

KING LEAR. AND ITS APPEAL TO THE DIRECTOR

by
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I have often asked myself what it is that attracts me so much to King Lear, and I have discovered that it is the extreme "theatricality" of the play. What is there in it which cannot be "performed" and shown to the audience by means of the art of the theatre? Nothing! In approaching the play from its outer aspects, we have such theatrical effects as the division of the kingdom, the denunciation of Cordelia, the banishment of Kent, the arising of evil powers, the treachery of one brother towards another, the banishment into the heath of Lear - who banished so many others; the growth of the thunderstorm throughout the whole middle part of the play, the great King becoming a beggar, the banished son and venerable courtier becoming homeless wanderers, the maddening of Lear, the blinding of Gloucester; war; the victory of evil powers, the reunion of two beings who had lost each other, the retribution meted out by the lawful son who was banished, the death of the most beloved being after she has been found again, the death of the King himself; intrigues with letters; duels, skirmishes and brawls of all kinds, conspiracies and plots, tense expectation and unexpected results, etc., etc. Are not these outer aspects enough to attract the attention and imagination of the producer?

On looking deeper, one sees how the main themes are interwoven with each other. The theme of Lear himself (representing the archetype of Man)

starts with him as a mighty, powerful possessor of earthly goods and rights, who destroys his own grandeur, commits a series of crimes, falls into nothingness; goes through great suffering, during which all the wrongs of his egotistical nature are burnt out and he finds a new spirit of love, sacrifice and devotion; and, dying, shows symbolically the step over the threshold of this world into the next.

The other theme, the interplay of evil powers, is given in the tragedy in extreme outline. Lear's own children become his persecutors and, in the end, persecute and destroy themselves, as is the destiny of evil powers.

Should not the director be attempted to a play in which four different worlds follow one another in quick succession? The world of the mighty, earthly kingdom of Lear becomes the world of chaos, destruction, brutality, treachery, pain, tears, cries and curses. The world which follows it attracts our attention by its hollowness, emptiness, and the quietness which is the lull after the storm of destruction. Is not the last world which arises before us in this tragedy one of love, uplifted emotions and spiritual satisfaction? And does not the last touch of Shakespeare's genius, given in the death of Cordelia and Lear, provide that which Aristotle termed the "Catharsis"?

What more can the director wish than the variety of characters which are given in the play? From the oldest and wisest example of mankind - Lear, to the youngest, purest, and strongest human being - Cordelia. From the most evil genius - Edmund, to the most insignificant, even humorous scoundrel - Oswald. Who, more than the man of the theatre, can appreciate

the range of dimensions in the text itself? From lines such as "Hear, Nature, hear dear goddess, hear! Suspend thy purpose, if thou did'st intend" or "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks, rage, blow" to the words, "Come, unbutton here"; "Draw the curtains", "Let me not stay a jot for dinner" From the highest poetical conception to the most simple human things.

What does the director find, who seeks for theatrical qualities in this unique tragedy? He finds there our contemporary feelings, passions, emotions; our present thoughts, misfortunes, mistakes, sins, rights, wrongs; our everyday impulses, characters, etc., but magnified, increased, clarified, turned into archetypes by Shakespeare's genius. He speaks about the past with the language of the future, speaks about the present with the language of things long gone and things which we may expect in the future. Through the prism of King Lear, we are able to look at our present catastrophic world and to find within ourselves the point where we can absorb both the tragedy of our present life and the tragedy of the imaginary life of Shakespeare's most noble creation.