

# Diagnosing Lear

*by Anthony Daniels*

Doctors have been trying to diagnose King Lear for more than two centuries. They haven't succeeded, of course, for a couple of reasons that are not mutually exclusive: first, King Lear does not exist, and second he is not available for tests or examination. The latest technology, no matter how sophisticated, will never settle the matter. No imaging studies for King Lear: he was born much too soon for them, and now will never be diagnosed properly.

Not, of course, that that puts doctors off, far from it. Nineteenth-century mad doctors in Britain and America said Lear's case was just like many they saw in their asylums. Psychoanalysts perceived in Lear a case of thwarted incest (they would, wouldn't they?). A variety of diagnoses have been offered from senile dementia to manic-depressive psychosis. (No one has suggested General Paralysis of the Insane, the last stage of syphilis.) Dr. Truskinovsky, writing in the *Southern Medical Journal* in 2002, makes a powerful case for mania, and suggests that Lear had been suffering from bipolar affective disorder all his life.

Personally, I am against all this diagnostic effort. It is not just that, as Dr. Truskinovsky dryly remarks, it is not altogether easy to decide what constitutes the symptom of grandiosity in an absolute monarch like Lear, so few of us having either experienced or witnessed that condition of man. It is rather that the medicalization of Lear's behavior deprives it of moral significance. If

only Lear had taken the right pills, everything would have been all right, and Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia would have been like the Andrews Sisters. The only question Lear raises for the modern mind is how to get him, or anyone like him, to the right doctor on time, before it is too late; presumably absolute monarchs carry adequate health insurance.

Early in the play, the Earl of Gloucester provides a physical explanation of various deformations of the soul:

These late eclipses of the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus, and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father.

Of course, where the Earl of Gloucester blames eclipses and the like, we blame social circumstances or, if we are really up to date, neurotransmitters, for everything wrong that people do.

The Earl leaves the stage to his bastard son, Edmund, to soliloquize. Edmund is evil and scheming, but has a Machiavellian understanding of the people around him. And he believe in Original Sin, or at least the irredeemably flawed nature of man:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that

when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon and the stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star.

And Edmund goes on to reflect upon his own bad character:

My father compounded with my mother under a dragon's tail and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows that I am rough and lecherous.

Edmund dismisses this explanation with a snort of contempt:

Tut! I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.

For the sake of his personal advantage, however, and in pursuit of his conspiracy against his legitimate brother, Edgar, Edmund pretends to believe in astrological theory of human behavior. He says to his Edgar:

I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read this other day, what should follow these eclipses.

Edgar expresses surprise that Edmund should concern himself with such a theory, to which Edmund replies:

I promise you, the effects he writes of succeed unhappily, as of unnaturalness between the child and the parent, death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities, divisions in state, menaces and maledictions against the King and nobles, needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches and I know not what.

This is hardly the first time that an incorrect explanation of human conduct has been turned to advantage by one who held it, or appeared to hold it, and indeed it could be said that entire governmental policies and bureaucracies have been founded upon little else.

If not from the bad conjunction of the sun, the moon, and the stars, from what, then, does evil arise? Edmund explains himself in terms remarkably reminiscent of Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*, who says:

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge!

And Edmund says, questioning why he should be disdained because of his birth:

Why bastard? Wherefore base?  
When my dimensions are as well compact,  
My mind as generous and my shape as true  
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us  
With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base?  
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take  
More composition and fierce quality  
Than doth within a stale tired bed  
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops  
Got 'tween a sleep and wake. Well, then,  
Legitimate Edgar. I must have your land.

Shakespeare, through the words of Edgar, makes us feel the injustice done to bastards almost as strongly as, through the words of Shylock, he makes us feel the injustice done to Jews. Why indeed, should he personally suffer any disadvantages because of the



“compounding” of his mother and his father? This is genuinely a plea for tolerance and understanding, and for the revision of our swift and prejudiced judgments. But Shakespeare did not live in the age of the Immaculate Victim: and Edmund’s resentment takes the evil form of granting himself permission to behave any way he likes because this wrong has been done to him. At the start of his speech, he says:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in plague to custom, and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me?

By Nature, Edmund means his inborn inclinations, untutored and unconstrained by the moral judgment of his society; and by “the curiosity” he means the moral refinement of human societies in a state of civilization. The fact that a moral judgment made in his case is unfair and unjust leads him, psychologically, to the conclusion that moral judgments as such are necessarily unfair and unjust, and that therefore it is only reasonable that he should act without compunction. How many Edmunds are there in the world who use injustice done to them to inflict injustice upon others? But Edmund’s mistake is one of thinking, of wrongful conclusion from his own experience, not because, as he puts it, his nativity was under Ursa Major. His case is important, because there can hardly be a human being alive who has not at some time used Edmund’s argument to justify his own wrongful behavior.

He is not the only one in the play, of course, to generalize too widely from his own experience. Lear himself does it, as when he explains Edgar’s madness (feigned, in the event):

Have his daughters brought him to this pass?  
Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou  
give ’em all?

Kent tells him that Edgar has no daughters:

Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued  
nature  
To such lowness but his unkind daughters.

Is there any among us who does not draw conclusions about the wide world from our standpoint of one pair of eyes?

Most of the medical commentators on Lear maintain that, whatever his illness, he had had it for at least some time before he divided up his kingdom and gave it to his daughters. This was an impulsive, ill-considered act, they say; and after all, Regan says of her father, and she conspires with Goneril, “he hath but ever slenderly known himself,” to which Goneril replies, “then must we look from his age to receive not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.” In other words, in old age, people become more like themselves, their salient characteristics coming to dominate their whole personality.

This is certainly the clinical experience of most doctors; and my wife, a doctor who worked solely among the old, would often return home with tales of “very foolish, fond old men” who had given away their houses to their children in return for the right to live there, only to find themselves turned out or conditions made so abominable for them that they wished to leave of their own accord. They were not suffering from any illness when they made their donations; what they were suffering from was an incomplete knowledge of the character of their children, and of the evil that lies in every heart, waiting its moment to emerge.

It is astonishing how Shakespeare seems to encompass our experience of life, and illuminate even its remotest corners. Towards the end of the play, Edmund, now dying, tells the Duke of Albany that he and Albany’s wife, Goneril, have despatched a captain to the prison wherein Lear and Cordelia are now incarcerated.

He hath commission from your wife and me



To hang Cordelia in the prison and  
To lay the blame upon her own despair,  
That she fordid herself.

An impossible commission to carry out, you think? Well, once I was on duty at night in the prison in which I worked and I was called to the cell of a man who had to all appearances done away with himself by hanging. It turned out that it was his cellmate who had hanged him, from sheer malice or unconditional ill-will—from a desire, if you like, to comply with a mirror image of Kant’s categorical imperative. The murderer had offered his cellmate (so he later confessed) a choice between having his throat cut while he slept, or co-operating with having himself hanged; and being a man of limited capacity to think of alternatives, he chose the latter. Called to give evidence in the trial of his cellmate for murder, I thought of the hanging of Cordelia.

The diagnostic temptation offered by Lear to doctors is very strong, especially when we read, or hear, a speech as follows, when he is reunited with Cordelia and the Duke of Kent after a long separation:

I fear I am not in my perfect mind.  
Methinks I should know you and know this  
man,  
Yet I am doubtful; for I am mainly ignorant  
What this place is and all the skill I have  
Remembers not these garments; nor I know  
not  
Where I did lodge last night.

This seems to indicate a fluctuating level of consciousness, a fluctuation that has implications for diagnosis: but now I am falling into the very temptation that I decry. Life is not a problem of diagnosis and, as Boswell once remarked, we are not to treat the world as if it were a great hospital.

Is there a central or pivotal, non-medical point around which the tragedy turns? I think that there is, and very uncongenial it is to our age, too.

Lear, it will be remembered, purposes to divide his kingdom between his three

daughters. Before doing so, however, he wants to hear how much they love him. Regan and Goneril, fully understanding what is at stake, are adepts at flattery and exaggeration. They rise to the task easily. Goneril starts the rhetorical ball rolling:

Sir, I do love you more than word can wield  
the matter,  
Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty,  
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,  
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty,  
honour.  
As much as child e’er loved, or father found,  
A love that makes breath poor and speech  
unable,  
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

The result is a third of Lear’s kingdom.

Next it is Regan’s turn. She understands the logic of the rhetorical arms race (to change the metaphor slightly), according to which utterance must be more and more extravagant, and less and less connected or reality:

Sir, I am made of that self mettle as my sister,  
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart  
I find she names my very deed of love:  
Only she comes too short, that I profess  
Myself an enemy to all other joys  
Which the most precious square of sense  
possesses,  
And find I am alone felicitate  
In your dear highness’ love.

And she is awarded a third of the kingdom as well.

Now it is the turn of Cordelia, “our joy, although our last and least.” Lear asks her:

. . . what can you say to draw  
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

Cordelia replies with a speech so short that even I can remember it:

Nothing, my lord.

Furious at her taciturnity, Lear cuts her



off and awards her third to her two sisters, banishes her from his affections and also the Duke of Kent, his ancient servitor who warns him against so precipitate a manner of proceeding. Before he leaves, however, Kent utters the words that are absolutely crucial:

Thy youngest daughter does not love thee  
least,  
 Nor are those empty-hearted, whose low  
sounds  
 Reverb no hollowness.

This is a message that we, who live in an age of emotional and self-expressive extravagance, now find very uncongenial. We favor the explicit, not the implicit, and the spoken rather than the unspoken, to the point where what is not said cannot have been meant. We favor incontinence over retention; we take vehemence for sincerity and depth of feeling. The signs of it are everywhere, and are visible even in very small things: tennis players, for example, grimace, mutter, exclaim, and punch the air as if no tennis players before them had ever truly wanted to win a match. Joy and screams of exultation are taken to be co-terminous, while tears and above all sobs are the *sine qua non* of sorrow. It is as if we took seriously the theory of the emotions according to which bodily changes precede, and then determine, what we feel. We find a joke funny because we laugh at it; we do not laugh at it because it is funny.

Reverbing hollowness is all the rage, as if loud echoes were somehow guarantees of meaning. The problem is, though, that human language and expression is as apt for disguising or concealing meaning and emotion as it is for expressing them; the ability to tell or imply the truth is inseparable from the ability to tell or imply falsehoods. As Hobbes said, words are wise men's counters, but they are the money of fools. Unfortunately, the very foolish, fond old man, King Lear, does not attend to this: his vanity (a universal vice that will, no doubt, one day show up on brain scans) leads him

to require extravagant declarations of love from his daughters, which he then takes to express their inner states.

There is another lesson, however, that Cordelia teaches, that is also uncongenial to our times: and that is that the emotions are not simply primeval forces, the psychological equivalent of volcanic eruptions that cannot be gainsaid, but are susceptible to discipline and proper proportion. Lear asks Cordelia to mend her speech a little, lest she may mar her fortunes. She replies:

Good my lord,  
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I  
 Return those duties back as are right fit,  
 Obey you, love you and most honour you.  
 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
 They love you all? Haply when I shall wed,  
 That lord whose hand must take my plight  
shall carry  
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty.  
 Sure I shall never marry like my sister  
 To love my father all.

Lear's jealous desire to be all-in-all to his daughters leads him to reject with contumely the obvious truth that Cordelia has spoken, and to believe the utterances that are the product of that "glib and oily art to speak and purpose not" of which his other daughters are such mistresses. Cordelia says, first, that our emotions ought to be proportionate to their occasion—difficult of achievement, as we surely all know, but even as a goal rejected by those who see in self-control nothing but treason to the self; and second that our speech should not simulate strengths of emotion we do not, because we cannot, feel.

The whole tragedy of King Lear follows from the king's failure to recognize that words do not always mean what they say, and that judgment is necessary. And nothing could bring home the distinction between the glib and oily art and true expression than the words of grief and despair, of the greatest depth possible, in the last part of the play. Here is emotional expression without exhibitionism: for ex-

ample, when Gloucester, his eyes put out, and who in his way has been as foolish as Lear himself, is accosted by an old man who says, "Alack, sir, you cannot see your way," to which Gloucester replies, "I have no way, and therefore lack no eyes." These words shake you: no despair has ever been more ultimate, or more instantly comprehensible to a person who does not share it, than that expressed by Gloucester.

Again, when Gloucester says:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,  
They kill us for their sport

we know that this is not the expression of exhibitionist angst, but despair that human suffering, so intense, is pointless.

Or yet again, when Gloucester is reunited with Lear, and says, "O, let me kiss that hand!" and Lear replies: "Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality," we are not in the realm of hyperbole. When Lear exclaims that "When we are born we cry that we are come/ To this great stage of fools" he is summing up his whole life according to his present state of mind, which is justified because of all that has befallen him, and his grief for his daughter Cordelia is as true and sincere as Regan's and Goneril's love for him is false and assumed:

Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!

But Shakespeare is never simple. Truth and sincerity are not for him the same. We cannot sit through *Lear* and conclude that vice and virtue are the same, or that all men and women are equally good, that there is nothing to choose between Goneril and Cordelia, or between Edmund and Kent; and yet Lear, in a burning sincere speech, says:

Thou, rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand;  
Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine  
own back,  
Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind  
For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer  
hangs the cozeners.  
Through tattered clothes great vices do appear;  
Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin  
with gold,  
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.  
None does offend, none, I say none.

Lear has earned his right to his bitter outburst: who could deny him it? The problem is that so many people haven't earned their right, and—besides—want their outbursts to be taken as the literal truth and made the foundation of policy.