I. The Philosophy of Hamlet and Lear

"Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?" This is the sudden question put by the fool Touchstone to the shepherd Corin in the play As You Like It. It is also the question we would like to put to the author of As You Like It. For he also may be regarded, according to the pastoral convention of his time, as a shepherd, just as in the same play he recalls his predecessor Marlowe as a "dead shepherd." Alas, however, looking for the philosophy of Shakespeare may be compared to looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. He is himself so enigmatic, hiding behind, now one, now another of his characters, but revealing himself in none of them. In them he is aptly termed "myriad-minded"; but what, we wonder, is he like in himself? Where is his single mind, and his simple — if it may be called "simple" — philosophy?

At least, we can begin with the characters, with special attention to the more philosophically-minded among them. And among the many characters that populate the plays, we may concentrate on two as being, if not philosophers, then at least of the type who are drawn to philosophy. These are Hamlet and Lear, who stand at either end of Shakespeare's "tragic period" in the first decade of the seventeenth century, and who seem to be altogether different from each other. The one is a brash young student, son of a recently deceased father and now undergoing an identity crisis for that reason. The other is a rash old man, accustomed to the unrestricted exercise of authority, but now with his abdication of that authority triggering in him an identity crisis. Thus for all their seeming difference in age and experience, they are similar
in facing both an identity crisis and the questions provoked by that crisis. So we may consider the questions raised by Hamlet and Lear one after another and compare the answers they respectively give to these questions. Then, in the comparison of the two, if not in either of them as individuals, we may hope to catch a glimpse of the dramatist's philosophy behind them.

What then, we may ask, is the philosophy of Hamlet? At least, we can say what it is not. At least, it is not the philosophy of his friend Horatio, to whom he declares, as it were from a superior viewpoint: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Then what is the philosophy of Horatio, which Hamlet finds so unsatisfactory? it is presumably the philosophy of "Seeing is believing," since Hamlet's words refer to the recent appearance of the ghost. Already after the first appearance of the ghost, Horatio had stated this philosophy: "I might not this believe, without the sensible and true avouch of mine own eyes." Thus one might say that, for all his fidelity to Hamlet, Horatio is something of a materialist, or what was then called a "naturalist," one whose philosophy (like that of Sir Francis Bacon) was restricted to the world of nature; whereas Hamlet, by contrast, is more interested in the world of the spirit, the supernatural world, beyond that of mere natural phenomena.

This metaphysical interest of Hamlet we notice in his opening outburst in reply to his mother. When she asks him, considering how common is the death of a father, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" he is indignant. "Seems, madam! Nay, it is; I know not seems." Here in a nutshell we have the philosophy of Hamlet and, considering how commonly it occurs in all his plays, that of Shakespeare, too. It is a philosophy which, as is natural to a "love of wisdom," is never content with the appearances or phenomena of the natural world, but looks to a "noumenal" reality in and beyond them. It is far from any kind of materialism, naturalism, pragmatism, or phenomenology; but it is not unrelated to scepticism and agnosticism, inasmuch as it casts a veil of doubt and ignorance, not so much over the unseen world, as over the world that is seen. For Hamlet, as for his creator, the world that is seen is but a dream, a shadow, a fantasy, a play, that sooner of later comes to an end and leaves us face to face with an unseen reality.

What, then, is this unseen reality, as Hamlet sees it? Needless to say, for Hamlet, as for his creator, it is a reality connected with man, or rather
the heart of man. From all his speeches we may conclude that, as a student at Wittenberg University, Hamlet is not a naturalist, like his friend Horatio, but a humanist, devoted to the study of “human letters,” or classical literature. Anyhow, he is deeply interested in man, as when he exclaims to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, “What a piece of work is man!,” and when he asks himself in view of Fortinbras, “What is a man, if his chief good and market of his time be but to sleep and feed?” In each of these cases, moreover, he attributes the dignity of man to the faculty of reason, as when he further exclaims, “How noble in reason!,” and when he reflects on “that capability and god-like reason” manifested in his “large discourse, looking before and after.”

Such an ideal of man may well seem to echo Aristotle’s famous definition of man as a “rational animal.” Only, Hamlet doesn’t end there. Unlike the Neo-Platonist Pico della Mirandula in his manifesto of Renaissance thought, De Dignitate Hominis, he is by no means uncritical of man; but he goes on, as it were, to take back all he has just said in favour of man with an unexpected profession of disgust, “And yet to me what in this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me.” Indeed, his whole view of man is tinted with this scepticism. Nor is it limited to this one utterance; but it recurs in his strange protest to Polonius, “Use every man after his desert, and who should ‘scape whipping?,” and in his stranger outburst to Ophelia, “What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us.” These are utterances not of a Renaissance humanist, with his optimistic ideal of human nature, but of a Reformation divine, with his pessimistic emphasis on human corruption. No wonder the university from which Hamlet has recently returned home is that of Wittenberg, the source and centre of sixteenth-century Lutheranism.

Thus the philosophy of Hamlet, if it may still be called “philosophy” and not rather “theology,” is one not so much of man or human nature, as of sin or the reality of man in this “harsh world.” It is this concern with sin, or what he calls “foul corruption,” that prevents Hamlet from accepting the outward appearances, however fair, of the court of Denmark. From the outset he doubts “some foul play,” and in the course of the action he seeks to uncover that foul play, by catching (as he puts it) “the conscience of the king.” Here is the reality, as he sees it from the beginning, the reality of sin and guilt both in his uncle, as his father’s murderer, and in his mother, as his uncle’s accomplice. The more, how-
ever, he investigates this reality in others, the more he is led to recog-
nize its presence in himself, too. Thus he confesses to Ophelia, “I could
accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne
me.” In himself he sees as it were an incarnation of the Seven Deadly
Sins, “with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them
in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.” No won-
der he cannot bring himself to act as “scourge and minister” of heaven,
according to his promise to the ghost, seeing that (as the Duke chants
in Measure for Measure), “He who the sword of heaven will bear/ Should
be as holy as severe.” So he goes on to face the reality not only of sin
but also of death, as being “the wages of sin.”

Here is yet another aspect of the increasingly complex philosophy
of Hamlet, which isn’t so simple after all. So long as he merely exclaims,
“What a piece of work is a man!,” his philosophy is delightfully simple;
and the simplicity only increases as he passes from individual men on
earth, such as his deceased father (“He was a man”), to the heavenly or
Platonic ideal of Man in himself. But it becomes complex and clouded
over, as he loses all delight in man (including himself) and sees in him
only a “quintessence of dust.” Thus for him everything in human life
ends in decay and decomposition, and man, who was so fine in life, be-
comes in the grave mere “food for worms.” In his diseased imagina-
tion Hamlet even comes to revel in such morbid thoughts. Yet even in
them he is nothing if not critical; and it is the whole point of his cen-
tral soliloquy, “To be, or not to be;” that he casts doubt not (as many
critics imagine) on the life after death but on death itself considered as
an end. He would even like to consider death as an end, or a sweet sleep;
but, he goes on, even if death is a sleep, what if that sleep is disturbed
by dreams and nightmares? What then? Ay, there’s the rub!

Thus in his philosophical reflections Hamlet is led, as it were irre-
sistibly, by some inner non-Aristotelian logic beyond the mere phenom-
enological fact of death, or of its outward appearance as a sleep, to “The
undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveller returns.” What is
this country, and this reality? Hamlet doesn’t tell us precisely; but con-
sidering the way his speeches are filled with references to heaven and
hell, angels and devils, we may easily guess what is at the back of his
mind. For all his superficial talk of Hyperion and Jove, Mars and Mer-
cury, we find in him no Renaissance paganism but a deep Christian view
of life, akin to that of Dante with his Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso.
And in this view of life he looks, beyond the sin that pervades the world of Denmark, both in himself and others, to "a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew how we will." He learns to recognize "heaven ordinant" even or especially in chance circumstances, and "a special providence in the fall of a sparrow." In this recently discovered faith, to which he only gives expression in the last scene, Hamlet comes to accept his death, without injury or violence to himself or others, whether by suicide or revenge, reflecting that "The readiness is all." And this, we may say, with its echo of Christ's warning about the final coming of the Son of Man, is the sum of Hamlet's philosophy, or theology.

Now what may we say of Lear's philosophy, and how may we compare it with that of Hamlet? We may well think of Hamlet as a philosopher, considering how fresh he is from his studies at Wittenberg University, and considering how disposed he is to melancholy, traditionally regarded as the humor of a philosopher. His philosophy, as we have seen, is one of man and human nature, of sin and human corruption, of death and man's condition after death, of divine providence and human salvation. But how may we see Lear as a philosopher? From the beginning of the play we see him as an impulsive old man, accustomed to command, with no experience of either school of university. As Regan truly, if unkindly, remarks of him, "He hath ever but slenderly known himself." His school, however, is soon to be the bitter school of adversity; and in his first lesson, in his experience of the ingratitude of his daughter, Goneril, he utters the basic question of his new personalist (as opposed to Hamlet's more existentialist) philosophy, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" And in this first grade of school it is ironically his Fool who acts as his tutor and gives him the answer to his question, "Lear's shadow." For in giving all his substance to his two false daughters, Lear is left with nothing but a shadow of his former self; and that shadow is as it were incarnated in his Fool, as the personification of his folly, according to the proverb, "There is no fool like an old fool."

While he remains with his Fool, however, Lear cannot learn wisdom or become a philosopher. So amid the thunder and lightning of the storm on the heath, he finds another tutor in the mad beggar, Edgar. Here it is deeply significant of Lear's new frame of mind that even in the depth of his madness he not only seeks guidance from the beggar but even hails him as "this philosopher ... noble philosopher ... my philosopher." The philosophy he is to learn from Edgar may not be the cus-
tomary philosophy or wisdom of this world, whether that of Plato or Aristotle or some other man of learning. It is, rather, what Erasmus calls "the philosophy of Christ," which is in the eyes of the world (as St. Paul says to the Corinthians) mere folly, the folly of the cross. For it isn't anything Edgar says that impresses Lear with the desire to become his disciple, but simply what he is or what he is not. As Edgar himself said in deciding to assume a beggar's disguise, "Edgar I nothing am." In other words, it is because Edgar has reduced himself to nothing as a beggar, that Lear desires to follow his example and to become nothing like him, as it were in atonement for having banished his good daughter Cordelia and so reduced her to nothing. This is the very philosophy of Christ, who in his incarnation (as St. Paul also says to the Philippians) made himself nothing in taking upon himself the form of a servant and becoming man.

Now Lear shows himself such a ready learner that he soon becomes a teacher in turn. Hardly has he graduated from the school of Edgar, whose philosophy is that of patience, than he is ready to preach a homily to the blinded Gloucester. "Thou must be patient," he preaches, "we came crying hither." What Lear thus preaches to Gloucester is precisely what he has just learnt from Edgar, not so much by precept as by example. It is also, interestingly, the precept that Edgar (who is a witness to Lear's sermon) goes on to repeat to his blind father in the final Act: "Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither. Ripeness is all." Here the addition Edgar makes to Lear's sermon is an interesting echo of Hamlet's philosophy in its maturest utterance, "The readiness is all." The meaning is the same, though the imagery (from the Book of Revelation) is different. Only it is the philosophy not of Lear but of Edgar, and as taught not to Lear but to Gloucester.

As for Lear, we find him progressing beyond the tutorial guidance of Edgar, as he has already progressed beyond that of the Fool. For now he has found a new, ideal teacher of wisdom in his good daughter, Cordelia. In her, and in their blissful moment of reunion in her tent at Dover, he has at last found himself. For she is his true, his better self, whom he had so foolishly banished at the beginning of the play in his preference of the flattery of his false daughters over her truth. She is, as the Gentleman tells him, the "one daughter who redeems nature from the general curse which twain have brought her to." In her Lear at last finds the true answer to his original question, "Who is it that can tell
me who I am?” It is not “Lear’s shadow,” as the Fool had then stated with merely momentary truth, but Cordelia herself with whom he is now one. So in this climax of dramatic recognition, or what Aristotle terms anagnorisis, he declares: “As I am a man, I think this lady to be my child Cordelia.” And she simply replies, “And so I am, I am”—as it were echoing the very name of God given to Moses on Mount Sinai, “I am who am,” and repeated by Christ, “Before Abraham was, I am.”

This moment of blissful recognition, as it were the satori of Lear and Cordelia, is not, alas, the end of the play. Rather, Shakespeare forces us, with seeming cruelty, to look from this height of happiness to a depth of misery in the deaths first of Cordelia and then of Lear himself. How, we may ask, can he do such a thing to them, and to us? Why does he subject his audience, no less than Lear and Cordelia, to such overwhelming sorrow? Simply, we may answer, to make us think and reflect on ourselves, no less than on Lear and Cordelia. For it is precisely such sorrow, whether experienced in fact or shared in imagination, that turns us into philosophers, in the school of adversity. And this is precisely the philosophy of Christ, above all when the old Lear comes onto the stage with the dead body of the innocent Cordelia. There, amid Lear’s apocalyptic howls of grief, Albany draws our attention— with his almost liturgical exclamation, “O, see! see!”—to the dramatic tableau formed by the old man sitting with his dead daughter on his knees, as it were a reenactment of the Pieta of the sorrowing mother with the dead body of her son taken down from the cross. As the prophet Jeremiah exclaims in his Lamentations, echoed by the Church’s liturgy in Holy Week, “Behold and see, if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow”; and as the same prophet says in his prophetic book, “The whole land is made desolate, because no man layeth it to heart”; and as the other prophet Zechariah says, in words that John applies to the death of Christ on the cross, “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced.”

Here, we may say, is the point of the whole play, and the point of its philosophy, as repeatedly emphasized in the asides of Edgar in Act IV. It is the need of piercing the hearts of each member of the audience, so that we also may lay it to heart and reflect on the true meaning of human life, which is only revealed in suffering, even in the cross of Christ, as the exemplification of innocent human suffering. This is where King Lear, in its philosophical content, goes far beyond Hamlet. For Hamlet as a play is too theoretical, too problematic; and so it is not infrequently
classified as a problem play rather than a tragedy. *King Lear*, on the other hand, is hardly theoretical at all: it is intensely actual, concentrating as it does on the almost unendurable sufferings of Lear and Gloucester, shared by their innocent children, Cordelia and Edgar, and culminating in a moment of unalloyed passion, in which the sorrow of Lear over Cordelia is transformed into that of Mary over Jesus. Such, we may say, is the practical philosophy not only of Lear, in his final moment of spiritual maturity, but also of Shakespeare, and not only of Shakespeare, but also of Christ.

Finally, we may add, this philosophy, which thus achieves its ripeness in *King Lear*, is not unforeshadowed in *Hamlet*. It is envisaged both in the general theme of “readiness” and in the particular defiance of Hamlet against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who would “pluck out the heart of my mystery.” For it is this mystery at the heart of Hamlet that may be seen as further developed in the heart of Lear, and in the hearts of all who are pierced (like Edgar) at the sight of his sufferings. In this way we may apply to Shakespeare the words of Newman’s motto, “Cor ad cor loquitur” — in that the heart of the dramatist and philosopher appeals to the hearts of his audiences from generation to generation.

**II. Philosophy of Nature in King Lear**

Is there a recognizable ideology in any of Shakespeare’s plays? That is the question I wish to ask from the beginning. But first I must ask the preliminary question, what is meant by the word “ideology”? It may be defined as a clear system of ideas, such as we find in the thought of Aquinas and Scotus, of Marx and Nietzsche, of Kierkegaard and Heidegger and Sartre. No one, of course, would call Shakespeare a thinker in the same sense as the above-mentioned individuals. Yet, as a poet and dramatist, may we not say that he develops his ideas along lines at least parallel to those of the philosophers. Just as we recognize that Dante derived philosophical support from Aquinas for the structure of his *Divina Commedia*, may we not say that Shakespeare, at least in the period of his great tragedies and final romances, had the support of such contemporary thinkers as Montaigne and Hooker?

In addressing myself to this question, I find it convenient to restrict
my attention to one of these plays, the one in which the influence of both Montaigne and Hooker has often been discerned, namely *King Lear*. If any of Shakespeare’s plays can be called philosophical, or even metaphysical, it is surely this one. In it the dramatist seems to be presenting a philosophy of nature, or rather of man in the state of nature. This is what had become a topic of philosophical discussion in his age, from the reports of discoveries made in the new world as one by one they were disseminated in the old world by men like More and Montaigne and Hakluyt. And this is what Shakespeare seems to echo in the experience of Lear, when the old man sees himself deprived of everything in the storm on the heath and is then confronted by Edgar in the guise of a mad beggar, as it were a reflection of himself. Then it is that he utters his memorable words on man in the state of nature, as though anticipating the words of Hobbes in his *Leviathan*:

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owrest the worm no silk, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here’s three on’s are sophisticated. Thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! (iii.4)

This is, in fact, a passage, one of many in the play that can be traced to the influence of Montaigne; though, I might add, there is an even closer parallel in Robert Persons’ contemporary *Book of Christian Exercise*. But for the moment let us consider its meaning in relation not to any philosophical or religious source but to the immediate context of the play. It points to man in his mere existence, deprived not merely of the commodities of life, or what Lear himself has just called “the superflux,” but even of the necessities of life and of all that seems to make man’s life on earth worth living. This is also what Lear has objected to his haggling daughters in the previous Act:

O reason not the need! Our poorest beggars
Are in the poorest things superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s. (ii.4)

Here, however, he is confronted with a man who seems lacking even in the basic needs of food and clothing, not to mention the more intrinsic gift of reason. Yet in that man he sees a reflection not just of
what he is but of what he ought to be as well. This is why he says, not just theoretically, “Consider him well,” but also more practically, “Off, off, you lendings!,” while imitating in himself what he sees in the other.

It is precisely at this point in the play that the question of Lear’s philosophy is no longer a matter of what we may read into the play, with more or less ingenuity; for now it is made explicit for us by Lear himself. Now he repeatedly refers to Edgar as “this philosopher” and “this same learned Theban,” “noble philosopher” and “my philosopher” and “good Athenian.” He himself, and possibly Shakespeare in him, is but a humble disciple; while the philosopher he professes to follow is Edgar. Who, then, we may ask, is Edgar? May we identify him with Michel de Montaigne in his comfortable retreat near Bordeaux, or with Robert Persons at the remote English College in Rome, or with Richard Hooker in his quiet vicarage at Bishopbourne near Canterbury? Surely he can be none of these contemporaries; but if he recalls anyone, it must be Diogenes, the principal representative at Athens of the Cynic school of philosophy, who sought to reduce the needs and desires of man to the barest minimum in search of an unearthly ideal.

The meeting between Lear and Edgar, the once proud king and the lowly beggar, may well recall the famous meeting between Alexander and Diogenes. “What can I do for you?” asked the great ruler in his munificence. “Take your shadow off me!” was the philosopher’s rough answer. Yet Alexander was so impressed that he remarked to those in his retinue, “If I were not Alexander, I should wish to be Diogenes.” As for Lear, now that he has rejected his one good daughter Cordelia, and has been rejected in turn by his two bad daughters, Goneril and Regan, he is no longer Lear. “Doth any here know me?” he asks at the first signs of Goneril’s rejection, “This is not Lear” (i.4). Now, therefore, in his search for a new identity he sees himself as he would like to be, in the mad beggar; and he feels an overpowering impulse to pull off his “lendings,” so as to become a disciple of this “noble philosopher” in the school of Diogenes.

In our identification of Edgar, however, we need not restrict our attention to Diogenes the Cynic. We may well recall the influence on Shakespeare’s plays not only of the ancient classics, as interpreted for him by contemporary philosophers like Montaigne, but also of the Bible, as interpreted by contemporary theologians like Hooker (as well as Persons). The Bible, too, is not without its quota of mad philosophical beg-
gars like Diogenes, except that they usually do not choose the state of beggary but it is thrust upon them by circumstances not of their choosing. This is for example, what we find in the experience of Jeremiah and Job, who both have occasion to curse the day they were born, and whose words are frequently echoed in the course of the play. Indeed, in the vehemence of their utterances they may be compared no less with Lear himself than with Edgar. For it is Lear, not Edgar, who says of himself in the tempest, like another Job, “I am a man more sinned against than sinning” (iii.2) — words that might more fitly be uttered by Edgar.

Again, this is what we find above all in the suffering figure of the Messiah, as foretold in Isaiah 1, iii: “He was despised and rejected of men,” and in Psalm xxii: “But I am a worm and no man.” Such a description is applied in the play rather to Edgar than to Lear. Thus he describes himself to his blinded father as “a most poor man, made tame to fortune’s blows” (iv.6); and already before being blinded, his father has seen him as “such a fellow ... which made me think a man a worm” (iv.1). From these general words, and from his previous statement of how he will conceal himself under the disguise.

Of Bedlam beggars, who with roaring voices
Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary, (ii.3)

Edgar has been portrayed in recent productions of King Lear — specifically that of the BBC — in terms of the Man of Sorrows as depicted in Guido’s Reni’s well-known painting of Ecce Homo. It is the moment when, as St. John says, “Jesus came forth, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, and Pilate said to them, Behold the man!” (John xix.5).

For the philosophical, or theological, interpretation of this miserable condition of man, we have no need to look abroad from England to France, to the philosophical scepticism of Montaigne, or from the age of Shakespeare to that of the Civil War, when Hobbes penned his famous summary of “the life of man” in the state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” In his own age, among his own English contemporaries, Shakespeare may well have read the words of Hooker, in the First Book of The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity (published in 1594), speaking of “the will of man” as “inwardly obstinate, rebellious and averse from all obedience unto the sacred laws of his nature,” and of
"his depraved mind" as "little better than a beast." It is, indeed, adds Hooker, because of Adam’s fall that, "while we are in the world, subject we are unto sundry imperfections, griefs of body, defects of mind"; and it is for this reason that "God hath delivered a law as sharp as the two-edged sword" to cure "our festered sores." Try as we may to alleviate our griefs with physical comforts in food and clothing, it is ultimately of no avail; since what we need — as Diogenes realized in his time — is not material but spiritual, not natural but supernatural. And so, Hooker concludes in common with Aquinas and Scotus, "nature hath need of grace," even as "grace hath use of nature."

This aptly applies to Lear’s sufferings, which can be alleviated by no form of physical comfort. He even welcomes the physical sufferings inflicted by the "contentious storm," considering that "where the greater malady is fixed, the lesser is scarce felt" (iii.4). As for this greater malady, he defines it as "filial ingratitude," which is precisely a sin against nature, that nature which should incline children to obey, love and honour their parents (as Cordelia declares in the opening scene).

Here we come to the other side of the nature of man which Lear overlooked in his exclamation at Edgar: "Is man no more than this?" (iii.4). For the nature of man has to be defined not only by what he is, as an individual standing by himself, but also and above all by how he has come into being. This is, in fact, both the etymological and the philosophical meaning of nature: namely, id quo res est quod est (that by which a thing is what it is), or id quod res nata est esse (that which a thing is born to be). In man it implies a necessary relationship to his human parents, as well as to those heavenly powers to whom Lear appeals in the opening scene, "from whom we do exist and cease to be" (i.1). This relationship is ideally expressed in the bond of piety or love, by which the perfection of man is attained within the setting of his family. But when this bond is broken, as Gloucester complains in the second scene, the outcome is discord, division and "all ruinous disorders" that "follow us disquietly to our graves" (I.2).

It is, moreover, in his deep misery, arising out of his division — partly his own fault, partly theirs, from his daughters, that Lear proceeds to raise two questions which are basic to his new philosophy. For it may be maintained that the function of a philosopher, whether in the Cynical school of Diogenes or in the Biblical school of Job, is as much to raise questions as to answer them.
In the first place, while he is still with Edgar, whom he has now come to regard as a “most learned justice,” Lear raises the question about his two bad daughters, with special reference to Regan: “Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” (iii.6). He merely raises the question; but he does not stay for an answer - because there is no answer. All that can be said about such hardness of heart in children towards their parents is what Edgar subsequently says on observing the pathetic meeting of his blinded father with the mad Lear: “It is, and my heart breaks at it” (iv.6).

The other question raised by Lear is that forced on his mind by the shocking death of his good daughter Cordelia: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life and thou no breath at all?” (v.3). This, no less than the former, is a question that defies all attempts to provide a rational answer. All one can do in the face of such misery is (as Lear says of Edgar) to consider, or rather (as Albany now says of Lear) to see — in terms that recall the urging of Jeremiah, “Consider diligently, and see if there be such a thing” (Jer. ii.10), and again, “Behold and see, if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow!” (Lam. i.12).

To the first of these questions there is indeed no answer, touching as it does on what St. Paul refers to as “the mystery of iniquity” (II Thess.ii.7). Within the terms of this play, however, we may say that Lear himself is partly “the cause in nature” that has made the hard hearts of his two daughters, seeing that, as Regan truly notes from the beginning, “he hath ever but slenderly known himself” (i.1). It is because of this lack of self-knowledge and a consequent “unruly waywardness,” which Goneril also notes in him, that he banishes his good daughter and commits himself to the care of his bad daughters. And so, without the “kind nursery” of Cordelia, he exposes himself to the untempered harshness of the latter. On the other hand, what those two lack in kind nature is more than compensated for by Cordelia, in whom (as the Gentleman observes) Lear has “one daughter, who redeems nature from the general curse which twain have brought her to” (iv.6).

At this point in my argument I would like to dwell on these words, though they are commonly omitted from productions of King Lear — even from the above-mentioned TV production by the BBC. Certainly, in their stage context there is something awkward about them, as they are spoken while the king is madly running from his captors and all the speaker can do is to call them out vainly after his disappearing figure.
But they have an important place in the context of the whole play, especially in reply to the second question which is raised by Lear only afterwards. "Why," Lear then asks, "should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life," and yet Cordelia, to whom we may well apply Othello's words about Desdemona, "thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature," have "no life at all?" In so far as any answer may be found to this question, it is contained in the one word "redeems," with its deep Biblical resonance. Here we are reminded not so much of Jeremiah or Job in the Old Testament as of Christ in the New; for he is above all the Redeemer, who redeems the nature of man from the curse which "twain" (in this case, Adam and Eve) have brought on him. In St. Paul's words, he "has given himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity" (Tit. ii. 14), and he "has redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal. iii. 13).

In a yet deeper sense, the answer to this second question is to be found not so much in any words that are spoken during the play as in the silent spectacle at the end. For, then, the heart-broken father comes on stage with the dead body of his dear daughter, crying, "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" and calling on everyone, like some prophet of the Old Testament, to howl with him, only he sees them as "men of stones" (v.3). But as his agony deepens, he relapses into silence, as though he himself with the body of Cordelia has been turned into stone. This may be what Albany implies when, at the end of his little speech of retributive justice, he points to Lear and Cordelia with the exclamation, "O, see, see!" In view of the wider context of the play, one might say it is the dramatists himself directing our attention through this tableau of mother and son, which was already famous in Shakespeare's age as the Pieta of Michelangelo.

Shakespeare, however, wisely refrains from making this parallel explicit, any more than he makes the many other Biblical and Christian parallels in the play explicit. For what he is presenting in King Lear, in contrast to the previous chronicle play of King Lear, is ostensibly a play about pre-Christian Britain, and also (as S.L. Bethell long ago pointed out) about human nature before the coming of Christ. What he shows is, above all, the predicament of human nature in its fallen condition, deprived of divine grace. This, far more than food and clothing and other commodities, even reason itself, is what nature needs, or else "man's life is cheap as beast's" (ii.4). In so far as this grace is symbolized in the play, it appears in the piety, first of Edgar, then of Cordelia,
as they each in turn move to save their desperate fathers. In the outcome, Gloucester dies, but "smilingly," while Edgar lives to the end. As for Lear, he only survives for a time after the death of Cordelia. How precisely the death of his daughter serves to "redeem" her father remains unclear, except in so far as he has already been redeemed in his blissful reunion with her, and in his end he, too, changes from sorrow to sudden joy in a vision of life on the lips of Cordelia. And so he dies with her.

Yet that is all a play like King Lear can be expected to do: namely, to point from afar at what Graham Greene calls "the hint of a solution." And that is all a paper like this on King Lear can be expected to do: namely, to uncover not only its philosophical or ideological implications, in the cynicism of Diogenes or the scepticism of Montaigne, or the pessimism of Hooker and Hobbes, but also in its more deeply underlying references to the Bible. After all, that is the one source of ideas which the dramatist shared, more fully than any of the above-mentioned thinkers, with his Elizabethan audience.