

Melvin Landsberg
Department of English
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66044
Telephone (785) 749-1766

An Existence without Poetry

Recently I expected to write out my thoughts on how different the world would be to me if there were no poetry. But this seemed on reflection too vast a subject—and I settled for explaining what that world would be like if all knowledge and memory of what to me is the supreme English poem, *King Lear*, were obliterated. I considered *Hamlet* as against *King Lear* for supremacy, having inter alia been overwhelmed on mulling over Prince Hamlet's lines regarding his uncle Claudius:

My tables—meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be
a villain. (1.5. Lines 108-109.)

I also considered two short poems, William Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" and Emily Dickinson's "The Bustle in a House . . .," both of which can bring a reader to tears. But these two are limited to only one human experience, bereavement, while *Hamlet* seems to fall short of *King Lear* in areas that concern me most. Other readers will, I know, differ strongly with me in their relative devotions to *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and I have no principled quarrel with their preferences.

For the depiction and excoriation of evil, I know of nothing more graphic, powerful, and philosophical than the scene in which the Duke of Cornwall and Regan blind the Earl of Gloucester (*King Lear*, 3.7). One of Cornwall's serfs says:

Hold your hand, my lord!

I have served you ever since I was a child;

But better service have I never done you

Than now to bid you hold.

When Cornwall persists, the serf fights and wounds him mortally. Regan, taking a sword, kills this servant from behind. After Regan leaves with the bleeding Cornwall, two other servants speak:

Second Servant. I'll never care what wickedness I do, if his man come to good.

Third Servant. If she live long,

And in the end meet the old course of death,

Women will all turn monsters.

To Shakespeare, enormous evil leads to revulsion in other humans. There is enough decency among these otherwise undescribed serfs in a feudal society that they turn against a duke himself, for the first servant at the cost of his life. Here in a nutshell is some of Shakespeare's philosophy of history. Would that there had been more rebellion in Hitler's

Germany, though we gratefully call to mind the ill-starred White Rose rebellion (1942-1943) by a few students at the University of Munich.

King Lear's fool plays a role like that of a Greek chorus in acts one through three of the play. Bold because he is in some respects deranged and can by his madness entertain the King, he mocks Lear, in series of witty taunts, for dividing his kingdom between his vile daughters Goneril and Regan.

Lear: Dost thou call me fool, boy?

Fool: All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with (1, 4, Lines 152-154).

In the next scene he again rebukes Lear with barrages of wit. Thus:

Fool: If thou wert my Fool, Nuncle, I'd have three beaten for being old before thy time.

Lear: How's that?

Fool: Thou shouldst not have been old before thou had's been wise. (1, 5, Lines 41-45).

Lear endures the taunts because they give keen expression to his own judgments on his recent follies. Attending to the Fool is an ordeal of self-flagellation. He endures the Fool's barbed wit again during the horrible thunderstorm when he is in a cave with him and "Poor Tom" (the Earl of Gloucester's virtuous son, disguised as a near-naked madman).

Lear: What, has his [Poor Tom's] daughters brought him to this pass?

Could'st thou save nothing. Wouldst thou give 'em all?

Fool: Nay, he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed. (3, 4, Lines 63-65).

Fallstaff in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Parts I and II* is often described as the playwright's supreme comic figure. But I find Lear's fool with his dark humor equally memorable.

King Lear himself displays an entire scale of emotions, going from savage rage to humbling repentance towards his honest daughter Cordelia. He shows analytical intelligence in his "O reason not the need" address to Goneril and Regan (2, 4, Lines 263-282), and also an awakened social conscience regarding the poor in his kingdom (3, 4, Lines 28-36).

Cordelia is saintly when her suffering father is brought to her. What are we to say, then, about Shakespeare's allowing Gloucester's evil son, Edmund, to have Cordelia killed, in Act 5? Samuel Johnson wrote that he was so shocked by her death that he found it most difficult to reread the last scenes of the play. And he noted that Cordelia's death was contrary to the accounts in Shakespeare's sources. I imagine that Shakespeare might have lessened the gate receipts of the play with Cordelia's murder. But I like to think that he was more concerned with giving his audience his mature reflections on patterns in human history.

Here I have used *King Lear* to plead the case for poetry. I am far from rich materially. But if the devil were to offer me an entire mint to banish poetry from my mind, I would hope to have the perfect verse to tell him to go to hell.

Melvin Landsberg is Professor of English at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence, and author of "*Dos Passos' Path to 'U.S.A.'*"