A draft letter from Sylvia to Dan Skinner of the Rose Theatre Company – concerning King Lear

Sunday 12th May 1991

Hello Dan and the Rose Theatre company,

What follows will be miscellaneous notes on certain textual connections on King Lear. I may sometimes repeat myself especially in generalizations, but I do hope you will forgive me for that. I have the impression that in this play although the mathematical centres are there, and are significant in their mirror function for the whole balance of the Scene or Act, it is an area around the centre that speaks most clearly to our understanding. So this 'pawne' which we find at the centre of Scene 2, Act one and just before the centre of Scene 1, Act one is certainly saying something. It alerts us first to the way that the centre of Scene 2 imitates and caricatures in effect the centre of Scene 1. It can also make us think, Edmund must have been listening very intently to that violent confrontation between Kent and Lear in Scene 1. The very words Kent used are so very imprinted on Edmunds mind that he uses them himself when confronting with a very different purpose, the violent anger of another old man. This links to the question: when did Edmund's wicked design first enter his head?

And now I do have to mention the figure, although it is not essential to the argument in a way. Edmund's words after the fight with Edgar in which he is mortally wounded are striking, 'The Wheele is come full circle,_I am heere.' Act 5 Scene 3 line 193. This moment, which can be identified on the figure with its interlocking circles or wheels, although its position is interesting, does not correspond with the completion of a small circle. But the moment of Edgar's death does in effect so correspond, see Illustration. This of course is the moment when for him, the wheel of destiny really does come full circle. But what significance, if any, lies in the precise moment of the wounded Edgar's prophetic words?

In Macbeth the most trenchant comments on meanings seem to come in plainer passages. So we look here for the plainer to the wheel line. This line, line 161 back from the end of the play is line 161 forward from the beginning of the play, that is Kent's words, 'My life I neuer held but as pawne'. Imagine Edmund listening and learning with great intensity at this moment. Why is he so interested? He, the disinherited has been watching an old father bestow his land on his children. He has seen that old father bamboozled by hypocrisy. He now sees the voice of truth of honesty of reason, utterly and violently rejected by that old foolish father. What does this tell you? Old fathers are easily duped, what Goneril and Regan can do he can do. And no truthful argument will prevail over his persuasive lie. That is why it is straight after the public ceremony in which Lear divides his Kingdom, that Edmund formulates his evil plot. 'Thou Nature art my goddess', links us back to the central lines of Scene 1 Act 1. Lear swears by Apollo, to which the text draws attention. Not Kent's god, he is an early Christian. Both Apollo and Natura are deities of the antique world. Rome and the beliefs that enter Britain with its conquest by Rome are not far away from Lear, nor from Edmund, who, however, has discarded them along with the superstitions of astrology. 'Thou Nature art my goddess' is surely spoken with perfect cynicism, but the words relate to a near memory, King's words to Kent, 'Now by Apollo' (have you by the way noticed the spoonerism there, it is written 'clear and lent' instead of 'Lear and Kent', there is food for thought). In the circular figure, and this is one reason why this is so important, the time stream at the end of the play also represents in certain ways the time stream before the play begins. Events on stage have their antecedents which makes sense of them. Especially of the opening situation. So again we have to ask: to what event before the play begins could the moment when Edgar speaks the words, 'the wheel etc', actually correspond.

The protagonists in the drama have to journey to the place appointed for the ceremony of division not, I think from several hints, the place were Lear usually held his court and where France had been staying; some little place convenient for all the travellers. At some point in time, the plan for the ceremony of the Royal abdication must have been published to all those concerned, including Glocester, who seems to have been a close friend of the King's. Edmund and Edgar learn what is going to happen, but Edmund is much more interested in the event than Edgar, who apparently does not trouble to attend the ceremony. Do not Edmund's long simmering resentments against his legitimate brother - how that word sticks in his gullet - crystalized into a vague determination, when he learns of the old king's intentions. His old father has no plan to abdicate in favour of his children, and when at last he dies only one child will inherit. It is bitterly unfair. So Edmund asks to go with his father to the ceremony and in Scene 1, hoping to glean ideas, perhaps arguments with which to change his father's mind. And he does get ideas, new ideas, all too precisely. This gives, I think, the true connection between the main plot and the sub plot, which is otherwise not very clear at first (Lamb, in his tales from Shakespeare, leaves the sub plot altogether). One further question we have to ask: 'to what event in the text does the final completion of the small circle in Act five actually correspond?' It is to the death of the King, or rather to the final recognition that he is dead, with Edgar's words line 16 back: 'Edg. Looke vp my Lord.'

To sum up the textual relationships, these words of Edgar's, the moment of certainty, echo Gloucester's words to Kent in Scene 1 Act 1: 'Do you smell a fault?' At first this sounds like nothing but I think it isn't. The words are ambiguous, surely they refer to the whole proceedings about to begin, as well of course to Gloucester's own fault. But the fault that matters is the King's, who is about to execute a disastrous policy of division, and who expects to keep his royal state, while losing the power that justifies it. Moving inwards from both ends of the play towards the centre, Edmund's death at line 36 back, the final closing of his circle, a echoes line 36 forward, this falls at Lear's first public words addressed to the assembly: 'Lear: Meane time we shal express our darker purpose.' A sinister preamble, not lost on the listening Edgar, whose own darker purpose begins to crystalize. Finally, the moment when Edmund foresees his own end - 'The Wheele is come full circle,_I am heere.' - that is line 161 back from the end of the play, echoes: 'Kent. My life I neuer held but as pawne'.

Kent's words confronting the king, beginning or one of our beginnings of our whole trail of thought. Lear's furious words, one line earlier: 'Lear: Kent on thy life no more', have already told Edmund that the aged king prefers flattering lies to truth. His own wicked plan is born.

One should not think of course that every single line of the play has a significant echo right across the centre to the other side, but certain significant lines do, and I think that the connection between Act 5 and Act 1, which is so very clear on the figure, is especially strong.

New subject: 'Act Centres.'

So far I have only looked at the scene centres in Act 1, on which I have written notes which I will try to send to you at some time, but I have looked at all the act centres and these do have a very clear element in common (though in Act 2 it has to be looked for). This element is 'light and fire'; a spark or many sparks, dancing flame, a glow, a flash. We also find Edgar in one of his shapes and aspects at all these centres.

The light at the centre of Act 1 is, 'the maidenlest Starre in the Fir – mament', which may be a single star or perhaps the constellation Virgo. The words are spoken by Edmund, speaking of what he is not, but Edgar is just on his way and we find again and again that what is said immediately before someone enters has much to do with that someone. The line with the star is Act-line 450, right-hand column, page 286, just before the entry of Edgar, followed by, 'Pat: he comes like the Catastrophe of the old Comedie:'. If you look up the word Catastrophe you will see that it is extremely apt.

At the centre of Act 2, that is Act-line 336 it is Edgar himself who is speaking, though it is in the crazed voice of Poor Tom. He has been hiding all night in the hollow of a tree planning how to escape arrest by pretending to be a crazy beggar. The Act-centre falls in Scene 2, Scene-line 194. The central three lines are:

> Sometimes with Lunaticke bans, sometime with Praiers
> Inforce their charitie: poore Turlygod_poore Tom,
> That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am.

It is the mysterious word, Turlygod, that in the end reveals the flame but this takes a little bit of research and so I will go on for the moment to the centre of Act 3.

At the centre of Act 3 we come to the Act-line 270, page 298, left-hand column, just after the entry of Gloster, with a torch. Once again it is Edgar, as Poor Tom, who is speaking. He sees the flames of Gloster's torch dancing wildly in the wind and pretends he thinks that it is a demon: 'Edg. This is the foule Flibbertigibbet;'. He puts on his mad act with increased intensity as I think he realizes that it is his father coming and since Gloster can still see, that he risks recognition as never before. I find it absurd that the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives two definitions of Flibbertigibbet as if they were entirely separate.

I Quote: 1549. [orig. flibbergib; prob. echoic of unmeaning chatter.] 1. A gossip; a flighty woman. 2. The name of a fiend (Lear III, iv, 120); applied in Scott's 'Kenilworth' to a mischievous urchin 1603.

It is not clear whether the contemporaries of Shakespeare or others later have also used Flibbertigibbet to mean 'fiend'. Very often the Oxford English Dictionary bases its definitions on one single example found in Shakespeare, which makes for rather a circular argument. Anyway, it is quite obvious that in this context, the word means both things at once. That wonderful word 'flibbertigibbet' is echoic not only of unmeaning chatter but also of something flipping and flapping about, this is Gloster's torch, not electric, dancing and flaming in the gusts of wind, looking like a red devil. Seeing it, Edgar has to increase his lunacy, his unmeaning chatter to preserve his disguise and the first thing he pretends is that he thinks that the torch is a fiend which is rushing at him to inhabit him and speak nonsense through his lips. The light at the Act-centre here is of course that flaming torch, which could easily be a prop, as the star in Act 1 could not.

The light at the centre of Act 4 shines from the two glowing eyes of the imaginary fiend-beggar which Edgar, with instantly changed voice, describes to his father after he has, but has not, fallen headlong from the cliffs of Dover. The central four lines are:

> *Edg.* … What thing was that
> Which parted from you?
> *Glou.* A poore vnfortunate Beggar.
> *Edg.* As I stood heere below, me thought his eyes
> Were two full Moones: he had a thousand Noses,

These are Act-lines 321 to 324. So the phrase, 'two full Moones', does not actually fall within the central couplet but 'eyes' does, and Edgar already imagines them glowing. Once again Edgar is speaking, but now in a sane and yet still altered voice and once again the 'fiend' idea is there. These lines fall in the left-hand column of page 303 shortly before the entry of Lear.

At the centre of Act 5 Edgar and Edmund face each other as opponents in what will be a dual to the death. The central couplet is:

> *Edg.* Draw thy Sword,
> That if my speech offend a Noble heart,

Between these two lines Edmund much surely draw his sword, whose blade now flashes in the sunlight. This is the light at the Act-centre and once again it is Edmund and Edgar contrasted, as it was at the centre of Act 1. Now at last Edgar is speaking in his own true voice, but he is no longer innocent and gullible and we feel that the noble heart is also his own. His speech will offend it because it is bitter to accuse a brother, to lay bare his treachery in the way that he is now compelled to do.

Finally we return to the mysterious, 'Turlygod' at the centre of Act 2. Kenneth Muir in the Arden edition of 'Lear', which you may have, gives on page 82 several possible meanings for this, none of which we find satisfactory and one is, an Anglicized form of 'twirlige' which means: one who beseeches or importunes for arms with a doleful pertinacity. I would say that this is certainly part of the meaning but I think that one can go further by just listening to the word and imagining the situation. Edgar is talking to himself, soliloquizing, thinking desperately what he can do to desperately escape recognition and apprehension by Cornwall's agents. One thing he knows he can do is act, and in the past he has watched with intent observation the bands of beggars and poor deranged creatures who roamed the countryside and extracted arms by playing now on fear and now on pity. He will pretend to be such a beggar, such a Turlygod. The passage in which these beggars are described gives a vivid picture of what was probably happening in Shakespeare's day and centuries before that but it contains one phrase that somehow jolts in the particular context in which it comes. The phrase is, 'with this horrible object' (line 191 Sc. 2 Act 2). It follow line 190 which contains a list of objects, sharp objects: pins, wooden picks etc. with which the beggars are wont to pierce and mortify their arms so that they may present as wretched a picture as possible. In the very next line we have 'object' used apparently in its alternative sense and purpose. Is it entirely likely that the first meaning of 'object' just illustrated has disappeared here? I find myself asking: What horrible object? What vile spite thing is hidden behind these words? And is it something that Edgar has in his hand?

When there is a riddle, turn to the play-mirror, it is almost axiomatic. In Sc. 2 Act 2 the lines 190,191,192, that is the three central lines of the Act are play-lines 1231, 1232, 1233. We look for their mirror lines across the play centre, what I write as: 1233-, 1232- and 1231- (in other words the total, that is 3185, minus 1231+1 etc.). We arrive at Act 3, Scene 6, page 299, in the company of: Kent, Gloster, Lear, Edgar and the Fool; the last three in contrasting states of madness or pretend madness. The theme of the king's deranged wits is still vengeance. The Fool, surely with Edgar in mind, asks whether a madman be a yeoman or a gentleman. Lear replies: 'a king, a king', surely because he can somehow still recognize Edgar's royal qualities. Of the Fool's own answer he seems to take no notice but joins together in his mind a theme of mad beggars with the overwhelming one of vengeance:

Lear. To haue a thousand with red burning spits
Come hizzing in vpon 'em.
Edg. Blesse thy fiue wits.

These are scene-lines 15, 16 and 17. They are also play-lines 1233 back, 1232 back and 1231 back, the precise play-mirror lines that we are looking for. The picture surely is of a thousand beggar waving stakes made red hot in the embers of a fire and advancing menacingly to attack. Here we have all our answers; the horrible object of which Edgar speaks as he hides in the hollow of a tree must surely be just such a wooden stake or spit with which the bands of beggars were wont to threaten arson or murder when they visited lonely habitations with too few occupants for defense. With these objects they could literally enforce charity though at first, thus armed, they may whine for pity. Imagine an isolated farm on a dark night. The farmer hears horrid cries and looking out sees a hundred glowing spits waving in the air. It is like a many-armed god, a great whirling 'Turlygod', whose separate members are lesser 'Turlygods'. At the centre of Act 2, 'Inforce their charitie: poore Turlygod_poore Tom,' I see Edgar starting to act the part he imagines, waving his arms, perhaps holding the stick he has cut with a small knife and switching suddenly from threat to whine. 'That's something yet:' could be glossed, 'yes, I can do it. I'm sure I can if it comes to it', but certainly Edgar does not intend actual arson or murder. So once again at this centre we do find 'light and fire' but wholly in the realm of imagination.

These constant images, linked always with Edgar at the centre of acts, seem to be saying, 'Edgar and fire, Edgar and light are somehow connected.' In effect he is a man of fire and light, which certainly fits well with a man of noble heart and nimble wits who is to boot a brilliant actor. It is interesting to think about who can act and who cannot in this story and the manner of acting that is used. Kent can act, or at least he can change voices, now speaking as a gentleman and now as a servant. That's two good men with this attribute. But Edmund can act too, at least well enough to dissemble lies and so can Goneril and Regan, but their kind of acting is just a face of hypocrisy which revolts Cordelia so much that she cannot act at all in any sense. False and true acting, even if the latter is born of necessity and involves a kind of lying, are there as polarities surely throughout the play. The Fool never stops acting; it is his recognized job. Lear I think never acts; we see straight into his tumultuous heart.

Doubtless many of these thoughts have already been expressed and expressed more eloquently by one or more of the hundreds of critics who have already thought about this play but here they arise directly, almost inevitably, out of the structure and that is what I wanted to show.