rationale for evil in the play, is nothing more than an elaboration of Lear’s distinction between nature and merit, which Edmund calls “invention”:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? . . .

... Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund
As to th’ legitimate. Fine word—’legitimate’!
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top th’ legitimate. I grow; I prosper.
Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (I.ii.1-22)
Edmund simply takes the distinction one little step beyond where Lear left it, and in the process his logic is impeccable. Where Cordelia had identified "merit" with "nature," insisting that a person's merit is his proper place and conduct within the whole structure of nature, and where Lear had denied this identification without implying an alternative, now Edmund resolves Lear's disjunction by reversing Cordelia's identification and making "merit" antecedent to "nature." Edmund insists that there is in nature no original structure but only a random distribution of talent and "invention," and that the plague of custom and its rhetoric of legitimacy frustrate our proper efforts to finally achieve the fluidity intended by Nature in her originally fortuitous distribution of talents. Cordelia's nature was a structure in which fixed gradations of place give rise to specific obligations of conduct, which mutually support the structure of the whole. For this Edmund substitutes a nature in which the only gradations are the unpredictable ones of individual wit and fortune and the only obligations are to make invention thrive and to hope for Fortune's blessing. The final aim of conduct is therefore to preserve the enticing indeterminacy of Nature and to prevent her from attaining a fixed structure that limits the bounty of Fortune but happens to be necessary to human mutuality.

Goneril echoes Edmund in the very next scene, where Shakespeare pays this philosophy its due with a profound and terrifying lucidity. Edmund has come bouncing onto the stage in the familiar guise of the Machiavel and has announced his theory to the world at large. Goneril puts the theory into practice on her father, and Shakespeare makes Lear's conduct seem to justify the treatment. In telling Oswald to "Put on what weary negligence you please" toward her father, Goneril says:

Now, by my life,
Old fools are babes again, and must be us'd
With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abus'd.

(I.iii.18–20)

Goneril's readiness to use Lear is of a piece with Edmund's "invention" aimed at abusing his father. At this point it would
have been easy for a lesser dramatist than Shakespeare to show Goneril’s criticism of Lear to be groundless, to make her evil seem unprompted and all the more melodramatically monstrous. But Shakespeare now brings Lear on the stage, in that scene of self-dramatization from which I have quoted at length, and makes his childish behavior in hiring Kent and crying for his dinner give credence to Goneril’s remark that old fools are babes again. Just as Goneril and Regan at the beginning used Lear’s rashness with Cordelia as a reason to harden themselves against him, so now Shakespeare leaves open the possibility that Lear and his knights have been so riotous as to disrupt Goneril’s household. It is true that Lear and a knight specifically deny that charge, but a great part of Lear’s behavior on the stage confirms it. Shakespeare wants it clear that even if Goneril is right about Lear’s behavior in her household, she is as wrong now as she was in the opening scene to bargain with him over it. For Goneril as for Edmund, merit is matter for invention, and man must get all he can by his wits, whether in forged speeches, forged letters, or in the use of checks and flatteries.

Or even by physical cruelty. Part of the terror in King Lear is aroused because Lear and Gloucester seem to “deserve” the Machiavellian policy wrought upon them by their wicked children. But the greater fright is in the swiftness with which that policy degenerates into an inhuman sadism that far exceeds the requirements of any policy—in the shuttlecock game by which Lear’s daughters bounce him back and forth till he is deprived of all his knights, in their turning him out in the storm to lose his wits (“Mine enemy’s dog,/ Though he had bit me, should have stood that night/ Against my fire,” Cordelia says later), and in the visible blinding of Gloucester. These acts are not necessary pieces of “invention” in the service of Edmund’s “Nature”; they do nothing to advance the Machiavellian design of the evil characters. Rather, they show the gratuitous bestiality into which mankind is inevitably betrayed by the pursuit of Machiavellian policy. Such actions lead us overwhelmingly to Lear’s question whether discarded fathers should have such
little mercy upon their own flesh, and they make his answer
our own: "... 'twas this flesh begot/ Those pelican daughters."

But there are good children who, the play tells us, redeem
Nature from the general curse to which the evil ones have
brought her. Over against Edmund and Goneril stand Cordelia
and Edgar, who have the patient readiness to endure their
parents' wrongs and still not abate their filial love or duty.
Cordelia and Edgar willingly enact the traditional doctrine of
order, on behalf of which they are ready to suffer the adversities
of fortune. Although their gratuitous action provides neither
challenge nor counterweight to the control of events by Edmund
and his cohorts, nevertheless it eventually serves to draw from
the world the poison with which it had been infected both by
Lear's original disjunction between nature and merit and by
the resulting hegemony of Edmund. Where the policied pur-
suit of Fortune's blessings by the evil children leads to mean-
ingless cruelty, the steadfast acceptance of Fortune's buffets by
the good children leads to meaningful suffering, and thereby
lights their parents' way out of Edmund's and Goneril's mid-
night world. Having to acknowledge of the older children that
human flesh can beget such pelicans is the price to be paid for
having these children answer for the permanence of love out
of which to weave the fabric of human life.

III

Lear's tragic suffering, which was made possible in the first
place by Cordelia's truth, carries him eventually from his
negotiated place in Goneril's household back into the arms of
Cordelia. In Lear's onslaught of madness there is something so
apparently unmediated by art that the play has always been
painful to witness on the stage, and about such pain it is hard
to speak clearly. We must keep before us the character and
extent of Lear's transformation, because in the bleak ending
of King Lear there is no other evidence for the practical efficacy
of suffering love in the good children, no other hope for the

• 107 •
refreshment of life, than the change we have witnessed in Lear himself. To ignore that change because it is familiar, or to misread its place among other prominent elements in the denouement, is to misapprehend the play's grim outcome.

Lear's chastisement by a storm of nature without and within passes through several distinct stages, and merely the first of these is his recognition, still on this side of madness, of his brotherhood with other men and his former carelessness toward them. Stripped of his knights and denied even shelter in a storm, Lear's first reaction had been to tax the elements for joining with his wicked daughters to hurt a man so old, helpless, and almost innocent. That self-pity, however, was the last layer of Lear's former self-dramatized image of himself. Now, finally, he forgets himself and thinks of others. He makes the Fool precede him into the shelter as a prelude to his speech,

Poor naked wretches, whereso'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? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! 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.28–36)

But Lear and we are not permitted to rest even in this deep and difficult knowledge; we are only allowed to imagine for the last time that what has gone wrong was merely adventitious and may still be put right by a corrective on the existing scales of justice, with the superflux of one side shifted to the other. But for Shakespeare, Lear's original deed has pushed the world too far out of kilter to be rebalanced so easily. Not only is the specific character of order as defined by traditional doctrine now in question but also the very source and possibility of order in the world. Lear has earned by his error the need to face that question, and therefore he must now go mad. He must descend into the original chaos of Nature out of which the order of justice in society, as well as the order of the human mind itself,
must be formed and reformed. It is a descent into nothingness out of which something may yet come; and Lear's ultimate royalty is to make that descent.

Lear next goes through an intermediate stage in the mock trial of Goneril and Regan. In seeking to present evidence in court against them and in all his talk of robed justice, equity, arraignment, and oath-taking, he is appealing to ostensible forms of justice no longer applicable to his experience, and his discovery of the irrelevance carries him fully and finally into madness.

When at last he comes on the stage at Dover wearing his crown of weeds, there is no further descent from sanity—since Lear has now reached bottom—but only the lateral expansion of his encounter with original chaos. He said to Cordelia in the opening scene that nothing would come of her "nothing." But for him now total deprivation has come of it: he has lost his outward royalty, his family, knights, shelter, clothing, and wits; and yet to have lost all that, to have reached the question whether there is any cause in nature for such denudation, is to have come after all, with the precision of a philosopher, from "nothing" to nothing. Lear has passed behind human justice and now reason itself in order to find the status in Nature of this nothing; and it is now to be discovered whether nature will offer a demonic pattern for Regan's hard heart, or a benign warrant for that patience which Lear had prized and lost, or whether Nature, like Cordelia, will answer nothing.

Short of quoting this scene (IV.vi) in full, which is the one way to do justice to its dense mixture of profundity and irrelevance, we can only enumerate the most conspicuous motifs in Lear's raving. Three such elements are inextricably woven together. The first is Lear's continuing ironic affirmation of his royalty even in the midst of his impotence and loss: "No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself." "Ay, every inch a king:/ When I do stare, see how the subject quakes." "None does offend, none, I say, none; I'll able 'em." "Come come; I am a king, masters, know you that?" He keeps harping upon the absolute potency that he was so jealous to defend
against Cordelia and Kent in the beginning. Yet that he can call himself a king and his captors "masters" in a single breath indicates that his royal authority is not autonomous after all, but subject to a dispensation beyond himself. Lear has acknowledged that indirectly in a poignant speech near the beginning of this sequence:

Ha! Goneril with a white beard! They flatter’d me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything I said! ‘Ay’ and ‘no’ too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o’ their words! They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie—I am not ague-proof. (IV.vi.97-107)

Here is the same insistence upon his potency—"there I smelt 'em out"—but coupled with the sharp awareness that neither agues nor thunder will spare him. An intense pathos arises from our awareness, over and beyond Lear’s, that he has been guilty himself of what he charges against his daughters. To have a husband and yet to say she loves only her father is no doubt to say “ay” and “no” both at once. But to demand such flattery of your daughters is to be the author rather than the echo of "no good divinity." It is to wish yourself everything and to leave yourself unready for the thunder to refuse your bidding. Lear may not be aware of all he reveals in this speech; but he has discovered that for all his claims to omnipotence, his mortality is as frail as ours.

The second element in Lear’s mad discourse, closely related to his running assertion of royal authority, is a pervasive awareness of the worldwide abuse of authority cloaked by deceptive appearances: “see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handycandy, which is the justice, which is the thief?” “There thou might’st behold/ The great image of Authority:/ A dog’s obey’d in office.” “Plate sin with gold./ And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:/ Arm it in rags, a pigmy’s straw does pierce it.” Third, there is the continuing fixated rage against the
wicked daughters: "Down from the waist they are Centaurs,/ Tho women all above." "And when I have stol'n upon these son-in-laws,/ Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill." Other important ideas emerge at isolated moments in this final madness, but I do not think they affect the crucial interrelationship of the three I have mentioned. Lear keeps shuttling back and forth from his blind assertion of royal potency, to his blinding vision of the corruption of justice by the arbitrary and deceitful use of power, to his limitless rage against the corruption bred of his own loins. None of these elements can be isolated as a "theme" more important than the others; the "theme" of Lear's madness is just the configuration made by all three. Lear sees that of all the rascal beadles, whores, usurers, and cozeners whose corruptions he enumerates, none does offend because he has authorized them. By his first momentary subversion of the traditional doctrine of order, cloaked as it was in the robes of royalty, the king has coined the handy-dandy world in which "ay" and "no" cohabit and justice and thievery are indistinguishable. He keeps insisting that the king cannot be touched for coining; but he keeps seeing horribly what it is he has created, keeps facing the fact attested all round that it was his flesh begot those pelican daughters; yet even so, he keeps cursing his daughters through their husbands with "kill, kill, kill." In this total vision Lear is accepting full responsibility for his deed in the most terrifying and purifying fashion that is humanly possible: he responds to its consequences individually full in the face; he confronts and assimilates his tragic error, the world-shaking infection it produced, and his resulting inexpungable hatred of his own flesh.

Two elements are conspicuously missing from Lear's mad discourse. One is self-pity: he no longer talks about his head so old and white, as when buffeted in the storm. The other is a change of heart, an admission that he has taken too little heed of this or that. For Lear now, both self-pity and that deep pity for others expressed by his prayer in the storm are evasions of the crushing responsibility for direct encounter that I have described. Now all Lear does is simply and grandly to face and possess his guilt with a precise enumeration of its consequences

• III •
and its immutability. He redeems his crime by acknowledging it in the bright uncanny light of his madness, with the human grandeur of Greek tragedy but without the extenuating transparency of Greek reason. In possessing his crime, as in his previous suffering for it, Lear remains that bare, forked animal which is unaccommodated man. And his ability to meet this terrible occasion, to achieve without accommodation of reason the moral coherence and therefore the tragic grandeur of accepting his guilt, reassures us that finally in this world man can be accommodated.

When Lear awakens in Cordelia's tent restored from madness, he is surely not a changed man in the ordinary sense of having a new attitude toward life. From a doctrinal point of view, he has learned nothing, and he subjects Cordelia to a backward version of the play's opening scene:

*Lear.* Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.

*Cordelia.* No cause, no cause. (IV.vii.71-75)

Lear is still thinking in those bargain terms by which nature is garnished with invention. First he would trade a kingdom for a pretty speech, then a father's curse for no speech; and now that the wheel of fortune has turned, he is ready to accept poison in payment for his curse. But Cordelia is Cordelia no matter how Fortune turns, and her "no cause" now is the precise equivalent to her "nothing" before. She still loves her father according to her bond, and her next words are, "Will 't please your Highness walk?" Lear is not transfigured by rising to the height of Cordelia's vision of life. He has been barred from that forever by the original mistake ingrained in his character; he can no more learn the lesson of Cordelia than Hamlet learned the lesson of Horatio. Lear is transfigured by kneeling to Cordelia and calling himself "a foolish fond old
man.” Like Hamlet admiring Horatio, he sees the rightness of her vision of life; then he goes on to accept it on his knees. There he achieves the contrition that has been forged in the heat of his madness.

IV

Lear in his pilgrimage has found no cause in nature for hard hearts or soft. He has found no pattern of patience, no justice, no design, nothing. He has found only himself still insisting upon that royal power through which now he sees how he set the world awry, and still with his sick desire to kill his daughters. Yet in Lear's discovery of himself the play begins to unfold an order in nature wholly independent of the specific requirements of Elizabethan political doctrine. Lear's kneeling to Cordelia after his mind and the world have been tested by chaos begins the return of life to itself. If Lear can never forget that his flesh begot Goneril, at least he now remembers that it made Cordelia too. Beyond the scope of Lear's personal suffering and transfiguration, there are the forces of destruction that his original mistake set loose; and these evil forces in the world, like those within Lear, eventually play themselves out. In King Lear evil is self-destructive. Lear's original mistake empowered Edmund and the wicked sisters, and Shakespeare, in building his plot from there, went out of his way in order to assure these evil persons an absolute sway over events, by depriving the good people of the play—Kent, Edgar, and Cordelia—of any power to oppose them or even to console their suffering victims. Yet in the flush of their omnipotence the evil characters turn upon each other and themselves and bring their own wheel of fortune quickly down. The sisters kill each other. Edmund, once divested of his faith in Fortune, is able to recognize his career of evil, and before he dies attempts to rescind his death sentence upon Lear and Cordelia. This general conquest of evil by its own nature, like Lear’s victory over himself when he drops to his knees before Cordelia, reassures us with growing conviction that Nature is not capricious, as Edmund had hoped
when he identified it with Fortune, nor demonic, as Lear had feared when he ordered Regan to be anatomized, but that Nature is ultimately and just barely providential, restoring order by a process and balance at a cost almost too savage for our vision to endure.

At the heart of this conviction stands Cordelia, whose unshakable adherence to a particular doctrine of order is the play's deepest promise for the renewal of general order. Cordelia no less than Edmund knows the power of Fortune to work capriciously in the world, but that is just why she refuses to depend for life upon whirling stars or turning wheels. She and Kent and Edgar have always known that man can only stand fast for love and justice, enduring a capricious Fortune that may decree at any time his going hence even as his coming hither, if the whole structure of creation is to be maintained. Cordelia's last words in the play, when she has been taken prisoner and is beyond all hope and expectation, might have been spoken with equal relevance when her father disowned her at the beginning:

We are not the first
Who with best meaning have incur'd the worst.
For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down;
Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown.
Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?
(V.iii.3-7)

From the beginning her meaning has been the best; and her readiness to incur the worst on its behalf succeeds at last, by a hairbreadth, in rendering Fortune false by outfrowning its frown. There is something almost savage in Cordelia's speech, which reminds us—like her bristling "Nothing" in the opening scene—just whose daughter she is. We have seen the transfiguring power of her love in the tears and the "No cause, no cause" of her reunion with her father. But now her determination to confront the sisters to whose power she must still submit reminds us by its fury of Lear's curse upon Goneril and of Regan's claws upon Gloucester's eyes. Every member of this family pursues his particular design upon life with remorseless
LATER HISTORY OF THE THEME

ferocity, Lear unto madness, his daughters unto death. But Cordelia’s meaning is the best meaning; if she can pursue it to the same ultimate distance to which Regan does, then it may prevail in the world. In the last line of her speech that is what Cordelia does: she announces herself ready for that death which, when it comes, will be as gratuitous as Regan’s, and will thereby constitute the necessary living proof that men must endure even their going hence so that man in his goodness may prevail. Cordelia’s death, in all its motiveless benignity, is essential to Shakespeare’s purpose: it completes what Lear’s kneeling began and what Edmund’s conversion enlarged, the revelation by King Lear of a need for order in the human community, and an enabling goodness at the heart of Nature that cannot be overthrown.

Yet that supreme revelation, for all the thoroughness with which we have seen it achieved, brings with it very little sense of human triumph. We like to say that tragedy affirms the moral order of the universe and thereby reconciles us to life. In the process it normally exalts us with a feeling of wonder, to balance that great woe which, like blind Gloucester confronting mad Lear, we have seen feelingly. When Hamlet and Othello ask at the end to have their stories told, it is not for the sake of preserving among mankind their brightly polished memories. It is rather to convey the wonder of that divinity which has shaped this end, in spite of, and yet by means of, the vagaries of fortune. Through the wonder of the hero’s story we may apprehend the grandeur of human life even while facing the scene of death; and this total vision uplifts our spirit. But at the end of King Lear there is no request for the hero’s story. The characters stand dumbly surrounding the dead father and daughter, asking whether this is the end of the world that was always foretold. They do not include even a possible audience for the hero’s story among the lords and ladies of the country. They are only those who have lived the story themselves—Kent, who now wants to die, and Edgar, who will be brief and then silent. For us there is no hint of wonder to be had in this scene, and barely an ounce of reconciliation with life. “Vex not his
ghost," and "He but usurp'd his life," are the last words spoken about Lear, and they have nothing in them of sweet princes sung to rest by angels. Edgar, whose function in this scene parallels Horatio's at the end of Hamlet, does not, like Horatio, spend twenty lines in preparing the others to hear the hero's story; he closes the play by telling quickly why no story can be told:

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

(V.iii.323-26)

What we really feel is that the young are prematurely aged, that life itself has grown old. We and Edgar have borne witness in this theater for as long as it has taken for the oldest to bear the most; and we are all as much depleted as the oldest. In King Lear life has been tested to its limit; it has had to spend itself wholly in order to affirm itself at all, and the result, no wonder, is exhaustion.

We become depressed when we are emotionally spent, and I think the depression that so often follows King Lear is responsible for some common pessimistic misreadings of the play. Each of the following quotations from King Lear has sometime been proposed as a summation of the play:

As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods.
They kill us for their sport. (IV.i.36-37)

Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (IV.ii.49-50)

O ruin'd piece of nature! This great world
Shall so wear out to nought. (IV.vi.137-38)

But each of these possibilities has been suggested only to make its rejection the more clear and convincing. The play does finally discover a profound impetus for order in the universe and, because of that, the possibility of man's deliverance from evil through the rectitude and love that are capable of renewing
that order. Furthermore, the discovery is made through Shakespeare's final affirmation of his own local doctrine of order: *King Lear* affirms universal order in the particular terms of its own culture, just as Sophoclean tragedy had done. I said earlier that the history plays and *Hamlet* converge upon *King Lear* from different directions, presenting it with the problem of order on the one hand and the problem of conduct on the other. *King Lear* resolves both problems in a form that is final for Shakespeare, by linking them together and showing that order is necessary to life and is made possible by those who suffer Fortune through. We are inevitably tempted to suppose that a play that joins and then resolves the two problems with which Shakespeare had been most deeply concerned in his earlier work marks the culmination of his whole intellectual development.

Yet any such inference runs hard into that heavy final scene. Cordelia's death guarantees the order of nature and the state by the final answer it gives to Hamlet's question of whether to be or not to be. But of Cordelia's death Kent asks, "Is this the promis'd end?"; and we must ask that question of Shakespeare concerning the play of *King Lear*. To see the play reject its potentially most extreme pessimism, and to feel in that rejection the power with which order and patience are affirmed, is not necessarily to accept order and patience as the most constructive values in human life. We may hope for more, because order and patience are often means to more wondrous ends, and because Shakespeare in fact went on to write plays that end more in wonder than does *King Lear*. The exhaustion we feel at the end of *King Lear* is related to the fact that although evil has proved self-destructive, it has brought down good with it; though Cordelia's ability to outface Fortune has held open the possibility of order in the world, in the process she has used her life to sustain order instead of letting order nourish life. It may be that men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither; but that fortitude, we must continue to hope, should be incidental to more vivid and varied pursuits, and not itself become the center and aim of our existence. It is not that Cordelia and Kent and Edgar are merely passive in
their suffering and therefore boring. What leaves us finally mute and shaken is that all their strenuous activity has been devoted to the minimal end of keeping life together at all. The whole play is a great affirmation, but it affirms only that life is not nothing, that life is livable and may go on. As John Holloway has written,

... if the play advances a "positive," I think it is that when men turn away from how they should live, there are forces in life which constrain them to return. In this play love is not a "victory"; it is not that which stands at "the centre of the action," and without which "life is meaningless"; it does not rule creation. If anything rules creation, it is (though only, as it were, by a hairsbreadth) simply rule itself. What order restores, is order. Men tangle their lives; life, at a price, is self-untangling at last.6

It is fitting that Shakespeare's greatest play should make that discovery with overwhelming clarity. But it is natural to ask, once we are assured that life can be lived, how we can live it in its full richness; and I believe Shakespeare goes on to ask that question in Antony and Cleopatra and the last plays.

We can see how King Lear leaves this question open by looking at two of Lear's speeches toward the end of the play. At the climax of his madness, just before Cordelia's servants find him, Lear makes a speech that is unprecedented for him, both in its awareness of his surroundings and in its thought:

If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes.
I know thee well enough; thy name is 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.

When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools. This' a good block.
It were a delicate stratagem to shoe
A troop of horse with felt. I'll put 't in proof,
And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,
Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!

(IV.vi.180-91)
The first part of this speech echoes Hamlet's "readiness is all" and Edgar's "Ripeness is all" speeches; it names the ethic by which Cordelia has lived and will soon die. But the second part of the speech contradicts the first and proposes a Machiavellian stratagem by which to take revenge upon the wicked daughters, so that both parts together reopen the question of Hamlet's soliloquy: whether to suffer outrageous fortune or to take arms against one's troubles. During the time of his dependency upon Goneril and Regan, Lear vacillated between these alternatives in action, just as Hamlet did in thought; and now, though his madness is almost spent and his tragic self-knowledge secured, still he cannot settle upon one or the other. Soon he is reunited with Cordelia, for whom the issue has never been in question; and when they have been captured and Cordelia affirms her ethic by asking fiercely, "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?", Lear replies quickly:

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 God's 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)

This speech, so beautiful and redeeming in its own terms, also marks a crucial moment in Shakespeare's development. Lear's final wish is neither to suffer Fortune's blows nor to take up arms against her, but to transcend a world in which that is the choice. On the one hand, the speech looks back both to Lear's raving about the deceptiveness of appearance and the corruption of justice, and to Hamlet's contempt of the world. In a sense Lear ends where Hamlet began when he lamented
the unprofitable uses of this world. Yet Lear’s tone, which begins to sound like the last plays, has in it none of Hamlet’s disgust; and the idea leads him not to a yearning for death but to a continuing desire to bear witness to the character of human life, so long as he can be protected by prison against its dangers.

In short, Lear’s willingness to accept now the fallen uses of this world against which he railed in his madness, and therefore to desire transcendence in life rather than death, looks straight forward to *Antony and Cleopatra*. Life must go on, the restored Lear knows, even in a world bound to fall again and again into disorder and corruption; life can go on in such a world, the play has taught us, because of the goodness in need of order that is also bound up in the heart of things. Despite all he has seen and suffered, Lear is still anxious to talk to poor rogues full of court news; yet he needs the protection of his walled prison, for all that he is turned back toward life, and we cannot blame him for that. Thus, the question with which he leaves us is whether this privileged view can be made good in the world; whether it is not noblest of all to endure the vicissitudes of Fortune as a means and not an end; whether man may not actively mitigate the evil in the world by infusing it with good from moment to moment rather than by enduring its ravages until both are spent; whether man, having secured his being out of nothingness, may not go on to make for himself a burgeoning place in creation. And these are questions for *Antony and Cleopatra*.

In *King Lear* the problem of order is not solved in the usual sense, for no way has been discovered to ignore disorder as a continuing potentiality of human life. But the play has shown how order is continually restored no matter what the human cost, for order is the necessary basis for life and from now on, for Shakespeare, may be assumed as given. *Antony and Cleopatra* goes on to inquire what life may be lived on that basis; and one further aspect of the connection between the two plays must be mentioned here. In an earlier chapter I spoke of the method of discontinuity in *Antony and Cleopatra*, a procedure by which the causal relationships among actions and
events are suppressed, and hence, in effect, denied. That procedure may be observed occasionally in Shakespeare's earlier plays, but I think its first significant and organic use is to be found in *King Lear*. The crucial events of both the beginning and the end of *King Lear* are wholly gratuitous from the standpoint either of general probability or of the specific dramatic context. Lear's decision to divide the kingdom according to his daughters' speeches comes as a surprise to everybody; and the fact that Cordelia and Kent, who are most unsettled by it, were previously Lear's favorites shows how capriciously "out of character" his decision is. At the end of the play Edmund's delay in rescinding the death sentence after his change of heart is just as maddeningly unmotivated. Between this beginning and end there are many gratuitous actions: for example, Edgar's acquiescence in his father's judgment against him without confronting his father directly; Gloucester's wish to go all the way to Dover simply in order to commit suicide; Edgar's refusal to identify himself to his father on the way to Dover; Kent's similar refusal to make himself known to Lear; and the confrontation between blind Gloucester and mad Lear. These are not mere discrepancies in the structure of the plot, although there are many of those too; they are not subordinate pieces that Shakespeare failed inadvertently to fit together tightly. All of these actions go to show the creative power of the good to suffer meaningfully; they are the means by which the plot tells us through its very structure that man must be ready to endure the utmost. Hence these actions are among the principal structures of which the whole framework of the play is wrought; and yet they are free-standing, disconnected from each other and from all causes. We cannot regard them as defects in Shakespeare's technique for which we need to apologize disingenuously by claiming that *King Lear* is too big for the stage. Shakespeare has begun to evolve here a new technique of discontinuity, which, there is good reason to suppose, reflects a new dimension in his vision of the world.

That new dimension originates, I suggest, in Cordelia's words, "No cause, no cause." Cordelia lives and dies on behalf of a world in which justice and love are not bargained for but
freely given. In order for such a world to exist, King Lear has painfully discovered, evil must be given its due and allowed its unmotived sway. Evil and good, disorder as well as order, are fixed potentialities of human life, and do not exist in causal relations with each other. Each is self-generating, and each act of generation is discontinuous with all others. The failure of Edgar and Kent to reveal themselves to those whom they never fail to serve is the necessary visible means by which good must causelessly reconstitute itself in a world dominated by an equally self-renewing evil. This ability of good to begin again and again in discontinuous moments keeps the world of King Lear from being wholly reduced to chaos by the evil forces that control it. It now remains to be seen whether the relationship can be reversed, and good in its endlessly renewed beginnings can dominate a world in which evil yet endures by redeeming evil from moment to moment. If, as I have suggested, King Lear bequeaths that problem to Antony and Cleopatra, then by the technique of discontinuity, appropriate to a world beyond good and evil and hence beyond cause, King Lear has made ready for Antony and Cleopatra the principal means by which to undertake its task.