

A draft letter to Dan Skinner of the Ambrose or Rose Theatre Company.

Wednesday, June 12th, (1991 ed.) to Saturday, June 22nd, (1991ed.)

Dear Dan,

Thank you for your last letter, which I was very glad to get.

Yes, I'm still motivated all right, though communication is a little hit and miss. I think each of us is longing to express the new idea, and fails to comment enough on the last one received. But you are very busy - and so am I - so there it is.

Lately I've been working on the "map of Lear" which I enclose. So I haven't yet found time to follow up the very interesting notes you sent me on zodiacal connections in the play. It's a subject I know very little about, though I'd like to know much more. One thing I observe at once - that four signs from Aries to Cancer - are allotted to scenes in Act I. This seems to echo the structure of the figure - because there are two 'inner circles' in Act I (also matching the unfolding of two plots), where as in all the other acts there is just one inner circle. But I'm not quite clear why zodiacal signs are matched to particular scenes, and not to the entire fabric of the play - though I can see that the significant sounds are especially strong in these scenes.

I like your doubling of Cordelia and the Fool. With the others, perhaps, disguise will have to be stronger. I see a slight problem with the Kent/France doubling. You cannot show the "further complement of leave taking" between the two of which Goneril speaks at the end of scene 1. Act I (line 320). It is surely between Kent and France that letters are later directly exchanged (I strongly suspect that Kent delivered Gloster his fatal one), and in this last conversation they must have been making secret arrangements about this exchange. So it is important that the audience is clearly aware of the connection between Kent and France. But there could be other ways of showing it.

I have much too much to say by letter. I wanted to make a tape to go with the map, which will doubtless look to you somewhat arbitrary at a first glance - but I can't do it this week.

I'll say this much for the moment. Both in 'Macbeth' and in 'Cymbeline' the system of Roman Roads and settlements is important. Unquestionably Shakespeare - or someone in the circle around him - had access to a map of Roman Britain. In 'Lear' we feel immediately close to Roman times, because the King swears by the classical gods Apollo and Jupiter. Also he asks for a train of a hundred men - which reminds one of the old Roman 'century' commanded by a 'centurion'. It is striking too that the very first thing Lear does is unfold a map. For me this was enough, first, to make me open my historical atlas, and then to look into various meanings attached to 'Albany'. All sources agree "the North": Spenser indicates Strathclyde. After that it was a question of further research and of simply following the conditions that the play implies. I think anyone who believed there is a clear geography to be found would have to find the same one. It is important to remember that Kings and Dukes in early times did not have one palace or castle, but moved about, travelling with servants, horses, possessions, tapestries from one centre to another. So, King Lear's main (imaginary) palace may have been in London or Winchester, but he wishes to gather people together from the North and the West and from across the

channel. Their journeys should not be too difficult or long. It would be natural to choose somewhere central to which the still excellent, though possibly weed grown roads of the departed Romans led, from all corners of the country.

A hint of Albany and Goneril's route may lie in her words, "Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty." We feel she is hawk-like, that she has been high up somewhere surveying great distances.

(Outline: Questions to Follow Bradleys – *this is a note at the top of the page ed.*)

Most people think there is no rational geography. I'm sure there is one. The problems/questions to be solved: The first question, "Where is Albany?" can be solved quite quickly. All sources agree, "the North". How did Lear divide his kingdom? How is it that Cornwall and Goneril appear to live quite close to Gloster? Do Albany and Cornwall perhaps move after the division of the kingdom and if so where to? The places cannot be very far apart, since the old King proposes to travel from one to the other each month.

Where did the great abdication and division ceremony of Act I take place? If, for instance, it was London or Winchester, Albany and his wife would have a disproportionately great distance to travel. How is it that a messenger can be dispatched, bidden to return with an answer, and then the dispatcher immediately leave home?

I am enclosing a map which I call the 'map of Lear'. At a first glance it will look to you somewhat arbitrary. I can only say - please have patience - I have now lived with this map for some time and a fair amount of past experience, research and thought has gone into it. I am inclined to think it would have been arrived at long ago, almost inevitably, if there were not this widespread and rooted conviction that to Shakespeare geography was unimportant, indeed that he quite often dealt in geographical impossibilities.

I start with an exactly opposite premise. I believe that just as there is a clear numerical and geometrical structure in all the plays, (that is in all the Tragedies and Comedies), so too there is a clear geographical one. In Merchant of Venice, Macbeth, The Tempest, the geography is crucial to the plot and in Macbeth and Cymbeline - both set in Great Britain - we are led back to the system of Roman Roads, camps and settlements. This makes me convinced that Shakespeare had access to a more-or-less complete map of Roman Britain - which need not surprise us when we remember the enormous interest in map-making that was going on in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries.

We are left to guess the imagined date of 'Lear'. References to Apollo, Jupiter and a hundred knights (like the old Roman 'century' of soldiers) and other references to steeples, cocks and churches, make one feel that the Romans had recently departed and Christian missionaries had recently come. If there is light to be shed on the extraordinary geographical vagueness of this play - which yet begins with a King unfolding a map - one must turn again surely to a good large map of Roman Britain.

First though, I'm going to quote a chunk from Bradley, who points very nicely to some of the spatial problems in the play, and expresses, I think, a widely held attitude to them.

Saturday, June 22, 1991 See Tape 141 (*not as yet located, ed.*)

Pages 259 and 260 Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1905.

'Before I turn to the other side of the subject I will refer to one more characteristic of this play which is dramatically disadvantageous. In Shakespeare's dramas, owing to the absence of scenery from the Elizabethan stage, the question, so vexatious to editors, of the exact locality of a particular scene is usually unimportant and often unanswerable; but, as a rule, we know, broadly speaking, where the persons live and what their journeys are. The text makes this plain, for example, almost throughout Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth; and the imagination is therefore untroubled. But in King Lear the indications are so scanty that the reader's mind is left not seldom both vague and bewildered. Nothing enables us to imagine whereabouts in Britain Lear's palace lies, or where the Duke of Albany lives. In referring to the dividing-lines on the map, Lear tells us of shadowy forests and plenteous rivers, but, unlike Hotspur and his companions, he studiously avoids proper names. The Duke of Cornwall, we presume in the absence of information, is likely to live in Cornwall; but we suddenly find, from the introduction of a place-name which all readers take at first for a surname, that he lives at Gloster (I. v. 1).¹ This seems likely to be also the home of the Earl of Gloster, to whom Cornwall is patron. But no: it is a night's journey from Cornwall's 'house' to Gloster's, and Gloster's is in the middle of an uninhabited heath.² Here, for the purpose of the crisis, nearly all the persons assemble, but they do so in a manner which no casual spectator or reader could follow. Afterwards they all drift towards Dover for the purpose of the catastrophe; but again the localities and movements are unusually indefinite. And this indefiniteness is found in smaller matters. One cannot help asking, for example, and yet one feels one had better not ask, where that 'lodging' of Edmund's can be, in which he hides Edgar from his father, and whether Edgar is mad that he should return from his hollow tree (in a district where 'for many miles about there's scarce a bush') to his father's castle in order to soliloquise (II. iii.) -- for the favourite stage-direction, 'a wood' (which is more than 'a bush'), however convenient to imagination, is scarcely compatible with the presence of Kent asleep in the stocks.¹ Something of the confusion which bewilders the reader's mind in King Lear recurs in Antony and Cleopatra, the most faultily constructed of all the tragedies; but there it is due not so much to the absence or vagueness of the indications as to the necessity of taking frequent and fatiguing journeys over thousands of miles. Shakespeare could not help himself in the Roman play: in King Lear he did not choose to help himself, perhaps deliberately chose to be vague.

From these defects, or from some of them, follows one result which must be familiar to many readers of King Lear. It is far more difficult to retrace in memory the steps of the action in this tragedy than in Hamlet, Othello, or Macbeth. The outline is of course quite clear; anyone could write an 'argument' of the play. But when an attempt is made to fill in the detail, it issues sooner or later in confusion even with readers whose dramatic memory is unusually strong.'

Bradley asked whether Shakespeare, may not have been deliberately vague in his writing, but he does not go on to wonder whether he was also deliberately vague in his mind.

Are we to suppose that he wrote a play, in which no single word or metaphor seems accidental, with no clear picture in his head of the great landscape which forms its background, or of the complex journeys undertaken by the figures in that landscape? This would be so totally unlike his practices in other plays that we would almost have to say, "This can't be Shakespeare!" There is always a landscape, a solid and ascertainable one. There is always a landscape, as well as a time-scheme, only some parts are in sunlight and some in shadow. And if the playwright does not provide a map alongside of the preface for each of his plays, it is not because he couldn't, but because he doesn't choose to. Over the centuries the impression of mysterious vagueness and vastness, especially strong in 'King Lear', heightened the power of the verse for the general consciousness of those epochs. But now we are acutely alert and critical, troubled and bothered by those unanswered questions to which Bradley, and a hundred others since his day, points.

The time has come. Treasure deliberately buried is coming to light, and just because it has to be found, it will be valued more. There is always a landscape like the earth itself and the plot too unfolds through unbroken and manifold events in time always precisely in summer or winter, by day or by night, in heat or in cold. In fact one can approach all the events, (as an exceedingly naïve realist), as if the characters were real beings, (which R.S. [*Rudolf Steiner, ed.*] says they are) and the events of their lives could be recorded in carefully kept diaries.

I can't quote the critics who strongly oppose this view, they say, more-or-less, "At that rate you will be speculating what kind of wart grew on the nose of King Lear's grandmother and that is a futile exercise." In fact, I think the language of the play itself, its musical interconnections teaches one how far imagination may be allowed to go in divining the details of the great hinterland to any Shakespeare play. And since words are full, not only of music but of the realities of the world of human experience over the centuries, we are permitted to use those riches to arrive at certainties. We are also permitted I think to call (as most Editors do) what we can from quarto variants of a play, from Holinshed, from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, from mythology and legend.

I know full well that one may be accused of extreme naiveté in treating dramatic motives, places, journeys within the framework of a play, exactly as though they existed in what we call the 'real' world. But to be cautious of apparent naiveté is already to be less naïve. I may find time (tape) to defend this position later.

Meanwhile - the map. Two of Bradley's points are rather easily answered. He speaks as if a Duke should have only one proper residence. But why should not a great lord, a mini-king, be almost as peripatetic as kings themselves were wont to be? They travelled from one bare castle to another with servants and horses, provisions, even tapestries to keep out the draught. So surely Cornwall could do much the same - when, with the surprise acquisition of half Cordelia's inheritance as well as his own new one he had every motive to move centrally from his original peripheral dukedom?

The same goes for Albany. He and Cornwall, both move in, like beasts of prey (though Goneril was the beast and vulture bird) to keep a sharp eye on the fair division of Cordelia's land and for administrating their share - to go to war if need be. However, I'm jumping the argument a bit. Where is the dukedom of Albany? How did King Lear originally plan to divide his great kingdom into three roughly equal parts? Cordelia's part is "more 'opulent' than the rest" but that does not necessarily mean it was much bigger - only richer. If only we could see the map that Lear unfolded! My thesis is that we can. (Tape 194)

How is it that (excepts when Gloucester asks 'Mad Tom' if he knows the way to Dover) there is never a problem about getting from A to B? About meeting a returning messenger? About carrying a litter without a compass over a wild heath? Because in the early 'Dark Ages', where Lear seems to be sited, the Roman Roads were still there, perhaps a little weed-grown but still excellent. To get to any place sited along this road system there was just one obvious and inevitable way of going. For the rest of the landscape, hills, valleys, rivers, bogs, downs, dramatic views, this (*the system of Roman Roads, ed.*) remains an almost constant element over the centuries - in spite of all the cutting down and building up that man may devise. It can be relied on as a kind

of permanent encyclopedia for anyone to look things up in, of great local events, great castles and cathedrals, great men. There are likely to remain traditions too.

So it is that Shakespeare did not have to be Merlin to predict that the keys to his plays would be close to hand for many generations to come. Because they are to be found they must house a reference library roofed or unroofed.