The Storm in *King Lear*

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In the January 1951 issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Mr. George W. Williams discussed “The Poetry of the Storm in *King Lear,*” analyzing some of the sound patterns and structures of meaning, with special emphasis upon the eschatological significance of the tempest. Mr. Williams sees a symbol of the Last Judgement and the destruction of the world in the fearful storm which descends upon the heath and the aged king. I am in general agreement with this view, but would add another, related interpretation of the storm, another level of meaning. Unquestionably, the connotations of doomsday and its accompanying phenomena are contained in the play and would have reached a Christian audience; but I wonder if the primitive story of Lear does not operate within a framework of pagan cosmology. I see in the tempest, as Mr. Williams does, and also Mr. Eustace Tillyard, a cosmic strife of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water; but it appears to me a cosmic chaos of the Empedoclean type, a destruction of the universe by Strife (Strife rooted in ingratitude).

Andrew C. Bradley made a passing observation suggesting the idea with which I am concerned, but he did not develop the possibilities inherent in his remark. Bradley noticed that the play contains two sharply defined groups of characters (exclusive of Lear, Gloucester, and Albany), which represent extremes of good and evil. Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, and the Fool display a love so intense that it cannot be destroyed even by abuse and injustice; Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Oswald, and Edmund display a selfishness so callous that it cannot be touched by the most elemental human pity.  

Bradley commented: “. . . the two [groups] are set in conflict, almost as if Shakespeare, like Empedocles, were regarding Love and Hate as the two ultimate forces of the universe.”

The notion, then, of the Empedoclean conflict of Love and Hate and that of the related clash of the four elements invite careful consideration, especially if they can be linked with the play’s theme of ingratitude.

Ingratitude, I think, is crucial to the interpretation of the storm metaphor, for it is that evil which breaks the heart of Lear, shatters his reason, and bursts asunder the bonds of family affection in him. By metaphorical extension, it is ingratitude which breaks the tranquillity of nature and causes the storm;

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2 With this comment one may compare Mr. Tillyard’s short passage in *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1944): “Lear’s first words in the storm invoke explicitly all four elements in their uproars; and though these are presented not in abstraction but as manifested in the concrete natural happenings, basic elemental conflict is as much a part of his thought as it is the actual violence of the weather” (p. 59).
even more, it is the origin of the cosmic chaos, for unthankfulness is the particular form of Strife or Hatred, in the Empedoclean sense, which destroys the harmony of the universe and tears it into the elemental fragments which had cohered under the dominance of Love.\(^3\)

In the closing scene of Act II, when the storm is beginning to rumble in the distance, Lear's parting speech to Goneril and Regan sets the stage, as it were, for the great third act and gives the metaphorical key to it. Struggling with the weakness of tears the old king turns upon his daughters and threatens them:

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 ere I'll weep. O, fool, I shall go mad!\(^4\)

The next line is Cornwall's and it completes the pattern by specific reference to the coming storm: “Let us withdraw; 'twill be a storm.” The passage gathers into one the various terms of the metaphor which is to envelop Act III, for the old father, now thoroughly cognizant of his daughters' ingratitude, totters on the verge of the madness which will soon shatter his mind, and he anticipates his heart-break “into a hundred thousand flaws,” while predicting in the same breath a world cataclysm of cosmic proportions—“the terrors of the earth.”

We are, therefore, prepared for the great apostrophes to the heavens which Lear delivers in Act III, scene ii. The first one is a curse in which he calls upon the wind, rain, thunder, and lightning to crush the world that produces the monster ingratitude:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Sing me my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,

\(^3\) Modern Spenserian scholarship has revealed the frequency of cosmic harmony and chaos as themes in Elizabethan literature. Spenser deals with concord and discord as human and cosmic phenomena in the *Hymn to Honour of Love*, *Hymn to Honour of Beatitude*, in Book IV of The *Faerie Queene*, and the *Mutabilitie canzonet*. See Charles G. Smith, *Spenser's Theory of Friendship* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Press, 1935), especially Chapters I and II. Professor Smith has gathered in Chapter II parallels to Spenser's conceptions from Elizabethan pageants and masques and from such other works as Lyly's *The Woman in the Moone*, Gascoigne's *Jocasta*, and Sackville's *Induction*. The Variorum edition of *Spenser's Faerie Queene*, Book IV, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, C. G. Osgood and F. M. Padelford (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1935) summarizes much of the earlier and recent scholarship relative to Spenser's theme of concord and its provenience. See especially the notes to Cantos I and X in which the allegorical figures of Até (Discord) and Concord are discussed by John Upton, A. E. Sawtell, Henry G. Lotspeich, Miss Rosemond Tuve, and others. Spenser's conception is studied in itself and is traced to intermediary sources like Alanus de Insulis and ultimately to classical literature.

\(^4\) II. iv. 281-289. All references are to the Globe edition of Shakespeare's *works* (1911).
Mr. Williams observes, in the article cited above (pp. 63-64), the clash of the four elements and compares the passage with the one in Macbeth IV. i. 50-61. The second apostrophe of Lear, however, Mr. Williams finds anti-climactic, because the imprecations are not fulfilled and the old man realizes that the elements have refused to obey him:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
I tax not you, you elements with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
You owe me no subscription: then let fall
Your horrible pleasure; here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man:
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O! O! 'tis foul!

(III. ii. 14-24)

I do not consider this second apostrophe anti-climactic, as Mr. Williams does. It seems to be a conclusion of the first apostrophe, and both of them appear to be Lear's curses upon himself, primarily. He is obsessed with his daughters' ingratitude, but he realizes that it was he who fathered the ungrateful Goneril and Regan. "'Twas this flesh begot/ Those pelican daughters," as he says later. In the first imprecation he invites the lightning to singe his own white head, the lightning which he had earlier asked to dart its blinding flames into Goneril's eyes (II. iv. 167-168). In the second apostrophe he reiterates his call for self-punishment, after exonerating the elements from ingratitude: "... then let fall/ Your horrible pleasure." Lear is, as it were, a Samson, pulling down on himself the pillars of his world.

In thus inviting destruction upon himself, he is repeating a motif which has been introduced quite early in the play. Just before the dreadful curse of Goneril ("Hear, nature, hear," I. iv. 297ff.) he expresses his own agony of self-reproach at his injustice to Cordelia:

O Lear, Lear, Lear!
Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in, (Striking his head.)
And thy dear judgment out!

Self-punishment appears again in a scene later than that of the great apostrophes. At Lear's meeting with the disguised Edgar, the king interprets Poor Tom's misery as the result of filial ingratitude, and insists upon such an interpretation even when Kent informs him that Edgar has no daughters. Lear, apparently observing the nakedness of the beggar and the violence he had done to himself

\[ \text{III. ii. 1-9, Mr. Williams gives a fine analysis of II. 6-9 in terms of Neo-Platonic philosophy (pp. 67-70).} \]

\[ \text{III. iv. 76-77. See my comment below on this remark of Lear's.} \]

by striking pins and nails into his arms (see II. iii. 13ff.), comments significantly upon self-punishment:

Is it the fashion, that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters. 8

To return to the storm and Lear's apostrophes—his imprecations do not stop with a curse upon himself. He calls for destruction of the universe, and it is in this idea that the Empedoclean strife of the four elements appears most significant. Lear wishes both the microcosm (himself) and the macrocosm (the universe) to be crushed, so that his curse is at the same time both self-destruction and revenge upon his daughters. In a sense, Lear and the macrocosm are one; the storm in his heart and the clash of the elements are fused into one gigantic cataclysm. The terms of the storm metaphor are therefore interchangeable, and both Lear and the cosmos become simultaneously avenger and victim of ingratitude.

Coleridge once exclaimed in awe at the imaginative power of Shakespeare which could fuse such diversity into the unity of the heath storm, "where the deep anguish of a father spreads the feeling of ingratitude and cruelty over the very elements of heaven." 9 Granville-Barker's magnificent Preface to King Lear observes the fusion of the man and the storm, a process by which Lear transcends the weakness of a wretched old man to become a titanic, apocalyptic figure endowed with all the fury, power, and awesome grandeur of the storm. 10 Edith Sitwell has added another illumination to the scene by designating Lear as Time, who is more than Old Age, who becomes a fifth element like the other four, viz., earth, air, fire and water. 11

The metaphor of cosmic chaos seems a particularly fitting way to represent imaginatively the unnatural character of ingratitude. Renaissance moral philosophy and courtesy literature, which I have examined at length elsewhere, 12 contain many references to the enormous evil of this vice; the dominant note seems to be that of unnatural, monstrous villainy, which severs the bonds among kinsfolk, friends, and members of civil society. Most of these ideas made their appearance in Renaissance ethical literature as restatements, translations, or comments upon classical ideas from Greek and Latin authors. Ingratitude was an enemy of human concord and deserving therefore of the strongest reproach. I consider that the Renaissance horror of the vice contains also overtones from the traditional concept of feudal fealty, in which gratitude had

8 III. iv. 74-77. The parallel between Lear and Gloucester is, of course, quite obvious in many parts of the play; each stands in the position of the father rejected by filial ingratitude. The parallel of their respective desires for self-destruction, however, is deserving of special consideration. Gloucester's leap from the cliff is a repetition, in a different key, of Lear's apostrophe to the elements, calling them to singe his white head. Ironically, neither one perishes by the means which he selects for himself, but each one dies of the mental and physical exhaustion, of heartbreak, induced by the total experience of anguish through which he has passed.
11 A Poet's Notebook (Boston: Little-Brown, 1950), pp. 3, 60, and 82.
originally been the quality sealing the relationship of lord and vassal, and hence the fundamental bond of feudal society.\textsuperscript{18}

The aptness of cosmic chaos in the Empedoclean sense to symbolize the effect of ingratitude can perhaps be seen again as the play draws to a close. In the cosmology of Empedocles the universe passes through a series of cycles in which first Love and then Strife predominates.\textsuperscript{14} Although Strife destroys the world, a new cosmos is born as Love returns. The reappearance of Cordelia, even for a short time, the victory of Albany, and the reinstatement of Edgar perhaps announce the return of Love, and create the “restoration of tranquillity” which is integral to the tragic effect. Lear and Gloucester have perished in the upheaval, but so also has the evil which destroyed them.

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\textsuperscript{13} ibid., pp. 45-91.

\textsuperscript{14} For a translation of fragments from Empedocles’ work, and a discussion of them, see John Burnet, \textit{Early Greek Philosophy}, 3rd edition (London: A. and C. Black, 1920), especially pp. 228-234.