Lear

We wish that we could pass this play over, and say nothing about it. All that we can say must fall far short of the subject; or even of what we ourselves conceive of it. To attempt to give a description of the play itself or of its effect upon the mind, is mere impertinence: yet we must say something.—It is then the best of all Shakespeare's plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest. He was here fairly caught in the web of his own imagination. The passion which he has taken as his subject is that which strikes its root deepest into the human heart; of which the bond is the hardest to be unloosed; and the cancelling and tearing to pieces of which gives the greatest revulsion to the frame. This depth of nature, this force of passion, this tug and war of the elements of our being, this firm faith in filial piety, and the giddy anarchy and whirling tumult of the thoughts at finding this prop failing it, the contrast between the fixed, immoveable basis of natural affection, and the rapid, irregular starts of imagination, suddenly wrenched from all its accustomed holds and resting-places in the soul, this is what Shakespeare has given, and what nobody else but he could give. So we believe.—The mind of Lear staggering between the weight of attachment and the hurried movements of passion is like a tall ship driven about by the winds, buffeted by the furious waves, but that still rides above the storm, having its anchor fixed in the bottom of the sea; or it is like the sharp rock circled by the eddying whirlpool that foams and beats against it, or like the solid promontory pushed from its basis by the force of an earthquake.

The character of Lear itself is very finely conceived for the purpose. It is the only ground on which such a story could be built with the greatest truth and effect. It is his rash haste, his violent impetuosity, his blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes, that aggravates his impatience of them, that enforces our pity for him. The part which Cordelia bears in the scene is extremely beautiful: the story is almost told in the first words she utters. We see at once the precipice on which the poor old king stands from his own extravagant and credulous importunity, the indiscreet simplicity of her love (which, to be sure, has a little of her father's obstinacy in it) and the hollowness of her sisters' pretensions. Almost the first burst of that noble tide of passion, which runs through the play, is in the remonstrance of Kent to his royal master on the injustice of his sentence against his youngest daughter—'Be Kent unmannerly, when Lear is mad!' This manly plainness which draws down on him the displeasure of the unadvised king is worthy of the fidelity with which he adheres to his fallen fortunes. The true character of the two eldest daughters, Regan and Gonerill (they are so thoroughly hateful that we do not even like to repeat their names) breaks out in their answer to Cordelia who desires them to treat their father well—'Prescribe not us our duties'—their hatred of advice being in proportion to their determination to do wrong, and to their hypocritical pretensions to do right. Their deliberate hypocrisy adds the last finishing to the odiousness of their characters. It is the absence of this detestable quality that is the only relief in the character of Edmund the Bastard, and that at times reconciles us to him. We are not tempted to exaggerate the guilt of his conduct, when he himself gives it up as a bad business, and writes himself down 'plain villain'. Nothing more can be said about it. His religious honesty in this respect is admirable. One speech of his is worth a million. His father, Gloster, whom he has just deluded with a forged story of his brother Edgar's designs against his life, accounts for his unnatural behaviour and the strange depravity of the times from the late eclipses in the sun and moon. Edmund, who is in the secret, says when he is gone: 'This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeits of our own behaviour) we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars: as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treacherous by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of

planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star! My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tale, and my nativity was under Ursa Major: so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous. I should have been what I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.'—The whole character, its careless, light-hearted villany, contrasted with the sullen, rancorous malignity of Regan and Gonerill, its connexion with the conduct of the under-plot, in which Gloster's persecution of one of his sons and the ingratitude of another, form a counterpart to the mistakes and misfortunes of Lear—his double amour with the two sisters, and the share which he has in bringing about the fatal catastrophe, are all managed with an uncommon degree of skill and power.

It has been said, and we think justly, that the third act of *Othello*, and the three first acts of *Lear*, are Shakespeare's great masterpieces in the logic of passion: that they contain the highest examples not only of the force of individual passion, but of its dramatic vicissitudes and striking effects arising from the different circumstances and characters of the persons speaking. We see the ebb and flow of the feeling, its pauses and feverish starts, its impatience of opposition, its accumulating force when it has time to recollect itself, the manner in which it avails itself of every passing word or gesture, its haste to repel insinuation, the alternate contraction and dilatation of the soul, and all 'the dazzling fence of controversy' in this mortal combat with poisoned weapons, aimed at the heart, where each wound is fatal. We have seen in *Othello*, how the unsuspecting frankness and impetuous passions of the Moor are played upon and exasperated by the artful dexterity of Iago. In the present play, that which aggravates the sense of sympathy in the reader, and of uncontrollable anguish in the swollen heart of Lear, is the petrifying indifference, the cold, calculating, obdurate selfishness of his daughters. His keen passions seem whetted on their stony hearts. The contrast would be too painful, the shock too great, but for the intervention of the Fool, whose well-timed levity comes in to break the continuity of feeling when it can no longer be borne, and to bring into play again the fibres of the heart just as they are growing rigid from over-strained excitement. The imagination is glad to take refuge in the half-comic, half-serious comments of the Fool, just as the mind under the extreme anguish of a surgical operation vents itself in sallies of wit. The character was also a grotesque ornament of the barbarous times, in which alone the tragic ground-work of the story could be laid. In another point of view it is indispensable, inasmuch as while it is a diversion to the too great intensity of our disgust, it carries the pathos to the highest pitch of which it is capable, by showing the pitiable weakness of the old king's conduct and its irretrievable consequences in the most familiar point of view. Lear may well 'beat at the gate which let his folly in', after, as the Fool says, 'he has made his daughters his mothers'. The character is dropped in the third act to make room for the entrance of Edgar as Mad Tom, which well accords with the increasing bustle and wildness of the incidents; and nothing can be more complete than the distinction between Lear's real and Edgar's assumed madness, while the resemblance in the cause of their distresses, from the severing of the nearest ties of natural affection, keeps up a unity of interest. Shakespeare's mastery over his subject, if it was not art, was owing to a knowledge of the connecting links of the passions, and their effect upon the mind, still more wonderful than any systematic adherence to rules, and that anticipated and outdid all the efforts of the most refined art, not inspired and rendered instinctive by genius.

One of the most perfect displays of dramatic power is the first interview between Lear and his daughter, after the designed affronts upon him, which till one of his knights reminds him of them, his sanguine temperament had led him to overlook. He returns with his train from hunting, and his usual impatience breaks out in his first words, 'Let me not stay a jot for dinner; go, get it ready.' He then encounters the faithful Kent in disguise, and retains him in his service; and the first trial of his honest duty is to trip up the heels of the officious Steward who makes so prominent and despicable a figure

through the piece. On the entrance of Gonerill the following dialogue takes place:

> “ Lear. How now, daughter? what makes that frontlet on?
> Methinks, you are too much of late i’ the frown.
>
> Fool. Thou wast a pretty fellow, when thou had’st no need to care for her frowning; now thou art an O without a figure: I am better than thou art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing.—Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue; [To Gonerill.] so your face bids me, though you say nothing.
> Mum, mum.
> He that keeps nor crust nor crum,
> Weary of all, shall want some—
> That’s a sheal’d peascod! [Pointing to Lear.]
>
> Gonerill. Not only, sir, this your all-licens’d fool,
> But other of your insolent retinue
> Do hourly carp and quarrel; breaking forth
> In rank and not-to-beendured riots.
> I had thought, by making this well known unto you,
> To have found a safe redress; but now grow fearful,
> By what yourself too late have spoke and done,
> That you protect this course, and put it on
> By your allowance; which if you should, the fault
> Would not ‘scape censure, nor the redresses sleep,
> Which in the tender of a wholesome weal,
> Might in their working do you that offence,
> (Which else were shame) that then necessity
> Would call discreet proceeding.
>
> Fool. For you trow, nuncle,
> The hedge sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
> That it had its head bit off by its young.
> So out went the candle, and we were left darkling.
>
> Lear. Are you our daughter?
>
> Gonerill. Come, sir,
> I would, you would make use of that good wisdom
> Whereof I know you are fraught; and put away
> These dispositions, which 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. Does any here know me?—Why, this is not Lear:
Does Lear walk thus? speak thus?--Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, or his discernings
Are lethargy'd—Ha! waking?—'Tis not so.—
Who is it that can tell me who I am?—Lear's shadow?
I would learn that: for by the marks
Of sov'reignty, of knowledge, and of reason,
I should be false persuaded I had daughters.—
Your name, fair gentlewoman?

Gonerill. Come, sir:
This admiration is much o' the favour
Of other your new pranks. I do beseech you
To understand my purposes aright:
As you are old and reverend, you should be wise:
Here do you keep a hundred knights and squires;
Men so disorder'd, so debauch'd, and bold,
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous inn: epicurism and lust
Make it more like a tavern, or a brothel,
Than a grac'd palace. The shame itself doth speak
For instant remedy: be then desir'd
By her, that else will take the thing she begs,
A little to disquantity your train;
And the remainder, that shall still depend,
To be such men as may besort your age,
And know themselves and you.

Lear. Darkness and devils!
Saddle my horses; call my train together.—
Degenerate Bastard! I'll not trouble thee;
Yet have I left a daughter.

Gonerill. You strike my people, and your disorder'd rabble
Make servants of their betters.

Enter Albany

Lear. Woe, that too late repents—O, sir, are you come?
Is it your will? speak, sir.—Prepare my horses.—
[To Albany.]
Ingratitude! thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous, when thou show'st thee in a child,
Than the sea-monster!

Albany. Pray, sir, be patient.

Lear. Detested kite! thou liest. [To Gonerill.]
My train are men of choice and rarest parts,
That all particulars of duty know;
And in the most exact regard support
The worships of their name.—O most small fault,
How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!
Which, like an engine, wrench'd my frame of nature
From the fixt place; drew from my heart all love,
And added to the gall. O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at the gate, that let thy folly in,
[Striking his head.]
And thy dear judgement out!—Go, go, my people!

Albany. My lord, I am guiltless, as I am ignorant
Of what hath mov'd you.

Lear. It may be so, my lord—
Hear, nature, hear: dear goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility;
Dry up in her the organs of increase;
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen: that it may live,
To be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth;
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks;
Turn all her mother's pains, and benefits,
To laughter and contempt; that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child!—Away, away!
[Exit.]

Albany. Now, gods, that we adore, whereof comes this?

Gonerill. Never afflict yourself to know the cause;
But let his disposition have that scope
That dotage gives it.

Re-enter Lear

Lear. What, fifty of my followers at a clap!
Within a fortnight!

Albany. What's the matter, sir?

> Lear. I'll tell thee; life and death! I am asham'd
> That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus:
> [To Gonerill.]
> That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
> Should make thee worth them.--Blasts and fogs upon thee!
> The untented woundings of a father's curse
> Pierce every sense about thee!—Old fond eyes,
> Beweep this cause again, I'll pluck you out;
> And cast you, with the waters that you lose,
> To temper clay.—Ha! is it come to this?
> Let it be so:—Yet have I left a daughter,
> Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable;
> When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails
> She'll flay thy wolfish visage. Thou shalt find
> That I'll resume the shape, which thou dost think
> I have cast off forever.
>
> [Exeunt Lear, Kent, and Attendants.]

This is certainly fine: no wonder that Lear says after it, 'O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heavens,' feeling its effects by anticipation: but fine as is this burst of rage and indignation at the first blow aimed at his hopes and expectations, it is nothing near so fine as what follows from his double disappointment, and his lingering efforts to see which of them he shall lean upon for support and find comfort in, when both his daughters turn against his age and weakness. It is with some difficulty that Lear gets to speak with his daughter Regan, and her husband, at Gloster's castle. In concert with Gonerill they have left their own home on purpose to avoid him. His apprehensions are fast alarmed by this circumstance, and when Gloster, whose guests they are, urges the fiery temper of the Duke of Cornwall as an excuse for not importuning him a second time, Lear breaks out:

> "Vengeance! Plague! Death! Confusion!
> Fiery? What fiery quality? Why, Gloster,
> I'd speak with the Duke of Cornwall and his wife.

Afterwards, feeling perhaps not well himself, he is inclined to admit their excuse from illness, but then recollecting that they have set his messenger (Kent) in the stocks, all his suspicions are roused again, and he insists on seeing them.

> "Enter Cornwall, Regan, Gloster, and Servants.
>
> Lear. Good-morrow to you both.

Cornwall. Hail to your grace!

[Kent is set at liberty.]

Regan. I am glad to see your highness.

Lear. Regan, I think you are; I know what reason
I have to think so; if thou should'st not be glad,
I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb,
Sepulch'ring an adultress.—O, are you free?
[To Kent.]
Some other time for that.—Beloved Regan,
Thy sister's naught: O Regan, she hath tied
Sharp-tooth'd unkindness, like a vulture, here—
[Points to his heart.]
I can scarce speak to thee; thou'lt not believe,
Of how deprav'd a quality—o Regan!

Regan. I pray you, sir, take patience; I have hope
You less know how to value her desert,
Than she to scant her duty.

Lear. Say, how is that?

Regan. I cannot think my sister in the least
Would fail her obligation; if, sir, perchance,
She have restrain'd the riots of your followers,
'Tis on such ground, and to such wholesome end,
As clears her from all blame.

Lear. My curses on her!

Regan. O, sir, you are old;
Nature in you stands on the very verge
Of her confine: you should be rul'd, and led
By some discretion, that discerns your state
Better than you yourself: therefore, I pray you,
That to our sister you do make return;
Say, you have wrong'd her, sir.

Lear. Ask her forgiveness?
Do you but mark how this becomes the use?
Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
Age is unnecessary; on my knees I beg,
That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food.

Regan. Good sir, no more; these are unsightly tricks:
Return you to my sister.

Lear. Never, Regan:
She hath abated me of half my train;
Look'd blank upon me; struck me with her tongue,
Most serpent-like, upon the very heart:—
All the stor'd vengeances of heaven fall
On her ungrateful top! Strike her young bones,
You taking airs, with lameness!

Cornwall. Fie, sir, fie!

Lear: You nimble lightnings, dart your blinding flames
Into her scornful eyes! Infect her beauty,
You fen-suck'd fogs, drawn by the powerful sun,
To fall, and blast her pride!

Regan. O the blest gods!
So will you wish on me, when the rash mood is on.

Lear. No, Regan, thou shalt never have my curse;
Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o'er to harshness; her eyes are fierce, but thine
Do comfort, and not burn: 'Tis not in thee
To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train,
To bandy hasty words, to scant my sizes,
And, in conclusion, to oppose the bolt
Against my coming in: thou better know'st
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude;
Thy half o' the kingdom thou hast not forgot,
Wherein I thee endow'd.

Regan. Good sir, to the purpose. [Trumpets within]

Lear. Who put my man i' the stocks?

Cornwall. What trumpet's that?

Enter Steward

Regan. I know't, my sister's; this approves her letter,
That she would soon be here.—Is your lady come?

Lear. This is a slave, whose easy-borrow'd pride
Dwells in the fickle grace of her he follows:—
Out, varlet, from my sight!

Cornwall. What means your grace?

Lear. Who stock'd my servant? Regan, I have good hope
Thou did'st not know on't.--Who comes here? O heavens,
[Enter Gonerill]
If you do love old men, if your sweet sway
Allow obedience, if yourselves are old,
Make it your cause; send down, and take my part!—
Art not asham'd to look upon this beard?—
[To Gonerill.]
O, Regan, wilt thou take her by the hand?

Gonerill. Why not by the hand, sir? How have I offended?
All's not offence, that indiscretion finds,
And dotage terms so.

Lear. O, sides, you are too tough!
Will you yet hold?—How came my man i' the stocks?

Cornwall. I set him there, sir: but his own disorders
Deserv'd much less advancement.

Lear. You! did you?

Regan. I pray you, father, being weak, seem so.
If, till the expiration of your month,
You will return and sojourn with my sister,
Dismissing half your train, come then to me;
I am now from home, and out of that provision
Which shall be needful for your entertainment.

Lear. Return to her, and fifty men dismiss'd?
No, rather I abjure all roofs, and choose
To be a comrade with the wolf and owl—
To wage against the enmity o' the air,
Necessity's sharp pinch!—Return with her!
Why, the hot-blooded France, that dowerless took
Our youngest born, I could as well be brought
To knee his throne, and squire-like pension beg
To keep base life afoot.—Return with her!
Persuade me rather to be slave and sumpter
To this detested groom. [Looking on the Steward.]

Gonerill. At your choice, sir.

Lear. Now, I pr'ythee, daughter, do not make me mad;
I will not trouble thee, my child; farewell:
We'll no more meet, no more see one another:—
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
Or, rather, a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a bile,
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,
In my corrupted blood. But I'll not chide thee:
Let shame come when it will, I do not call it:
I did not bid the thunder-bearer shoot,
Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove:
Mend when thou canst; be better, at thy leisure:
I can be patient; I can stay with Regan,
I, and my hundred knights.

Regan. Not altogether so, sir;
I look'd not for you yet, nor am provided
For your fit welcome: Give ear, sir, to my sister;
For those that mingle reason with your passion
Must be content to think you old, and so—
But she knows what she does.

Lear. Is this well spoken now?

Regan. I dare avouch it, sir: What, fifty followers?
Is it not well? What should you need of more?
Yea, or so many? Sith that both charge and danger
Speak 'gainst so great a number? How, in one house,
Should many people, under two commands,
Hold amity? Tis hard; almost impossible.

Gonerill. Why might you not, my lord, receive attendance
From those that she calls servants, or from mine?

Regan. Why not, my lord? If then they chanc'd to slack you,
We would control them: if you will come to me
(For now I spy a danger) I entreat you
To bring but five-and-twenty; to no more
Will I give place, or notice.

Lear. I gave you all—

Regan. And in good time you gave it.

Lear. Made you my guardians, my depositaries;
But kept a reservation to be follow'd
With such a number: what, must I come to you
With five-and-twenty, Regan! said you so?

Regan. And speak it again, my lord; no more with me.

Lear. Those wicked creatures yet do look well-favour'd,
When others are more wicked; not being the worst,
Stands in some rank of praise:—I'll go with thee;
[To Gonerill.]
Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,
And thou art twice her love.

Gonerill. Hear me, my lord;
What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house, where twice so many
Have a command to tend you?

Regan. What need one?

Lear. O, reason not the need: our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's: thou art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous,
Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st;
Which scarcely keeps thee warm.—But, for true need—
You heavens, give me that patience which I need!
You see me here, you gods; a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger!
O, let no woman's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks!—No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall—I will do such things—
What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think, I'll weep:
No, I'll not weep:—
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or e'er I'll weep:—O, fool, I shall go mad!

[Exeunt Lear, Gloster, Kent, and Fool.]

If there is anything in any author like this yearning of the heart, these throes of tenderness, this profound expression of all that can be thought and felt in the most heart-rending situations, we are glad of it; but it is in some author that we have not read.

The scene in the storm, where he is exposed to all the fury of the elements, though grand and terrible, is not so fine, but the moralizing scenes with Mad Tom, Kent, and Gloster, are upon a par with the former. His exclamation in the supposed trial-scene of his daughters, ‘See the little dogs and all, Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, see they bark at me,’ his issuing his orders, ‘Let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart,’ and his reflection when he sees the misery of Edgar, ‘Nothing but his unkind daughters could have brought him to this,’ are in a style of pathos, where the extremest resources of the imagination are called in to lay open the deepest movements of the heart, which was peculiar to Shakespeare. In the same style and spirit is his interrupting the Fool who asks, ‘whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman’, by answering ‘A king, a king!’

The indirect part that Gloster takes in these scenes where his generosity leads him to relieve Lear and resent the cruelty of his daughters, at the very time that he is himself instigated to seek the life of his son, and suffering under the sting of his supposed ingratitude, is a striking accompaniment to the situation of Lear. Indeed, the manner in which the threads of the story are woven together is almost as wonderful in the way of art as the carrying on the tide of passion, still varying and unimpaired, is on the score of nature. Among the remarkable instances of this kind are Edgar’s meeting with his old blind father; the deception he practises upon him when he pretends to lead him to the top of Dover-cliff—‘Come on, sir, here’s the place,’ to prevent his ending his life and miseries together; his encounter with the perfidious Steward whom he kills, and his finding the letter from Gonerill to his brother upon him which leads to the final catastrophe, and brings the wheel of Justice ‘full circle home’ to the guilty parties. The bustle and rapid succession of events in the last scenes is surprising. But the meeting between Lear and Cordelia is by far the most affecting part of them. It has all the wildness of poetry, and all the heartfelt truth of nature. The previous account of her reception of the news of his unkind treatment, her involuntary reproaches to her sisters, ‘Shame, ladies, shame,’ Lear’s backwardness to see his daughter, the picture of the desolate state to which he is reduced, ‘Alack, ’tis he; why he was met even now, as mad as the vex’d sea, singing aloud,’ only prepare the way for and heighten our expectation of what follows, and assuredly this expectation is not disappointed when through the tender care of Cordelia he revives and recollects her.

> “ Cordelia. How does my royal lord? How fares your majesty!
>
> Lear. You do me wrong, to take me out o’ the grave:
> Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
> Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
> Do scald like molten lead.
>
> Cordelia. Sir, do you know me?
>
> Lear. You are a spirit I know: when did you die?
>
> Cordelia. Still, still, far wide!

> Physician. He’s scarce awake; let him alone awhile.
>
> Lear. Where have I been? Where am I?--Fair daylight?--
>
> I am mightily abus’d.—I should even die with pity,
> To see another thus.—I know not what to say.—
> I will not swear these are my hands:—let’s see;
> I feel this pin prick. ‘Would I were assur’d
> Of my condition.
>
> Cordelia. O, look upon me, sir,
> And hold your hands in benediction o’er me:—
> No, sir, you must not kneel.
>
> Lear. Pray, do not mock me:
> I am a very foolish fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward;
> Not an hour more, nor less: and, to deal plainly,
> I fear, I am not in my perfect mind.
> Methinks, I shou’d know you, and know this man;
> Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
> What place this is; and all the skill I have
> Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
> Where I did lodge last night: do not laugh at me;
> For, as I am a man, I think this lady
> To be my child Cordelia.
>
> Cordelia. And so I am, I am!

Almost equal to this in awful beauty is their consolation of each other when, after the triumph of their enemies, they are led to prison.

> “ Cordelia. We are not the first,
> Who, with best meaning, have incurr’d the worst.
> For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down;
> Myself could else out-frown false fortune’s frown.—
> Shall we not see these daughters, and these sisters?
>
> Lear. No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison:
> We two alone will sing like birds i’ the 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 us 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 the moon.
>
> Edmund. Take them away.
>
> Lear. Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
> The gods themselves throw incense.

The concluding events are sad, painfully sad; but their pathos is extreme. The oppression of the feelings is relieved by the very interest we take in the misfortunes of others, and by the reflections to which they give birth. Cordelia is hanged in prison by the orders of the bastard Edmund, which are known too late to be countermanded, and Lear dies broken-hearted, lamenting over her.

> “ Lear. And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life:
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life.
> And thou no breath at all? O, thou wilt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never!—
> Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir.——

He dies, and indeed we feel the truth of what Kent says on the occasion—

> “ Vex not his ghost: O, let him pass! he hates him,
> That would upon the rack of the rough world
> Stretch him out longer.

Yet a happy ending has been contrived for this play, which is approved of by Dr. Johnson and condemned by Schlegel. A better authority than either, on any subject in which poetry and feeling are concerned, has given it in favour of Shakespeare, in some remarks on the acting of Lear, with which we shall conclude this account.

The Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery with which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements than any actor can be to represent Lear. The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual; the explosions of his passions are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that rich sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on; even as he himself neglects it.

On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear;—we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur, which baffles the malice of daughters and storms; in the aberrations of his reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers, as the wind blows where it listeth, at will on the corruptions and abuses of mankind. What have looks or tones to do with that sublime identification of his age with that of *the heavens themselves*, when in his reproaches to them for conniving at the injustice of his children, he reminds them that "they themselves are old!" What gesture shall we appropriate to this? What has the voice or the eye to do with such things? But the play is beyond all art, as the tamperings with it show: it is too hard and stony; it must have love-scenes, and a happy ending. It is not enough that Cordelia is a daughter, she must shine as a lover too. Tate has put his hook in the nostrils of this Leviathan, for Garrick and his followers, the showmen of the scene, to draw it about more easily. A happy ending!—as if the living martyrdom that Lear had gone through,—the flaying of his feelings alive, did not make a fair dismissal from the stage of life the only decorous thing for him. If he is to live and be happy after, if he could sustain this world's burden after, why all this pudder and preparation—why torment us with all this unnecessary sympathy? As if the childish pleasure of getting his gilt robes and sceptre again could tempt him to act over again his misused station—as if at his years and with his experience anything was left but to die.'[1]

Four things have struck us in reading *Lear*:

1. 1. That poetry is an interesting study, for this reason, that it relates to whatever is most interesting in human life. Whoever therefore has a contempt for poetry, has a contempt for himself and humanity.
   2. That the language of poetry is superior to the language of painting; because the strongest of our recollections relate to feelings, not to faces.
   3. That the greatest strength of genius is shown in describing the strongest passions: for the power of the imagination, in works of invention, must be in proportion to the force of the natural impressions, which are the subject of them.
   4. That the circumstance which balances the pleasure against the pain in tragedy is, that in proportion to the greatness of the evil, is our sense and desire of the opposite good excited; and that our sympathy with actual suffering is lost in the strong impulse given to our natural affections, and carried away with the swelling tide of passion, that gushes from and relieves the heart.

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1. 1. See an article, called 'Theatralia', in the second volume of the Reflector, by Charles Lamb.

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