***King Lear***

1. i. The division of the kingdom: Lear deceives himself

ii. The letter and the plot: Edmund deceives Gloucester

iii. Bad service from Goneril and Oswald

iv. Kent, Fool, Goneril, and Albany give various service

1. i. Edmund triumphs; Gloucester goes to Regan and Cornwall

ii. Cornwall puts Kent in stocks

iii. Edgar disguises himself as Tom

iv. Lear comes, finds Kent in stocks, hears Oswald disrespectful, sees Regan unmoved, and is lacerated by Regan and Goneril; Cornwall shuts Lear out of doors on a night of storm

1. i. Kent and Gentleman seek Lear

ii. Kent finds Lear and Fool

iii. Edmund prepares to betray Gloucester

iv. Kent, Lear, and Fool find “Tom”; Gloucester finds all four of them

v. Edmund betrays Gloucester

vi. Gloucester shelters the four for some time, then lets them go

vii. Regan and Cornwall blind Gloucester, killing a servant who in protest wounds Cornwall

1. i. Edgar leads blinded Gloucester

ii. Albany rebukes Goneril; news comes of Cornwall’s death from his wound

iii. Kent and Gentleman meet again

iv. Cordelia

v. Regan and Oswald plot

vi. Edgar is with Gloucester, who wishes to throw himself over a cliff and is lovingly deceived into thinking he has survived doing so; Lear enters, mad; Oswald enters, and Edgar kills him

vii. Cordelia and Kent meet with Lear, who is restored to sanity

1. i. Plans for battle and for after the battle

ii. Edgar is with Gloucester for the last time

iii. Victory and defeat; poisoning and trial by combat; stabbing, hanging, and natural collapse: six deaths after the battle has ended

Questions about Characters

* Do the characters occupy two philosophical positions: medieval, feudal, quasi-Christian versus Renaissance, Machiavellian, atheist (equivalent to good characters versus bad)? Or three: belief in cruel gods, just gods, or not gods? Or four: atheism (Edmund), superstition (Gloucester), belief in an inscrutable providence (Lear), faith in a divine providence (Edgar and Cordelia)? Note that this last position is the province of virtuous pagans; the play’s language is consistently that of paganism.
* Are the good characters a single category – Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, and Albany? Are the bad guys a single category – Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Oswald, and Cornwall? Are Lear and Gloucester good or bad, or are they merely foolish? If wisdom is the opposite of folly, are the good characters wise?

Questions about Suffering

* What do Lear and Gloucester do to deserve the treatment they get? It looks as though they are punished for believing lies and not believing truth, but to what extent is this their fault as opposed to the fault of the liars? Note that the plot and subplot alike show parent-child bonds breaking.
* What other bonds of society, such as marriage and mutual loyalty between masters and servants, hold or fail in this play? Can we call Oswald loyal, or can we call his kind of loyalty a virtue in him?
* Poetic justice, up to a point: (a) having suffered disproportionally to their deserving, Gloucester and Lear learn and become better men; (b) all the bad guys are dead by the end of the play; (c) given these two facts, why do Gloucester, Cordelia, and Lear die anyway?
* The deaths of the good lead us to ask what the play has to teach us. If we are good, I think the answer is we would rather be any of the good characters than any of the bad ones; this is not a play that shows any sympathy for its villains. They cause suffering, but they do not suffer remorse.

Imagery

Wolfgang Clemen, quoted by Hibbard in 1980 *Shakespeare Survey* volume: “An attempt to interpret a Shakespearian play solely on the basis of its imagery – a risky undertaking – would have the greatest chance of success if *King Lear* were the play in question.”

Note that imagery is literal rather than figurative and there are no references to the elements or gods in the play’s first scene, prior to Lear’s becoming angry. Then he swears by the sun, moon, and stars, calls himself a dragon, and engages in highly figurative exchanges with Kent. When peace is restored, Lear returns to plain speaking. In I.iv, he waxes poetic again only after he is angered. He uses no figurative language in III.vi, when he is out of his mind. What do these correlations imply about poetry itself?

Effect

I consider this play to be flawless and almost unbearable. The way in which it makes pain beautiful without making it any less painful is a tribute to art and a lesson for life.

David Denby, in *Great Books*, writes about *King Lear* in counterpoint to his mother’s old age and death: “[T]wo of the most essential and unfathomable tasks in life – raising our children and lowering our parents into the earth – pull away at us steadily, unacknowledged and sometimes unattended. . . . [N]o rules or guidelines, no training or expertise, really helps you take care of children or elderly parents.

“The play brings you back to the inescapable struggle for power between the generations. It suggests that the basic human relations in begetting and dying can be intolerable. . . . For Lear is hardly the only parent to demand too much love from his children. . . . And who hasn’t had moments when he wished his parents dead, as Goneril, Regan, and Edmund did? An amazing work of art: Shakespeare begins with this humiliating, awkward stuff and splits the world wide open with it.”