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The Lame Storyteller, Poor and Despised

Studies in Shakespeare

The nature of *King Lear*

Shakespeare set Christian and pagan philosophies against each other in *King Lear* and mediated the debate through the concept of nature.

Content:

Like several of Shakespeare's romances, *King Lear* is set in a pre-Christian pagan land that worships the gods of Rome. These plays include, however, a deity rarely encountered in classical mythology, the goddess Nature. Although foreshadowed in late Latin literature, the goddess Nature was largely created in the poems of two twelfth century French clerical philosophers: Bernard Silvestris and Alan of Lille. Actually, the goddess traced her origin and descent from classical philosophy and literature, but she joined the pantheon as a deputy of the Christian God.[1] In parallel to this exotic addition to Christendom, medieval scholars, most notably Thomas Aquinas, extended the work of their classical predecessors on the non-personified concept of nature. The schoolmen used the philosophy of nature to integrate classical and Christian teachings in an attempt to unite faith and reason[2]—which is akin to Shakespeare's intent in *Lear*. Fortunately, the fruit of this medieval labour crops up in many authoritative sixteenth-century texts, rendering a study of scholasticism unnecessary to an appreciation of the role of nature in *King Lear*.

Dame Nature was a well-known figure in English poetry, appearing, for example, in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, with both authors referring back to Alan of Lille.[3] In medieval and Renaissance literature, Nature serves as God's vicar, controlling the movement of various heavenly bodies, the weather on earth, and the life processes of birth, growth, ageing, sickness, and death. She also instils in humanity the classical concept of natural law or law of nature, that aspect of human behaviour which, among other things, causes us to love our kin and revere our parents. Shakespeare and his contemporaries often omit the personification, and so «nature» may be thought of as combining physics, meteorology, botany, zoology, sociology, and ethics. Above all, whether personified or not, nature, the creation of almighty God, was good. This arrangement allowed medieval and Renaissance writers to refract the theology and ethics of pagan societies through the prism of a Christianized law of nature.

Using nature and related biblical concepts, this essay examines the following topics in *King Lear:* the meaning of Edmund's first soliloquy; the status of Cordelia with respect to Christ; three sins or errors of Lear's; and the significance of the deaths of Cordelia and Edmund, as well as of the Earl of Kent's question, «Is this the promised end?» The principal biblical references come from St Paul's epistles to the Romans and Corinthians, the two wisdom books in the Old Testament Apocrypha, and the synoptic gospels. The marginal notes in the Geneva Bible provide sufficient explanation of the Renaissance concept of nature, which links the play's pagan setting to the biblical references, creating a form of equivalence between the two religions. The analysis will be assisted by the parallels that Shakespeare created between King Lear and the Earl of Gloucester, as well as by the fact that Shakespeare raised similar issues in several other plays. The topics under consideration may be illuminated by either Christianity or nature, though a full understanding requires both. Moreover, this dichotomy between Christianity and nature aligns with the subplots of the two families, as Lear and his daughters illustrate the Christian side, while pagan nature emerges through Gloucester and his sons. All of these factors unite to shed light on the behaviour and fates of *King Lear's* main characters.

Edmund

In his first soliloquy (I.ii.1-22), the bastard Edmund announces his intention of stealing the birthright of his older, legitimate brother Edgar, specifically the lands and title of their father, the Earl of Gloucester. *King Lear's* modern editors have been unable to make sense of Edmund's selection of the goddess Nature as patron of his planned theft.[4] The character of the evil deity implied by Edmund's words and subsequent deeds has been explored by various scholars, two of whom have been particularly influential. John Danby argues that Edmund's Nature prefigures the nasty and brutish view of humanity's natural state in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* of 1651 or in Darwin's theories. Unfortunately, these references to philosophies yet-to-come would have been of no use at all to Shakespeare's Jacobean audiences. They could observe for themselves the motives that Edmund imputes to his deity, but,

> absent a contemporary explanation, we must suppose them to have been thoroughly confused by the familiar goddess Nature becoming the sponsor of robbing one's brother, not to mention blinding one's father. It is just as if Edmund appealed to Mars to make him a coward in battle. Following Danby, William Elton opens his discussion of Edmund's Nature with Hobbes, but then turns back to Shakespeare's age, citing a multitude of authorities on the emergence of Epicurean libertinism and the growth of religious scepticism. Although improving on Danby's essentially Whig interpretation of *Lear,* Elton organizes selected Renaissance writings into a pattern, and then tries to fit *King Lear* to it.[5] A better approach would be to start with Shakespeare.

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In his scores of uses of the word «nature» or «Nature,» Shakespeare conforms to the beneficent view of this force or deity, although the deformed Richard III understandably slurs her as «frail» (*3 Henry VI,* III.ii.155) and «dissembling» (*Richard III,* I.i.19).[6] Aside from Edmund in *Lear,* however, only one character in Shakespeare's works implies an evil Nature. Queen Margaret denounces Richard III, the murderer of her husband and son, as «The slave of Nature, and the son of hell,» (I.iii.230) which malevolent epithet provides the key to Edmund's Nature. Margaret's meaning was first recognized by Virgil Whitaker,[7] who explained it as referring to Article IX, «Of originall or birth sinne,» of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England:

> Originall sinne standeth not in the folowing of Adam (as the Pelagians do vaynely talke) but it is the fault and corruption of the *nature* of euery man, that *naturally* is engendred of the ofspring of Adam, whereby man is very farre gone from originall ryghteousnes, and is of his owne *nature* enclined to euyll, so that the fleshe lusteth al-wayes contrary to the spirite, and therefore in euery person borne into this worlde, it deserueth Gods wrath and damnation. And this infection of *nature* doth remayne, yea in them that are regenerated, whereby the luste of the fleshe, called in Greke φρόνημα σαρκός, which some do expounde the wisdome, some sensualitie, some the affection, some the desyre of the fleshe, is not subiect to the lawe of God. And although there is no condemnation for them that beleue

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