



Understanding
Shakespeare
KING LEAR

ROBERT A. ALBANO

UNDERSTANDING
SHAKESPEARE:

KING
LEAR

UNDERSTANDING
SHAKESPEARE:

King Lear

Robert A. Albano

MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE:
KING LEAR

Robert A. Albano

First Printing: February 2012

All Rights Reserved © 2012 by Robert A. Albano

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage retrieval system, without the written permission of the publisher.

MERCURYE PRESS

Los Angeles

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	11
Act I	21
Act II	69
Act III	91
Act IV	115
Act V	137
Final Remarks	153
Comments from the Critics	165
Appendix A: Cap o' Rushes	169
Appendix B: The Dirty Shepherdess	175
Appendix C: The Prophecy of Merlin	181

Books by Robert A. Albano

Middle English Historiography

Lectures on Early English Literature

Lectures on British Neoclassic Literature

Understanding Shakespeare's Tragedies

Understanding the Poetry of William Wordsworth

Understanding Shakespeare (series)

1. *The Sonnets*
2. *Henry IV, Part I*
3. *Hamlet*
4. *Macbeth*
5. *Othello*
6. *Julius Caesar*
7. *Antony and Cleopatra*
8. *Much Ado about Nothing*
9. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
10. *Twelfth Night*
11. *King Lear*

NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

In the first scene of *King Lear*, the King warns the Earl of Kent to “come not between the dragon and his wrath.” King Lear is referring to himself as the dragon, and his **wrath** is both extensive and dangerous. Although it would be a gross oversimplification to state that the play of *Lear* is about wrath, that powerful **emotion** is the catalyst that sets all of the events in motion. Wrath is the source spring of the plot. During the Middle Ages wrath was viewed as one of the **Seven Deadly Sins**. Each of these sins (pride, lust, gluttony, sloth, wrath, envy, and greed) is actually a strong and powerful emotional state that could cause an individual to lose control and commit one of the **Mortal Sins** (the breaking of any of the **Ten Commandments**): lust could lead to adultery, wrath could lead to murder, and so on. The Mortal Sins were called by that expression because, by breaking one of the commandments, a person risked losing his immortal soul: his soul could be damned to hell. The soul, in a manner of speaking, then, would be dead. The Deadly Sins were deadly in the sense that they were deadly dangerous and could compel a person to further action that would result in the death of the soul.

Every play that William Shakespeare ever wrote concerns the emotional state of mankind. *Macbeth* revolves around ambition and pride, *Othello* concerns jealousy, and *Hamlet* involves melancholy and indecision. Man is an emotional creature; and his emotions are, more often than not, the source (or, at the very least, the stimulator) of many of his

problems and anxieties. If man were a totally rational creature who always made his decisions based on what is reasonable and best, there would be very few conflicts in the world – and there would not be any Shakespeare plays. Shakespeare realized that man's natural state is one of a constant struggle between reason and emotion. And the **conflict of Reason vs. Emotion** is one that appears in every Shakespeare play.

During the Middle Ages the Catholic Church recognized that this conflict is a natural and ongoing condition of mankind, but the Church leaders believed that Reason was the more powerful of the two. They believed that all men and women were capable of controlling their emotions with the proper application of reason. Reason was a gift from God, they believed; and it provides all people with the ability to control their emotions and resist temptation. The religious view concerning Reason and Emotion continued to assert itself into Renaissance England, and the Church of England asserted the supremacy of Reason over Emotion as much as the Catholics did.

Shakespeare did not agree with these church leaders. In situations where the temptations are not very great or when the emotions are not very intense, Shakespeare would have acknowledged that reason can then prevail. However, there come occasions in just about every person's life when the emotion is so intense – when the emotion boils and bubbles over – that the rational ability of that person disappears entirely. That person becomes, then, an individual of pure irrationality. That person then becomes crazy or mad.

And Shakespeare's "heretical" view regarding the supremacy of emotion over reason did not apply just to the weak or the poor or the foolish. Strong men, rich men, and wise men were also susceptible to the overwhelming power of their emotions. An aristocrat, just as easily as a commoner, could also become a victim to his emotions.

In Renaissance tragedies, just like the Greek tragedies of the Classical Age, the central character, the **protagonist**, is a person of "**high estate**." He is a king, a prince, a great lord, or a national hero of the people. The plot of a tragedy involves the **fall** of the protagonist. A tragedy does not necessarily need to end in the death of the protagonist, but the tragedy always must end with the fall of that central character. The fall is a fall from honor. It is a fall into disgrace. According to Renaissance thinking, only aristocrats held positions of honor and respect. Thus, only aristocrats could experience a fall. And, thus, Shakespeare's tragic heroes are always aristocrats: Macbeth is a king of Scotland, Hamlet is a prince of Denmark, and Lear is a king of England. Yet even the kings and princes of Europe, even the most heroic and noblest and wisest men of a kingdom, could fall victim to a strong and powerful emotion. The protagonist may be involved in an external conflict against an enemy or competitor; however, his internal conflict, his struggle against his emotions, is what ultimately causes his fall. When it comes to a struggle against an extremely powerful emotion, the aristocrat is not any better off than the commoner. The aristocrat just as easily loses in a conflict against a strong emotion.

This struggle against emotion is a **universal** quality that contributes to the success of Shakespeare's plays. Although very few members of an audience and very few readers can fully relate to what it means to be the powerful political leader of a nation, every member of the audience and every reader can understand what it means to be in a struggle against their own emotions.

The richness of Shakespeare's plays is that they operate on two levels. In the case of *King Lear*, these levels are (1) politics and (2) family. In regards to the political level, Lear is King of England; and his decisions and policies in regards to the affairs of state affect the livelihood of thousands of people. The political level thus causes the plot to be momentous and critical. Thus, this level adds intensity and intrigue to the story. However, Lear is also a father; and he thus makes decisions and judgments based on his concern and love for his three daughters. The level of family causes the plot to be more personal and emotional. This level contributes to the feelings of sympathy and compassion that the audience will feel as the story unfolds. Most importantly, these two levels are firmly interconnected. They are so tightly wound, the one over the other, that it is impossible to separate them or analyze them individually.

Although critics always praise Shakespeare for his wonderful **characterization** and for his beautiful **poetic language**, they often downplay or disregard his treatment of **plot**. Some critics underscore or even completely ignore Shakespeare's contributions to plot because his stories are usually based on earlier sources. And such is true even with the play of *King Lear*. However, a more thorough

and thoughtful critic will realize that Shakespeare was definitely no amateur when it came to plots. Shakespeare took his source materials and built upon them in a multitude of ways, adding level upon level of plot and meaning. Thus, the sources for Shakespeare's plays provide only a point of departure for Shakespeare's final product. Shakespeare's finished plays transcend the source material in numerous and even marvelous ways. The source material is the cornerstone, but Shakespeare's play is the magnificent palace that is built upon that cornerstone.

One of the methods that Shakespeare uses to enhance and enrich the plot of *King Lear* is through the use of **parallel structuring**. The play involves a subplot concerning one of King Lear's noblemen, the **Earl of Gloucester**. Like the King, the Earl takes part in affairs of state: not only is he one of the king's advisors, but he also has his own county to run. But also like the King, the Earl is also a father. He has two sons, the older son is named **Edgar** and his younger son is **Edmund**. Gloucester is involved in a conflict regarding his two sons (just as Lear is involved in a conflict regarding his three daughters); and thus Shakespeare creates a subplot that echoes the concerns and themes of the main plot. But Shakespeare's overall structure is far more complex than just that. The characters of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund also become directly involved and intricately connected to the main plot as well. In fact, the main plot would not proceed without them. Thus, Shakespeare is interweaving not just two strands of story, but (at the very least) four strands: (1) the political level of the main plot, (2) the family level of

the main plot, (3) the political level of the subplot, and (4) the family level of the subplot. None of these strands can be removed without seriously damaging the integrity of the overall story.

Literary critics have coined the term **dialogic** to describe the intricate parallel structuring that appears in certain dramatic works like *King Lear*. The prefix dia means across, and the root logic means sense or meaning. Thus, the sense or meaning (or themes or motifs) of one scene carries across to another scene (and vice versa). Often, the second scene is usually shorter than the first since the main ideas or concepts have already been covered fully in the first scene.

Another literary term that works in conjunction with the dialogic technique is **semiotics**. Simply stated, semiotics is the use of signs and symbols in a literary work. In *King Lear* Shakespeare uses various signs or symbols to connect two scenes that have a dialogic relationship. The sign or symbol can be an object or even just a word. For example, both Goneril (in the main plot) and Edmund (in the subplot) scheme to betray their respective fathers. The similarity in situation is emphasized by the semiotic use of **letters**. Both characters depend upon the use of letters in order to accomplish their goals. Often, the signs or symbols produce an effect on the audience that works at a subconscious level. The audience often does not register all of the signs on a conscious level because the scenes usually move rather quickly, but the audience will be aware of these semiotic devices and thus sense or feel the connection between the scenes.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

