

## "Fairies and Gods": A Socio-Religious Context for *King Lear*

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The action of *King Lear* predates Christianity, a simple fact of chronology which profoundly complicates the play, depriving it of the familiar moral context of tragedies like *Hamlet* which rely heavily on Christian doctrine to order the action and its consequences. In *Lear*, heaven and hell are bodily conditions rather than incorporeal projections; Lear wishes to make his paradise on earth in the homes of his daughters and finds just the opposite in the same. This pagan universe provides the perfect backdrop to the sense of chaos and despair created by the action, a chaos which culminates in the seemingly senseless death of the play's one consistently sympathetic character, Cordelia. But pre-Christian England has been imagined as the home of two very different kinds of paganism, and both can be seen to have a part to play in influencing the action and outcome of *King Lear*. As he prepares to commit suicide by throwing himself from what he thinks is a high cliff, the king's faithful courtier, Gloucester, blesses his guide with the words, "Fairies and gods/Prosper it with thee!" (4.6.29-30). These are the powers which hold sway in Lear's England, and the pattern of conflict between them provides a possible order to the chaos of Lear's tragedy.

As king, Lear maintained the patriarchal order of law represented by the Olympian pantheon of the Roman conquerors. All through the play, he makes references to classical myth and geography, always in positive terms and nearly always identified with himself. But when he decides to divide his kingdom between his daughters, Lear can be said to be turning England back over to the matriarchal chaos of Celtic witchcraft represented by the spirits of Nature. This pattern of conflict between two socio-religious systems is repeated in the Gloucester subplot by Edgar, the son of law who feigns the behavior of the bewitched, and Edmund, the son of the nature who feigns the behavior of the lawful. Celtic witchery in the persons of Goneril and Regan destroys the reason of both Lear the man and his kingdom; the men of law are forced to stand by and watch in horror as these harriidans and their paramour, Edmund, become increasingly powerful and vicious. Order can only be restored by Cordelia, a "white witch" who attempts to use her magic to cure her father's madness and ultimately dies to return the kingdom to lawful rule. In doing so, Cordelia becomes, in Celtic terms, what her father in effect asked her to be in the first scene of the play. She takes his place as the physical manifestation of the kingdom, willing to die to preserve it, becoming a kind of Celtic Christ-figure. Recognizing at last what he has required of his beloved child is what kills Lear, and his death leaves the kingdom in the hands of Edgar, the man of law, who will presumably keep it in order until the coming of actual Christianity (at least according to the Folio text).

Shakespeare uses the subplot to introduce this conflict between nature and law in the opening moments of the play when Gloucester uses these concepts to describe the contrast between his own two sons, and these two opposites are immediately gender-identified, nature being female, law being male. He emphasizes Edmund's mother's role over his own in the conception of Edmund, saying, "She grew round-wombed and had indeed, sir, a son for her cradle [a natural acquisition from her own female body] ere she had a husband for her bed [a legal acquisition denied her by the male-dominated probate courts of the day]" (1.1.14-16). Gloucester goes on to say almost immediately, "But I have a son, sir, by order of law," meaning Edgar (1.1.19). From this point on, Edmund is

identified with the natural, fairy world ruled by womb-bearing females, and Edgar is identified with and is justified by the legal, classical world historically ruled by males.

When the main plot begins, Lear is operating under the misconception that his daughters will rule by the same legal order he recognizes, never conceiving that they could be other-directed. Lear has the Roman view of the female as a passive ornament suitable for creating babies and nursing old men, so he assumes he can turn over his kingdom to his daughters while still maintaining control from the luxury of their "nursery." Goneril and Regan are content not to disabuse him of this misconception, playing by the rules (laws) of the game of "love" he has devised to test their worthiness. Their declarations of affection are careful rhetorical constructions which sound rather like summations for a jury, carefully calculated to exploit their father's mental blindness to any context or motive outside his own. Only Cordelia reveals her true nature to her father by refusing to play along, a refusal he interprets as childish obstinacy, being unable to conceive of any other motivation for it.

Even when his daughters begin to turn on him, Lear still can't make this leap of comprehension, still choosing to interpret their behavior in masculine, Roman terms. His curse on Goneril, for example:

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 her organs of increase,  
And from her derogate body never spring  
A babe to honor her! If she must teem,  
Create her child of spleen, that it may live  
And be a thwart disnatured 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 pain and benefits  
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel  
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is  
To have a thankless child! (1.4.274-88)

Lear is misinterpreting Nature as a classical personification and with her his own daughter's powers, motivations and desires. He thinks Goneril's beauty and her potential for motherhood are all that matter to her, so that is what he curses. He also identifies a daughter with a serpent here for the first time, a pattern which continues throughout the play, the serpent/dragon being not only a Judeo-Christian symbol of evil but also a Celtic symbol of power.

When Regan refuses to ally herself with Lear against Goneril and suggests that he really doesn't need his retinue, Lear understands her motives no better than he understood her sister's. As with Goneril, he attempts to reason with her in terms he thinks she will understand: "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" (2.4.269-71). Still thinking that beauty is what is important to women, Lear thinks his daughters should understand vanity and the need to be "gorgeous" more than any other behavioral motive. He even invokes the word "nature" again, but again in a context outside that of his daughters. He reads "Nature/nature" as a rhetorical device or a synonym for the physical world; for Regan and Goneril, nature is spiritual

power. They refuse to be convinced by their father's appeals to their vanity and motherly nurturance, recognizing in it the same condescension they have no doubt endured throughout their lives in this Romanesque royal court. Rather than being moved to pity or guilt by Lear's raging exit into a raging storm, they happily let him go, chatting calmly with one another about how impossible he is.

Standing beneath the fury of this storm is where Lear first begins to know nature as his daughters know it and recognize their alliance with this power. He tells the thunderclaps:

But yet I call you servile ministers,  
That will with two pernicious daughters join  
Your high-engendered battles 'gainst a head  
So old and white as this. O, ho! 'Tis foul! (3.2.21-4)

Lear begins to realize that the gods he has been calling on may be gone or merely symbolic, leaving the spiritual world to the control of Celtic spirits who favor and serve his daughters. The Fool points out that Lear made this witchcraft possible by giving power to his daughters in the first place. Lear has returned the kingdom that had been "civilized" by Roman influence back over to the wildness of the Celtic order. The Fool neatly appropriates Lear's own mistaken vanity image to express this, saying, "For there was never yet a fair woman but she made mouths in a glass" (3.2.35-6). In other words, if given the chance, a woman will use the power she has. After his prophecy, the Fool reinforces this idea, saying, "This prophecy shall Merlin make for I live before his time" (3.2.95), meaning he lives in the time of fairy. Merlin was another powerful old man who lost his power by turning it over to a beautiful and much younger fairy woman, Nimue/Elaine, his daughter/lover.

The knowledge that his view of the universe no longer holds together and that he himself is the one who caused its destruction is what drives Lear mad, and he spends the rest of the play trying to work out a context which can contain both his daughters and himself. In doing so, he takes comfort in the company of Edgar, the son of law who has also been turned out of his home by the machinations of nature-worshippers. Shakespeare makes this character his cipher/key for the entire nature versus law conflict, a sort of tragi-comedy in miniature. Edgar is pretending to be mad, a reasonable man whose reason has been taken by female magic. He renounces the witchcraft of females in his false ravings, saying that lust and striving to please women drove him mad and even blaming the evil of one of his "demons" on a female "nightmare and her ninefold" (3.4.120). Not surprisingly then, Lear finds him better company than both the Fool and the disguised York, calling Edgar a "learned Theban" (3.4.155) and a "good Athenian" (3.4.179). In his truth-perceiving madness, Lear sees Edgar as another Roman man of law driven mad by this upside-down world of Celtic female power. Barbara Millard, in an essay on Cordelia as the tragic heroine of the play, writes that "As an old dispossessed man, Lear is as vulnerable in the female realm of nature as Cordelia is in the male-dominated settings provided for her trials: the court and the battlefield. The entire import of Act III is that no man can stand in the fierce winds of a true matriarchy" (Millard 150).

So Lear tries again to make his daughters fit into his own setting, staging a mock trial of Goneril and Regan in his hovel with the Fool, York, and Edgar for officers of his court. In his introduction of to the play in the edition of the plays cited here, David Bevington places

this trial in opposition to that of Gloucester staged by Regan and Cornwall:

Justice . . . . is portrayed in two sharply contrasting scenes: the mere "form of justice" by which Cornwall condemns Gloucester for treason (3.7.26) and the earnestly playacted trial by which the mad Lear arraigns Goneril and Regan of filial ingratitude (3.6). The appearance and the reality of justice have exchanged places. . . . . In the playacting trial . . . , the outward appearance of justice is pathetically absurd. Here, justice on earth is personified by a madman (Lear), Edgar disguised as another madman (Tom o'Bedlam), and a Fool, of whom the latter two are addressed by Lear as "Thou robbed man of justice" and "thou, his yokefellow of equity" (lines 36-37). They are caught up in a pastime of illusion, using a footstool to represent Lear's ungrateful daughters. Yet true justice is here and not inside the manor house. (Bevington 1170)

Lear is using this trial to impose a legal, Roman order on the Celtic witches, even if it is an order which exists only in his own head. In the course of the trial, he says, "Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart" (3.6.75-6). Lear wants to take his daughters apart by reasonable methods and make some sort of sense of them in hopes of making the universe make sense to him again.

Bevington writes that this trial occurs "concurrently" with Gloucester's, but in fact Gloucester is tried for helping Lear after the mock trial is over. With Lear not only powerless but now outside their physical presence as well, Goneril and Regan are free to exercise their witchcraft almost at will, with only the constraint of their husbands to stop them, and this is a state of affairs they will do much to preserve. When it is suggested that Gloucester has acted to preserve the inconvenient king, Goneril orders, "Pluck out his eyes" (3.7.5), and Regan and her husband, Cornwall, obey. Jay Halio's essay on this most-vividly cruel event of the play asserts that Gloucester's blinding is a symbolic castration of "an acknowledged adulterer" who is "somewhat proud of the fact" (Halio 222). When a servant tries to stop them, Regan takes up a sword and wounds him. The witches are not only symbolically castrating a man of law and friend of the father they have already deprived of manly power, but now they are taking on the traditionally (and symbolically) male office of swordplay. As one servant says to another, "If she [Regan] live long, /And in the end meet the old course of death, /Women will all turn monsters" (3.7.103-5). The womb-bearing Celtic witches have not only been set free to express their own natural power but are now seeking to commandeer the Roman phallic/masculine power symbolized by the courts and the sword.

Goneril and Regan become so monstrous, in fact, that even their lovers are forced to notice and protest. Cornwall has the foresight to die of the wound he receives from his servant during the blinding incident where his wife turned swordsman. Albany, however, lives to see the full evolution of his wife's character. When he tries to regain husbandly control of Goneril and her activities, she calls him a "Milk-livered man, /That bear'st the cheek for blows" (4.2.51-2). He calls her a "devil," declaring her freakish cruelty even more repulsive in a woman than the same behavior would be in a man and asserting that only her womanly person prevents him from destroying her. Goneril replies to this declamation against her character with the somewhat-less-than-awestruck, "Marry, your manhood! Mew!" (4.1.69). By the time battle with France comes, Goneril has become as much the warrior as her sister Regan. Her steward, Oswald, tells Regan, "Your

sister is the better soldier." While in contemporary feminist work, this might be a compliment, within the context of Shakespeare's pagan tragedy, this very strength is Goneril's weakness and her sister's as well—a kind a Celtic, feminine *hubris*. Like their father before them, these women have made the mistake of wanting it all.

The only man who is himself Roman unnatural/Celtic natural enough to benefit from the sisters' power is the one who brings it to an end—Edmund, Gloucester's "natural" son. When his father is declared a traitor, blinded, and turned out to die, Edmund takes his father's legal title and imbues it with Celtic power drawn from his overtly legal/covertly sexual alliance with Goneril and Regan. Even before she breaks with Albany, when she still tells Edmund, "I must change names at home and give the distaff/Into my husband's hands (4.2.17-8), Goneril demonstrates romantic or at least sexual designs on Edmund, insisting he seal his vow of fealty to her with a kiss. Regan wants him as well, even trying to make Oswald turn over her sister's love letter and finally instructing the steward to tell his mistress, "Edmund and I have talked,/And more convenient is he for my hand/Than for your lady's" (4.5.32-34). Goneril's response is "I had rather lose the battle than that sister/Should loosen him and me" (5.1.19-20). Having determined to rule and fight by historically and symbolically male methods and stratagems, they take the traditional male roles of seducer/competitor in love as well, and these warring affairs of the heart (or whatever) quickly take precedence over the warring affairs of state in the attentions of these Celtic queens.

Mad Lear knows lust will destroy his daughters' control even without physically witnessing their activities, and he expresses this knowledge in Roman, masculine terms. Claudette Hoover analyzes this idea in Lear's centaur speech from Act IV, Scene vi: "Down from the waist they're centaurs,/Though women all above" (124-5). Hoover writes that:

Although the application of the myth to women is *literally* inappropriate [centaurs traditionally being what she calls "hypermasculine" creatures] . . . Lear's new awareness of the true nature of Goneril and Regan has led him to view them—and by extension all women—as masculine in their verbal, emotional, and physical violence. (353)

The use of this creature from classical myth as his metaphor indicates that Lear is still trying to fit his daughters into a Roman context, but his madness is making him better able to see them for what they are.

Edgar, who isn't actually mad, can also see what's happening, or at least the outward results of it, and he becomes his father's guide and caretaker after Gloucester's blinding. But being a son of law, Edgar has no power to right the wrongs of a kingdom now ruled by a natural, Celtic order. Lear is mad, Cornwall dead, Albany flummoxed. Edgar, the "natural" son, has no motivation to restore order—his only power springs from chaos. Only a woman can put right these women's wrongs. Only Cordelia, herself a potential witch, can save England from the evil of these witches, and she must give her life to do it.

The idea of Cordelia as a Christ figure is hardly a new one. Citing the Annual Shakespeare Lecture of the British Academy XXXIII in 1946, William R. Elton writes that, "According to Geoffrey L. Bickerstath, Shakespeare was 'unconsciously inspired by a story taken . . . from Christian mythology,' with Cordelia in the part of Christ" (Elton 26), and in his analysis of the play written some forty-two years later,

Alexander Leggatt writes:

. . . . Cordelia, "Most choice, forsaken; and most loved despised " (I.i 215) has Christ-associations: she comes back to England with the words, "O dear father,/It is thy business that I go about" (IV.iii.23-4 [IV.iv]), echoing Luke 2:49. The word "hanged" is often used for Christ's death by crucifixion." (Leggatt 28)

Even the description of Cordelia's grief at hearing of her sisters' atrocities and her father's madness reads like a description of the Holy Virgin:

. . . . Her smiles and tears  
Were like a better way; those happy smilets  
That played on her ripe lip seemed not to know  
What guests were in her eyes, which parted thence  
As pearls from diamonds dropped. (4.3.18-22)

Even her tears are described as "holy water from her heavenly eyes" (4.3.32).

But Lear's England has yet to hear of the Holy Virgin or her Son, even if the idea of a female Christ was not somewhat problematic in a traditional context. Millard identifies Cordelia with Boudicca, the heroine of a "legend from British Celtic history" who "fought gloriously against the Roman invaders of her country only to face ultimate defeat . . . Boudicca had no mind to figure in a Roman triumph, and like several Shakespearean women of 'manly' courage, she killed herself" (Millard 151). Being of the same gender and family as Goneril and Regan, Cordelia recognizes the feminine power of nature and sees in herself the potential to harness that power just as her sisters have done. But she has no political ambition, no personal desire to wield a sword. She has been happy in France as a wifely queen to her kingly husband. But she returns to England and takes up her natural power because she feels obligated to do so: "No blown ambition doth our arms incite,/But love, dear love, and our aged father's right" (4.4.27-8). Recognizing the likely consequences of this Roman-unnatural action, she nevertheless becomes a Celtic nature-witch. Her doctor's cures are like magical incantations, using herbs and music to heal Lear's madness, and Cordelia herself invokes the white magic of a kiss to awaken her father:

"Restoration hang/Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss/Repair those violent harms that my two sisters/Have in thy reverence made!" (4.7.26-9).

But whether or not Cordelia's magic might have eventually cured Lear of his madness becomes a moot point when they are captured by Edmund. Things have gone too far; some blood sacrifice must be made to put the kingdom back in order. Cordelia realizes this; as a Celtic witch, she knows that the ruler of the land is also its scapegoat, and she has come to England to take her father's place not on his throne but in his grave. When she and her father are brought in under guard, she is calm, telling her father, "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" (5.3.7) She realizes what is required, and she is ready to face it. But Lear is not; he is still trying to reconstruct a traditional if somewhat unhealthy father-daughter paradise where Cordelia will be pretty and sweet and nurse him in his old age. Only when he sees Cordelia strangled does Lear rouse himself and kill her murderer-this sight is the magic that cures his madness, even if only for a moment. Meanwhile, the other witches have killed each other out

of jealous lust for Edmund, and Edmund himself is killed by Edgar. All of these characters have been brought together in one place by Cordelia's invasion; her arrival from France is the catalyst which brings her sisters' chaos to the boil that ultimately destroys it and its darling, Edmund. As he says, "All three/Now marry in an instant" (5.3.32-3).

When Lear enters at the end of the play carrying Cordelia's strangled corpse, Kent and Edgar see this as an apocalypse (again using the Folio text): "Is this the promised end-Or image of that horror?" (5.3.268-9). Certainly it is the end of Lear. Operating in the Celtic universe, Cordelia sees the king of the land as its human representative, and if the land is sick, the king must die to cure it. In allowing herself to be hanged, she has taken "a third more opulent" than her sisters; she has taken her father's place in death. Lear's death could be the result of this final stroke of insane knowledge, this final truth, that he has indeed passed his crown on to his most beloved child and killed her in the process. Or perhaps this final, apocalyptic tableau is meant to signal the end of the pagan era, Celtic and Roman, and be the precursor of the Christian age to follow.

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