

An Evolutionary Approach to Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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What Can an Evolutionary Perspective Offer to Our Understanding of *King Lear*?

King Lear (1604 to 1605) is widely regarded as one of the greatest works of world literature, but also as one of the most challenging. The challenge is not just in the complexity of the language and the need for notes explaining obsolete terms and idioms—those problems are common to all of William Shakespeare's plays. Instead, *King Lear* is exceptionally demanding emotionally and imaginatively. An evolutionary perspective can help readers meet these challenges in three main ways: first, by offering a metaphysical vision that corresponds with that of the play; second, by providing ideas about human motives and values concordant with those in the play; and third, by integrating an awareness of universal aspects of human nature with a recognition of the historically specific features of the play.

Providence versus blind variation and selective retention

Efforts to interpret *King Lear* have often been distorted by trying to make the play fit the vision of a world in which good people are rewarded and evil people are punished. For more than a century and a half (from 1681 to 1834), the only version of the play produced on the stage was that of poet Nahum Tate, who revised it to produce a happy ending, interpolating a love story between Edgar and Cordelia and having all the protagonists live happily ever after. On the stage, the original form of the play was restored almost two centuries ago. Nonetheless, interpretation in the twentieth century often sought to emphasize redemption and consolation.¹

At one time or another, characters including Lear, Kent, Edgar, Albany, and Gloucester all affirm that human lives are governed by

divine justice. The action of the play, though, gives no evidence that a just providence watches over the fate of individuals. The antagonists unleash violence that rebounds lethally against themselves, but that same violence takes the lives of Cordelia, Lear, Gloucester, Cornwall's servant, and likely the Fool as well (he disappears after the third act). Kent, too, declares he will soon be dead. Among the major characters, only Albany and Edgar remain standing. A naturalistic view of human social relations can easily enough make sense of these outcomes. A providential world view cannot. Hence Tate's feeling that the play needed to be rewritten.

Within the framework of evolutionary theory, life is a mechanical and blindly developing process. More organisms are born in any generation than can survive and reproduce; organisms vary in the traits for survival and reproduction; the organisms that possess more favorable variations reproduce at a higher rate and also transmit their more favorable characteristics to their offspring. This simple causal sequence entails no cosmic purpose for the evolution of life. Nor does it entail a divine source for human motives and values. From an evolutionary perspective, if people wish to justify ethical values, they can look for justification only within a purely human context.

Many characters in *King Lear* make broad general statements about the human condition. All but one such statement either conflict with the action of the play or exceed the evidence it affords. Admonishing Gloucester to keep up his spirits after Lear and Cordelia have been defeated in battle, Edgar declares, "Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither; / Ripeness is all" (Shakespeare 5.2.9–11).² This statement stands apart from Edgar's affirmation of a just providential order. After having defeated Edmund, Edgar declares that "the gods are just" (5.3.168) because they mete out appropriate punishments for vice. Gloucester's vice was adultery: "The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes" (5.3.170–71). This kind of Draconian moralism would be at home in a rigidly moralistic theocracy, but it is not characteristically Shakespearean. The appeal to

“ripeness,” in contrast, has no moralistic overtones. The metaphor is taken from plant life and thus says nothing about the specific characteristics that ripen into fulfillment in human beings. An image of that kind of fulfillment nonetheless emerges from the action of the play.

The lag between literary criticism and modern psychology

Evolutionary psychologists have a term for common human intuitions about the motives and emotions of other people; they call such intuitions folk psychology, and they argue that folk psychology converges closely with evolutionary psychology. Since human beings are highly social, being able to understand the character and purposes of other human beings has always had adaptive value.³ Literature gives the fullest possible expression to intuitive folk psychology. Indeed, until very recently, fictional depictions offered much more adequate insights into human nature than any psychological theory could offer. Professional psychology is now finally catching up with the insights of novelists and playwrights, but many literary theorists and critics have not kept up with modern psychology. Instead, they have continued to use Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which is in basic ways simply wrong. Freudian conceptions of the stages of development have long since been abandoned by most serious psychologists, and the oedipal theory, at the heart of Freudian developmental psychology, has been empirically disconfirmed in multiple ways. Freudian theory can thus give no reliable account of the true nature of bonding between parents and children. That bonding is central to all human experience and is foregrounded in *King Lear*. The Freudian emphasis on purely sexual motives also limits the understanding of romantic love, which includes admiration and respect along with sexual desire—as it does, for instance, in the King of France’s response to Cordelia. A similar limitation in critical perspective—blindness to mutuality in relationships between men and women—hampers the feminist criticism that focuses exclusively on male dominance.⁴

Modern literary critics now typically blend Freudian concepts of family relations with feminist concepts of gender and with Marxist concepts

of social dynamics. Like Freudianism, Marxism is obsolete in its own field and produces interpretive ideas that fit poorly with Shakespeare's depictions of human behavior. The Marxists identify economic class as the chief constituent in social relations. That preconception blocks insight into *King Lear* in two important ways: it gives no adequate access to the feelings of reverence associated with Renaissance conceptions of royalty, and it obscures the sense of a common humanity.⁵

Archetypalism and biocultural critique

The historical period is notoriously vague in *King Lear*. The source story is set in a pre-Christian era. Except for one glancing reference to God in the singular, Shakespeare's characters refer only to pagan deities. However, the ranks, titles, military accoutrements, and matters of daily life depicted or mentioned in the play are more appropriate to the sixteenth century than to a barbarous British antiquity. By blurring historical period while simultaneously invoking multitudinous images of nature, animals, and the human body, Shakespeare directs attention away from any culturally specific setting and directs it instead toward human universals—toward physical sensations (especially pain), basic motives, basic emotions, intimate family relationships, and elementary principles of social organization.⁶

In the earlier decades of the twentieth century, some of the best and most influential criticism of *King Lear* was produced by critics who emphasized universal themes and images—often designated *archetypes*.⁷ The archetypal critics have made it easier to understand why Shakespeare has been admired in widely different cultures all over the world, and why, in our own time, despite political and religious institutions radically different from those of Elizabethan England, works like *King Lear* still elicit awe and wonder. However, the archetypal critics make little or no effort to link universal themes and images with a biologically grounded understanding of human nature. As a consequence, archetypal criticism lacks the dimension of causal explanation made

possible by integrating literary study with biology and psychology. It also lacks a comprehensive model of human motives and emotions.

G. Wilson Knight, following Bradley, declares that *King Lear* depicts “not ancient Britons, but humanity, not England, but the world” (Knight 202; see Bradley 240). This claim for universality is overstated. The religion depicted in *King Lear* is pagan and polytheistic, not Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist. The political organization is monarchical and feudal, not tribal, republican, capitalist, or socialist. The characters are aristocrats, servants, soldiers, or peasants, not hunter-gatherers, tribal warriors, imperial administrators, salaried workers, or bourgeois merchants. The culturally specific religious and sociopolitical conditions in *King Lear* limit the forms of value and belief possible for the characters. They can imagine the gods intervening directly in human affairs—for either good or ill—but they cannot imagine a mythology in which the Son of God redeems the world from sin and offers salvation to all who acknowledge his divinity. They can envision more equitable distributions of material goods, and they can cast doubt on the legitimacy of political authority, but they cannot envision a teleological historical progression concluding in the triumph of the proletariat.

Biocultural critique versus New Historicism

Over the past thirty years, the idea of human universals has been roundly rejected by historicist critics who insist that human beliefs and values are wholly constituted by specific cultures. The chief theoretical source for New Historicist criticism, cultural historian Michel Foucault, presupposes that power is the sole determining influence on the beliefs and values within any given culture.⁸ The leading New Historicist practitioner, Stephen Greenblatt, argues that *King Lear* is “part of an intense and sustained struggle in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England to redefine the central values of society” (95). That struggle, as Greenblatt envisions it, involves “rethinking the conceptual categories by which the ruling elites constructed their world and which they attempted to impose on the majority of the population”

(95). This top-down model of beliefs and values registers an important aspect of social interaction: dominance and subordination. Like the view of social relations in Marxist and feminist theory, though, the top-down model eliminates any generous or sympathetic understanding of shared interests, values, and beliefs. In the New Historicist vision of culture, the feeling of belonging to a community, so crucial to most actual human experience, is reduced on the one side to cynical manipulation and on the other to foolish credulity.

In affirming that values and beliefs are wholly “constructed” by culture, the New Historicists obscure a deeper truth: that beliefs, values, and social practices originate in evolved and adapted features of human nature. It is from those features that cultural constructs ultimately derive their passion and imaginative force. This argument—that cultural images articulate natural passions—can be sharply contrasted with Greenblatt’s concept of culture. In his essay on *King Lear*, Greenblatt argues that theater empties life of its content and then replaces life with its own purely cultural form of reproduction. The theater “signifies absence” and “evacuates everything it represents”; it is, nonetheless, able to “reproduce itself over generations” (127). From a biocultural perspective, in contrast, the theater comes alive precisely because it grounds itself in the reproductive cycle of human life.⁹

Human Nature

Life history theory is a comprehensive biological conception that organizes ideas about the nature of all species. Each species has a life history consisting in a reproductive cycle—birth, mating, reproduction, growth, maturity, and death. The life cycle for humans includes intense and prolonged parental care; it thus requires bonding between parents and children and cooperative parental effort. Adult pair-bonding is a trait humans share with many species of birds, but not with most mammals. Like wolves and chimpanzees, but unlike tigers and orangutans, humans are highly social animals. That is why solitary confinement is such a severe form of punishment. Social life among humans, like social

life among wolves and chimpanzees, is hierarchical. Some people hold higher status and exercise more power than others. But humans display an exceptional capacity for concerted, collective action, and they have strong impulses toward egalitarianism. All human social organization thus involves a dynamic tension between dominance and affiliation.¹⁰

Because evolutionary psychology converges with folk psychology, a modern evolutionary conception of human nature looks very much like what ordinary people have in mind when they say, “Oh, that’s just human nature.” Phrases like that usually refer to basic motives and passions: the instinct for survival, the urge to seek sexual intimacy, companionship, the deep attachment between children and parents, and the driving need to belong to a social group. Common ideas about human nature also include the desire to get ahead, to take advantage of others, to think a little better of one’s self than one deserves, and to indulge in envious spite against people who are better off. Because human nature includes deviousness, hypocrisy, and manipulation, the phrase “that’s just human nature” sometimes has a cynical tinge, but the concept also includes values like honesty, justice, gratitude, charity, and community. An evolutionary perspective systematizes these elements and encompasses them within a causal explanation.

The characteristic that most distinguishes humans from other species is a highly developed mental life made possible by a large and highly structured brain. People have a sense of personal identity as a continuously unfolding sequence of experiences, and they project that sequence into the future. They connect their own identities with those of other people, and they create mental images of themselves located within a social order, within the natural world, and within any spiritual world they might envision. They engage in collective action on the basis of shared images of social identity and shared norms of behavior. Since they have the power to direct their actions in accordance with consciously held goals, they often feel a need for “meaning” in their lives; that is, they feel a need for a sense of value and purpose in their connection with the world around them.

Moral Perspective in *King Lear*

In the dominant forms of academic literary theory and criticism, the various theoretical schools—Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and New Historicism—all blend together within an overarching set of theoretical ideas commonly designated poststructuralism. These overarching ideas derive chiefly from deconstruction, a form of skeptical epistemology that purports to disclose the instability and incoherence of all knowledge.¹¹ Jonathan Culler, a chief proponent of poststructuralism, rightly observes that its main characteristic is “the disputing of ‘common sense’” (4). There are three chief bits of common sense disputed by the poststructuralists: the ideas that authors and readers share experience within a real, physical world; that authors intend to say specific, definite things about this world; and that readers can more or less accurately understand what authors mean to say. Evolutionary critics typically reaffirm these bits of common sense. They argue that language is an evolved and adapted feature of human nature and that it serves vital functions in communicating information and creating shared experience.¹²

When readers seek to identify what Shakespeare means, they are not looking only for the moral—a theme or idea—that the writer is trying to convey. Shakespeare’s plays are not arguments. They are depictions designed to have an emotional, imaginative effect on an audience. From an evolutionary perspective, there are three main ways we can identify the effect Shakespeare meant to have on his audience: first, recognizing universal motives and emotions; second, comparing the cogency of the characters’ interpretations of events; and third, following the guidance of the more reliable characters.

Shakespeare can be fairly confident that most of his audience will feel with him in detesting hypocrisy; recoiling from psychopathic cruelty; and responding favorably to honesty, kindness, and loyalty. Basic emotions are human universals (Brown; Ekman). That does not mean that every reader will feel precisely the same way in responding to a play. After all, psychopaths like Edmund and Goneril do exist, though they evidently constitute a small percentage of the total population

(Baumeister; Grossman). A human universal is not a form of behavior or judgment that appears in all individuals; it is a form of behavior or judgment that appears in all known cultures (Brown). Because universals appear in all known cultures, we can reasonably infer that they are not a product of any specific culture. They are built into human nature.

For forms of behavior that constitute the dominant pattern of value, belief, or behavior in all known cultures, we can use the term *normative universals*. For instance, incest between fathers and daughters is taboo in all known cultures. That taboo is thus a normative universal. Normative universals typically reflect and reinforce adaptive mechanisms such as the psychological inhibition against sexual behavior that produces inbreeding. Most, but not all, members of a community feel revulsion against incest. Culture turns this common feeling into a rule of behavior enforced by social sanctions ranging from disapproval and shunning to execution.

Normative universals include horror at the murder of kinfolk and respect for honest dealing. When Edmund announces that his sole motive in life will be to gain power and rank denied him by the rules of inheritance, many readers feel sympathy for a disadvantaged young man who is determined to make his own way in the world. Protagonists in literature often fit that pattern. But when Edmund conspires to have his brother Edgar executed on false charges, and when he turns his father over to be tortured by Cornwall, most readers feel their sympathy fade. Edmund's patently hypocritical language in justifying his behavior—declaring that his love for his father must yield to his loyalty to Cornwall and his party—demonstrates that his motives will not bear public scrutiny. He cannot speak the truth about himself without anticipating public revulsion. In this respect, the audience of the play merges with the public mind from which Edmund feels it necessary to hide his true character.

Edmund's duplicity and hypocrisy stand in sharp contrast to the honesty of Kent, Cordelia, and the Fool. Shakespeare could with confidence anticipate that readers would admire these characters for

speaking truth to power. Because they thus establish their reliability as witnesses, they can also help guide readers' responses to *Lear*. Despite *Lear*'s freak of impulsive rage at the beginning of the play, Kent must be right in characterizing him as "the old kind king" (Shakespeare 3.1.28). Otherwise, *Lear* could not have won the devotion of characters such as Cordelia, Kent, the Fool, and Gloucester. Once *Lear* completes the mental collapse heralded in his initial act of folly, the shock and pity felt by Edgar, Gloucester, and Cordelia help guide the audience to the response intended by Shakespeare.

When Kent and Gloucester declare that the stars govern the human condition, readers can remain agnostic; the action of the play gives no evidence either way. When any of the characters make declarations about the gods—declaring either that they kill for sport or that they are the instruments of cosmic justice—readers can infer the arbitrariness of such judgments by comparing them with the varied outcomes of the play: some of the good characters die, and some remain alive. But when Gloucester and Kent denounce the older sisters for parricidal cruelty, when Edgar and Albany declare that Edmund is a villain and a liar, when Edgar praises Kent as an honest and loyal man, or when Kent praises Cordelia for wisdom and truth, the play gives readers good evidence in support of such contentions.

Playwrights reflect the ethos of their communities and also help shape that ethos. Since communities depend on prosocial dispositions, it is not surprising that audiences usually respond with revulsion to Machiavellian personalities like those of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan. In literature across the world, more often than not, antagonists are actuated chiefly by a desire for power and personal gain; protagonists tend to form prosocial clusters by helping kin, creating friendship groups, and exercising magnanimity toward the less fortunate. Empirical evidence for those trends has been gathered on a large set of British novels in the nineteenth century (Carroll, Gottschall, Johnson, and Kruger), and the pattern is also evident in the plays of Shakespeare.

Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar all experience the world as outcasts, and all three, as a consequence, expand in general human sympathy. When Lear is cast out into the storm, deprived of all social standing and power, he recognizes the plight of “poor naked wretches” (Shakespeare 3.4.28) who have no protection from the elements. Gloucester, after he is blinded, takes comfort in the thought that his misfortune will benefit a mad beggar. When Gloucester asks Edgar who he is, Edgar describes himself as a man whom sorrow has made “pregnant to good pity” (4.6.219). These statements are made by Shakespeare’s characters; they are not his own direct pronouncements. Nonetheless, it can be said with confidence that the ethos of the play—Shakespeare’s own ethos—includes a sense of universal human compassion. *King Lear* contains a great deal of cruelty, violence, and treachery, but it does not invite its audience to share vicariously in the enjoyment of sheer malevolence. It inclines readers instead to join Edgar, Lear, and Gloucester in sympathy for the wretched of the earth.

The Central Theme of *King Lear*

The central theme of the play is announced in Cordelia’s first speech to Lear, refusing his demand for flattery:

I love your majesty
According to my bond, no more nor less. . . .
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty. (1.1.92–102)

Had Cordelia thought ahead, she might have added that once she had children, she would have to further subdivide her love, leaving a third,

or perhaps less than a third, for Lear. She could also have added something about her engagement with the wider social world. Though her statement is schematic and incomplete, Kent is right to praise it for justness of thought. Cordelia here enunciates the central principle that is violated in the play: due proportions in the phases and offices of life, the balance in attention and concern distributed among parents and children, marital partners, and the larger community.¹³

Cordelia is not, of course, an evolutionist. Nor is Shakespeare. They are both intuitive folk psychologists. Nonetheless, the wisdom of their intuitive moral sense depends on its insight into human life history. On the level of moral principle, it might not be possible to improve on their judgment. But by invoking human life history, readers can locate this judgment within a larger explanatory context and can confirm its wisdom.

At Dover, speaking with Cordelia, Lear acknowledges his folly in dividing his kingdom and disinheriting Cordelia, but he does not achieve the kind of balance implicit in Cordelia's statement about a due proportion in "bonds." He had been violently angry at her because he had wanted her love all to himself. At Dover, when he and Cordelia are being led to prison, he is delighted with the outcome of the events he set in motion. He has what he had wanted all along—Cordelia all to himself, and with no further social responsibilities to trouble him. "We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage" (5.3.9). Cordelia is not here called upon to remind him of the due proportions of human life, but she is a married woman, young, and with her whole adult life ahead of her. Being a caged bird, having only her father as company, could hardly make her as happy as it makes Lear. He asks, "Have I caught thee?" (5.3.21). He has indeed, and he is perfectly satisfied to let the rest of the world go its own way. For Cordelia, as it turns out, the rest is silence.¹⁴

As king, Lear is supposed to be a living personification of the body politic. The reverence due to royalty, though perhaps seldom earned in practice, depends on that personification. A king, then, needs to be wise. The Fool puts it mildly when he teases Lear about having been

old before he was wise. Kent is more incisive: “be Kent unmannerly / When Lear is mad” (1.1.146–47). Lear is mad long before his wits begin to turn in the storm. When Goneril and Regan say they love him more dearly than life itself, he actually believes them. At Dover, he announces to Gloucester that they were untruthful in telling him he was everything. This discovery, he feels, is significant; he cites his experience in the storm as empirical evidence confirming it: “I am not ague-proof” (4.6.104). Lear’s first onset of madness is an eruption of narcissism coupled with delusions of grandeur.¹⁵ The astonishment expressed by Kent in the first scene implies that Lear has not always been like that. Evidently, a sudden onset of senile dementia has collapsed the rational constraints that in healthy minds regulate the claims of the self in relation to other people.¹⁶

In the first phase of his madness, Lear fails as a king because he fails to embody the shared norms that form a community. He identifies his own desires as ultimate and non-negotiable assertions of his regal authority. His narcissistic impulses become one, in his own mind, with his authority as king. On the heath, confronting Edgar, and again at Dover, speaking with Gloucester, he goes to an opposite extreme. As soon as Goneril provokes a quarrel and begins treating him with contempt, his fragile sense of personal identity, too heavily invested in his public persona, begins to dissolve: “Does any here know me? Why, this is not Lear. . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.217–21). On the heath in the storm, he begins to tear off his clothes, aiming at discovering “the thing itself,” “unaccommodated man” (3.4.104, 105). In casting off his clothes, he is symbolically casting off convention. In this respect, he makes a mistake similar to the mistake Edmund makes in his first soliloquy: “Thou, Nature, art my goddess” (1.2.1). Edmund takes Nature to be pure egoistic energy, without regard to human bonds. Lear takes a mad beggar—“a poor, bare, forked animal” (3.4.105–06)—as the paradigmatic human form. Edmund and Lear both make false reductions, stripping away essential features of human nature. At Dover, Lear comes still closer to Edmund’s cynicism.

Evoking the image of a dog barking at a beggar, he declares, “there thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obeyed in office” (4.6.153–55). This repudiation of all authority might resonate with readers who equate cynical skepticism with intellectual sophistication, but it is not the ethos that actually governs the play.

Kent, in disguise, tells Lear that he seeks service with him because he sees in his countenance what he would “fain call master”: “Authority” (1.4.28, 30). And yet, Kent has severely rebuked Lear precisely for failing to embody the wisdom that is the legitimate ground of authority. Kent himself makes an appropriate distinction when contrasting himself with Oswald. “Such smiling rogues as these,” he says, serve all their master’s lusts and impulses, “knowing naught, like dogs, but following” (2.2.71, 78). Loyalty to legitimate authority is part of the basic ethos of the play. The play is a tragedy precisely because authority, first in Lear and then in the Machiavellian antagonists, fails to sustain its legitimacy.

The hypocrisy in the speeches made by the antagonists reflects the bad faith in their claim to political authority. Though purely egoistic, the antagonists realize they must at least pretend to embody the moral sense of the community. Oswald is merely a dog, loyal but without principles. Edmund, Goneril, and Regan can claim even less authority than that which could be claimed by a loyal dog. They are monsters in human form. In place of the bonds that form the basis of community, their only relation to others is envy, resentment, ravenous lust, jealousy, and murderous deceit. The imagery of fierce wild animals that pervades the play evokes the quality of their inner lives. The human wreckage that litters the stage exemplifies the consequences of life conducted without legitimate forms of authority.

Tragic Vision in *King Lear*

King Lear tacitly affirms an ethos of domestic and social order grounded in a sane understanding of the due proportions in human life, but that ethos makes itself felt less in its positive manifestations than in its

violations. Despite moments of humor and tenderness, the dominant emotions in *King Lear* are rage, venomous resentment, cruel vindictiveness, hatred, outrage, anguish, remorse, and grief. The storm scene at the center of the play provides a dramatic symbol for the play as a whole. Lear does not embody the positive ethos of the play. Kent and Cordelia come closest to that. But Lear is nonetheless the central figure in the play that bears his name. Shutting the gate against him, Goneril declares, “Tis his own blame; hath put himself from rest, / And must needs taste his folly” (2.2.479–80). And he does taste it. The disintegration of his mind is the chief medium through which the audience feels the stress of the destructive forces he has himself unleashed.

Though he is a vessel for suffering on a grand scale, Lear does not embody the full tragic vision of the play. He never achieves the balance and wisdom necessary for that. Indeed, no character in the play fully encompasses its tragic scope. That is in part because the play involves so many phases and offices of life: troubled relations between aging parents and adult children, sibling conflict, marital strife, sexual jealousy, violent conflict between servants and masters, political dissension, and war between nations.

Compared to the scope of conflict in *King Lear*, Shakespeare’s other major tragedies are relatively simple. *Othello* (1603), in particular, has only one chief tragic subject—the murderous jealousy of Othello. Othello commits a rash act, tastes his folly, and then dies. *Macbeth* (1603 to 1606) contains family grief, but its main subjects are political: ambition, loyalty, and betrayal. *Hamlet* (1604 to 1605) includes the metaphysical dimension—the quest for meaning in life—that also distinguishes *King Lear*, but it is essentially a family drama. Social and political conflicts are marginal to Hamlet’s resentment at the murder of his father and his revulsion against his mother’s unseemly remarriage. Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet all have imaginations adequate to the scope of the tragic action in which they are involved.¹⁷

The action of *King Lear* is unified, so that each scene contributes ultimately to the catastrophic culmination, with wrecked families on a

field of battle amidst a “gored state” (5.3.319). Individual characters, though, are caught up in different parts of the “general woe” (5.3.318). Cordelia, held captive after the battle, is focused on Lear’s suffering. After her death, Lear is indifferent to everything except his grief for her. Gloucester is already dead, somewhere offstage. Albany has to deal with Edmund and Goneril, who have plotted against his life, and he must also work out a new distribution of political power. Kent is too emotionally shattered even to live much longer; he expresses only grief. Edgar waxes moralistic over his own family drama, and then Albany and Edgar, responding to the death of Cordelia and Lear, express simple sorrow.

King Lear, then, issues a double challenge to the imagination of its audience: requiring that the audience be responsive to passions and concerns in diverse phases and offices of life, including those of old age, and demanding that the audience achieve a full tragic understanding greater than that achieved by any individual character in the play. Adopting a life history perspective can help readers avoid falsely reducing the concerns of the play to any one issue—to relations between the sexes, for instance, parent-offspring conflict, or social dominance. By providing a thematic framework adequate to the whole scope of the play, a life history perspective can also help to more closely approximate Shakespeare’s own encompassing vision of human life.

Though no single character fully embodies the tragic vision of *King Lear*, several characters rise to high poetry in the midst of violent emotional turmoil. The specific imaginative effect of *King Lear* depends in part on the way its brilliantly figurative language interacts with the speed and ferocity of its depicted events. Amid a chaos of false appearances and turbulent relationships, the characters use highly wrought rhetoric to capture fleeting insights or create powerfully synoptic images of human life. Lear is duped by the flattery of his older daughters and fails to see the inner truth in his youngest daughter. But he does not merely bellow in rage; he constructs an elaborate curse so that he can create an emotional barrier between himself and Cordelia. Then, in

calling on nature to blight Goneril's womb, he rises to a magnificent height of sustained rhetoric, encapsulating a whole lifetime of maternal misery in his curse. The simplicity of Kent's rebuke to Lear—"What wouldst thou do, old man?" and "thou dost evil" (1.1.146, 167)—has a massive force. In a different rhetorical mode, Kent's extravagant diatribe against Oswald outlines by contrast his own sense of honor. Edmund, too, attributing his "composition and fierce quality" to "the lusty stealth of nature" (1.2.12, 11), uses powerful rhetoric to affirm his identity. Albany is the least of the major characters, but there is fierce poetic power in his repudiation of his wife: "O Goneril, / You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face" (4.2.30–32). Few readers sympathize with Goneril and Regan, but most readers register the force and pith of utterances such as "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.294–95) and "must needs taste his folly" (2.2.480). Cornwall's brutality excites universal horror, but readers still feel the evocative power of his gloating sneer at Gloucester's eye, "Out, vile jelly, / Where is thy lustre now?" (3.7.82–83). When Edgar depicts Gloucester's fall from an imaginary cliff at Dover, his word painting is so vivid that it compels his father's belief. That scene is only the most extreme instance of a pervasive theme: that we live in images, often delusive, but nonetheless so powerful that they can overmaster even our physical sensations.

More than in any of Shakespeare's other plays, even *Hamlet*, the characters in *King Lear* display the common human need to encompass their own experience within some cosmic scheme of things, characterized variously as the gods, the stars, or nature. After Gloucester is blinded and discovers that Edmund has betrayed him, he exclaims, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.38–39). Taken merely as a philosophical proposition, this declaration has no more general validity than Edgar's affirmation that "The gods are just" (5.3.168). Gloucester's utterance nonetheless has a powerful poetic effect. In this his highest moment of imagination, he takes in human life at a single glance, with all its turbulence, torment,

and ultimate helplessness. The dizzying height from which Gloucester sees his own bitter experience puts him on the same visionary level as that which Lear achieves on the heath, bidding the heavens to “smite flat the thick rotundity o’ the world” (3.2.7); it is of a piece, too, with Edgar’s admonition, “Ripeness is all” (5.2.11); with Edmund’s vow to a universal predatory force, “Thou, Nature, art my goddess” (1.2.1); and with Kent’s characterization of the world as a scene of torment: “O, let him pass. He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer” (5.3.312–14).

The experience of reading or watching *King Lear* is not just the effect of observing passions and actions in the commonplace matters of family strife and political intrigue. Such passions and actions intertwine with the characters’ struggles to encompass the whole scope of human life within their own minds. The audience feels sympathy, pity, horror, and revulsion, but it also shares with the characters—good and bad alike—the sensation of minds expanding to the grandest possible scale.

Grand rhetoric and visionary expansion contribute to the total impression made by *King Lear*. The play does not, though, suggest that poetic imagination is an ultimate, final good. The ethos of the play is essentially moral, not aesthetic. It points away from art and back toward the world of ordinary human relationships. Shakespeare depicts a world gone mad, but he does not generalize madness as the essence of the human condition. Sanity, decency, and charity exist all around the fringes of the madness. The play points its audience toward restoring those qualities to the center of the world.

Notes

1. Major redemptive readings include those by Dowden, Bradley, and Knight. For critical accounts of such readings, see Everett; Foakes 45–54. On specifically Christian interpretations, see Vickers, chapter 7.
2. Like most modern editions of *King Lear*, the text cited here conflates the Quarto and Folio versions.
3. For evolutionary concepts of folk psychology, see Geary; Mithen; Sterelny.

4. On the decline of Freudian psychoanalysis in professional psychology, see Crews; Eysenck; Webster. On the empirical disconfirmation of Freudian oedipal theory, see Degler. On evolutionary developmental psychology, see Bjorklund and Pellegrini. For an evolutionary commentary on romantic love, see Gottschall and Nordlund; on both romantic and filial love, see Nordlund. For a critical account of Freudian readings of Shakespeare, see Vickers, chapter 5; on feminist readings, see Levin; Vickers, chapter 6.
5. The last Marxist economist of note in the United States was Paul M. Sweezy. His magnum opus (co-authored with Paul A. Baran), *Monopoly Capital*, was published nearly half a century ago. For a critical commentary on Marxist readings of Shakespeare, see Vickers, chapter 7. On Renaissance conceptions of royalty, see Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Politics*, chapter 4.
6. On the animal imagery, see Bradley 244–45; Holloway 80–84; Knight 205–11; Spurgeon 342.
7. Major universalizing readings include those by Bradley, Knight, and Mack. For a more recent “archetypal” commentary, see Boose.
8. For a critique of Foucault from an evolutionary perspective, see Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory*, 32–40, 411–35, 445–48.
9. For a critical commentary on several New Historicist readings of *King Lear*, see Foakes 65–68. For an extended critique of Greenblatt on Shakespeare, see Vickers 231–71. On the history of historical criticism of Shakespeare, see Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Politics*, 184–215.
10. On human life history theory, see Kaplan and Gangestad; Low; MacDonald. On the prosocial elements in human nature, see Goleman; Keltner; Wilson. On the tension between dominance and affiliation, see Boehm. On the correlation between conceptions of human nature in Shakespeare and those in evolutionary psychology, see Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism*.
11. For critical commentaries on Jacques Derrida, the chief deconstructive theorist, see Carroll *Evolution and Literary Theory*, 390–409; Searle.
12. For comparisons of poststructuralist and evolutionary perspectives, see Boyd; Carroll, *Evolution and Literary Theory*, 49–95; Carroll, *Reading Human Nature*, 71–87, 271–77; Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare's Humanism*.
13. Holloway (94–95) makes a similar argument, though without reference to evolutionary theory.
14. Boose makes a similar argument and locates it within an archetypal analysis of the marriage ritual.
15. For an examination of narcissistic personality disorders in several modern tyrants, see Barbara Oakley, *Evil Genes*.
16. In his biocultural analysis of Lear's character (chapter 3), Nordlund rightly places a strong emphasis on Lear's senile dementia.
17. For an evolutionary perspective on Hamlet, see Carroll, *Reading Human Nature*, 123–47. For a comparison of the history of responses to Hamlet and *King Lear*, see Foakes.

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