

King Lear tape 2 – Regarding how to lift the drama into light and about the geography of the play.

A draft letter to Dan Skinner of Rose Theatre Company. Made originally in written/ note form and later modified in an audio tape. The typed audio tape version is here presented in full.

June 26nd 1991

Dear Dan,

I want to talk first but briefly about how to lift the drama into light which you speak about at the end of your letter then at greater length about the geography of the play and the ideas on which the map is based, and finally, if there is time, about Kent (*See: King Lear Notes / The Story Of Lear' ed.*). I know there is a great risk that the acting of King Lear can produce an effect on its audience which in fact no great work of art ought to produce. Not only is there the intolerable scene of the putting out of Gloster's eyes, which can make one almost physically ill for the rest of the performance, but there can be an impression of overwhelming blackness and despair about the state of the human race, the pointlessness of everything at the end of the play. It seems to me that acting it must produce this impression unless somehow the belief is got across in the spiritual world and in the continuing journey of the soul. After all a materialist would have to say, 'Well maybe Lear is purified by his suffering and Gloster too and even Kent but what's the point no space is given for any blessing to come of this because they all die immediately at the end of the play.' I can't think of any better way to lift the play for modern audiences, perhaps teenagers, than through music, and/or eurythmy or both. People are much more open to music than they are to the expression of theoretical ideas and I think to eurythmy too. Maybe you have already come to these conclusions.

I don't know what you have already decided about the handling of the eye-gouging scene. I was very struck recently when re-reading the passage on Lear in A.C. Harwood's book, 'Shakespeare's Prophetic Mind', when he (Harwood) came to the scene with Gloster and the putting out of his eyes he always had to shut his own eyes, he simply couldn't bear to watch it! I had the same experience the first and only time that I have seen the play put on and I could imagine that it would be horribly powerful for a teenage audience, unless you somehow underplay it or ritualize it. I was even thinking, perhaps you could omit it for when Gloster appears with his bleeding rings it is quite obvious what has happened and obvious before because Cornwall is talking about revenge. If you omitted that scene then you could also omit the play-balancing passage in which Kent is most extravagantly abusing the Steward, but I want to say more about this later on.

One further thought on this, I suspect (but I don't know) that the very awareness of structure in the players must lighten a Tragedy. I have suspected for instance that the extraordinary succession of disasters which are known to have attended rehearsals of 'Macbeth' and which have led to all sorts of superstitions about it, might come to an end if the play was acted with a full knowledge of its structure.

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. Note: The other side of the subject, to which he refers in the first sentence, is the overwhelming powerful effect of the whole play on an audience.

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 bides 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 asks 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 practice 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, as well as a clear time-scheme, only some parts of the landscape and of the time are in sunlight and some in shadow. And if the playwright does not provide a map as 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', surely 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 point. The time has come. Treasure deliberately buried is coming to light, and just because it has to be found, it will in the end be valued more. I know full well that one may be accused of extreme naiveté in treating characters, motives, places, journeys, within the framework of a play exactly as though they existed in what we call the 'real' world. But to be conscious of an apparent naiveté is already to be less naïve. I may find time 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, 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 it was Goneril who was the beast or rather bird) to keep a sharp eye on the fair division of Cordelia's land to administer their share and to go to war if need be. However, I'm jumping the argument a bit and will come back in a moment to the whereabouts of Albany. As to the problem of Gloster, if Cornwall moves East after the great division of the kingdom, there is no reason why he should not live a night's short journey from Gloster's house - that we should expect to be somewhere near the town of Gloucester only high up in a barren place, not necessarily a heath as Shakespeare doesn't actually use that word. The final condition is that the route from Goneril and Albany's house, or palace or castle to Regan and Cornwall's house must lie naturally through Gloucester and the Earl of Gloster's house, then the problem is solved.

Bradley's other difficulty about Mad Tom's, or rather Edgar's hollow tree can I think also be solved. Shakespeare does not give a stage direction, 'a wood' at all. Why should Edgar's hollow tree not have been quite close to Gloster's house, a windbreak there, from whose windows there one could see many miles about in rolling bush less country? The best place to hide when a hunt is on is a place where the hunters will very soon pass and go beyond. So I think one could well imagine Edgar's hollow tree close to or standing in perhaps a courtyard where Kent sits in the stocks.

Two questions look for answers at the very beginning of the play. What were the boundaries of King Lear's realm, and how did he originally plan to divide it in three? We do not know whether the old King ruled Scotland and Wales as well as England, nor whether he was previously the overlord of the lands of Albany and Cornwall. These could have been independent dukedoms lying outside the sphere of the King's sovereignty. However, since the title of his sons-in-law are, 'Duke' and not 'King', we may surmise that their lands formed part of Lear's kingdom and that when he effectually abdicates this will simply increase their extent and give the Dukes a more absolute authority over them.

The extra land must be subtracted from the third part, over which perhaps the king ruled directly, in such a way as to leave an area for Cordelia and her husband that would be roughly equal to or a little larger than the areas destined for her sisters and her brothers-in-law. We know where Cornwall is, the original dukedom of Regan's husband, and already conceive that an area was added to it which included the town of Gloucester. We learn from several references that Albany is vaguely in the North, but the connotation of the word seem to have varied at different epochs and in the imagination of different authors. The Romans applied it to Scotland. Holinshed applied it to an enormous area stretching from the Humber to the very north of Scotland; but Spenser, in whose *Fairy Queen* we find one version of the Lear story, seems to apply it to the North of England and this would fit best the needs of Shakespeare's plot and correspond most naturally to the King's demonstrations: "From this line to this". The upper part of the British Isles is long and narrow. The lines would surely go across, horizontally, not vertically—and neither can be the North coast of Scotland or a line would not be needed.

The Lear story in Spenser's, 'Fairy Queen', falls in Canto 10 of Book 2 and is part of a legendary history of early British kings. The verses that precede that story are also striking in relation to Shakespeare's play. King Lear was not the first great King to divide his kingdom in three amongst his children. Before him we learn of Brutus or Brute, who in old age allotted his kingdom to his three sons: Loocrinus, Albanact, and Camber. Albanact going North to found Albany, Camber going west to found Cambria (that is Wales and perhaps Strathclyde) and Loocrinus being appointed overlord of the whole. A little earlier again there is a verse reference to the name 'Albion', which came to be applied to the whole British Isles. When a mariner, nearly wrecked on the white cliffs of Dover gave it its name (Latin, *albus* = white).

Ne did it then deserue a name to haue,
Till that the venturous Mariner that way
Learning his ship from those white rocks to saue,
Which all along the Southerne sea-coast lay,
Threatning vnheedie wrecke and rash decay,
For safeties sake that same his sea-marke made,
And named it *Albion*....

From Canto 10 Book 2

Reading this we are reminded of the Fool's words and his curious prophecy: 'Then shall the realm of Albion come to great confusion.'

It is hard to resist the conclusion that Shakespeare took his concept of Albany from the *Fairy Queen*, an exceedingly famous poem, whose first 3 books were published in 1589. And as most educated people would certainly have read that poem, not very long before they read or watched Shakespeare's *Lear* (1606?) perhaps the situation of 'Albany' was less vague to them than it is to us. I have tentatively sited it between the Antonine Wall to the North - dividing it from Scotland and the Humber to the South - mentioned by Holinshed, Shakespeare's other chief source.

The Antonine Wall of course relates us again to the Roman occupation of Great Britain, and here we must look at an obvious objection. King Lear of legend is supposed to have lived in early Celtic times, around 800 BC, so how can Roman constructions and topography really be relevant here? But the substantiation of Shakespeare's plays are layered in anachronisms. Place is constant but time is kaleidoscope. Defects are picked up, combined, rejected like the colours an artist palette only the picture is new and more than the sum of its parts. In 'Macbeth' for instance, in the early battle, there are elements of several battles (including Bannockburn) although we feel that the main time of the play is perhaps the 9th century. I do not know what most people feel about the time of King Lear, it must be that it is an early, wild and primitive world. My own impression is that the events of the play took place in the early

Dark Ages, not long after the Romans had departed or the first missionaries had come. Lear swears by Apollo and Jupiter in a landscape where steeples and cocks imply churches. He also asks for a hundred men - like the old Roman 'century' of soldiers. Another thing too, in this wild landscape there never seems to be the smallest question about getting from A to B; the only exception is when Gloucester asks 'Mad Tom' if he knows the way to Dover. Nor is there any problem about meeting a returning messenger on his journey. If the Romans had not long departed, their excellent roads would still be there. They would be usable by fast horses and even by a horse-drawn litter.

Shakespeare used for his purposes those details which were available to him. Probably at that time little was known about early Celtic tracks but the Roman road system was known.

Once he had decided to divide his kingdom, because surely he had no male heir, the aged king had to choose a convenient central place to which everyone could travel fairly easily. Parties were coming from the North from the West and from the South, wherever the King, with his French guests, was holding court, perhaps Winchester or London.

We observe first two diagonal highways crossing one another at a town called Venonae East of the Forest of Arden. The first of these highways is Watling Street, which runs North West from London, making a great curve in the heart of England, to end on the borders of Wales at Wroxeter. The other highway is the Fosse Way, which is incredibly straight and runs from a point on the South Coast between Dorchester and Exeter diagonally North East through Bath and Cirencester (Corinium) right up to Lincoln. Watling Street would be the natural route to take for anyone travelling from London and also from Dover, to which the road extends, if they wanted to get to the middle part of England. There is also a route from Winchester (Venta Belgarum) which joins Watling Street a little South of Venonae, but a large part of it consists of lesser roads and it would not be such a straightforward journey. For anyone coming from the South West i.e. the Duke of Cornwall and his wife, the one simple route would be straight along the Fosse Way. But what about the Duke of Albany and Goneril? If they lived somewhere East of the Pennines, say York, they could get to the region of Watling Street quite well via Lincoln, but it would be a curving and rather out-of-the-way route. If they lived somewhere West of the Pennines, say Lancaster or Manchester, they could also get quite easily to the central region of Watling Street though mainly by lesser roads. The journey to be undertaken by the Earl of Gloster, and old friend of the king, and his son, Edmund, might also have been taken into consideration before the final meeting place was decided on. But here there was little problem, a straight road, a lesser road, leads North from Gloucester and joins a branch of the Fosse Way, called the Iknield Way just South of Watling Street. The Iknield Way crosses Watling Street at a town named as, Letocetum, which would also have been convenient for the northern travellers if they came by Chester. Letocetum is now just a village, called Wall (there is an old Roman wall there) but in early times it must have been a town of some importance. To get there the king and his party would only have to travel straight along Watling Street. Cornwall and Regan would have to travel straight up the Fosse Way and then branch left at the North East end of the Cotswold Hills. For Albany and Goneril there were good roads on either side of the Pennines. So the town of Letocetum was considered as a candidate especially as the two syllables in Leto are the same as that of the mother of Apollo, by whom Lear swears in the first scene. However, a chance reference made me discover a much better case.

When looking up the word: Lipsbury, in 'Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable' I notice next to it the word, Lir, which is the old legendary name for King Lear. There I read that he founded the town of Leicester which the Roman later called Ratae (I might have discovered this early by reading the extract from Hollinshed quoted in the Arden Edition). What is remarkable is the Leicester is just North of Watling Street on the Fosse Way and only about 25 miles East of Letocetum. The most direct route from Lancaster or Manchester would be across the High Pennines, called the Roof of England. It would therefore not only be more convenient for Albany and Goneril, if they lived near the West Coast, but it

would illuminate perhaps Goneril's words when she is telling the king how much she loves him: 'Deerer then eye-sight, space, and libertie,'. We feel sure that she has lately been somewhere high up with an enormous and splendid view. I had thought of Lancaster at first for from the hills nearby there is a wonderful view over Morcambe Bay. But a route across the Pennines to the meeting place in Scene 1 would make the nearness of that splendid view even greater.

I believe that Leicester has to be right, even though the Lir who founded it was pre Roman by many centuries and in so much legend he was known as an ocean god. The places in Shakespeare's plays, as I have tried to indicate, wear a kind of permanent aura of all the important things that have ever happened in them.

A guide to Leicester reveals that there was once a great basilica there next to a forum from which the governor administered justice and laws which were passed on to the British people. What better place in the story could be chosen than one which the king himself had formally founded and where therefore he would surely have a palace waiting for him where justice and laws were in the habit of being promulgated and to which all the protagonists in the story could get easy by good roads.

But after the great division of his kingdom, into two parts not into three, the king decides to move to and fro between Goneril and Regan's houses every month. Commonsense demands that these two residences are not too far apart. Because of the unexpected development, that Cordelia's land, the rich land to the South East, is to be shared between them. The two dukes, I think, move centrally. Cornwall and Regan come to live somewhere not very far from Gloster's house.