The Story Of Lear *(Summer 1991 ed.)*

The old king King Lear plans to divide his kingdom in three, bequeath it to his three daughters and their husbands and to retire. His two elder daughters, Goneril and Regan are already married. The first to the Duke of Albany, whose lands are in the north. The second to the Duke of Cornwall, whose lands are in the southwest. His youngest and most beloved daughter is not yet married but she has two suitors, the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France.

On the day when Lear divides his kingdom, Cordelia's marriage must also be settled, since whoever wins her will also obtain one third of England – the richest part, in the south, including Dover, Kent, London, Winchester and so on.

The Duke of Burgundy appears to have the prior claim on Cordelia's hand, but the King of France has lately been staying in Lear's Court and comes to his division ceremony as a rival suitor.

In the event, the old king makes a vain and foolish condition before he formally divides his kingdom: each of his daughters must tell him how much she loves him – then they can inherit. Goneril and Regan lie and flatter and this leaves Cordelia so ashamed for them that she is almost struck dumb. She can only say that she loves her father according to her duty, but for the King this is not only not enough, - it is cause for violent rage. He disinherits Cordelia – once his favorite daughter – there and then and bestows her share of the kingdom to be divided now in two on his two elder daughters. When his loyal and faithful friend, the Earl of Kent, is courageous enough to protest, the King turns his anger on him and banishes him from the country.

There follows the planned Ceremony of Betrothal for Cordelia, for whose hand it seems the Duke of Burgundy has already advanced his claim. But when the King makes it clear that she is now rejected by him, and will be dowerless, Burgundy promptly retreats – leaving the King of France, who has already fallen in love with her – and who is, perhaps, rich enough to care nothing for dowries – to claim her as his wife and queen.

After the King has left, Cordelia says goodbye to her sisters, and hands them her jewels to which she feels she no longer has any right. She commends the King to their care – but clearly she knows her sisters all too well and fears they will treat him badly. She departs with the King of France.

Goneril and Regan, now left alone, whisper together and we learn how they really feel about the aging King and his tantrums. Somehow they know that the King of France is having a last conversation with the banished Kent before departing south toward Dover and his ships. He would naturally suggest that Kent should accompany him and Cordelia and be given asylum in France. We surmise that Kent has already formed his plan of remaining in England in disquise. Then he tells France and Cordelia of this and makes some arrangements to stay in communication with them.

Kent's encounter with the steward – the effect of his impetuous anger on subsequent events.

Kent encounters the steward with a long out-pouring of abuse which strikes us – though we know Kent is a 'good' man – as strangely exaggerated and far-fetched. In his rage he insists on having a fight with the steward, and the outcome of this is that he, Kent, gets put in the stock. He is the first thing Lear sees him when he arrives at Gloucester's castle.

We are impelled to ask: suppose Kent had not given way to his rage when the steward approached him? Suppose he had contented himself with a few scornful words? In that case Lear would not have been in high anger when he first met Regan and Cornwall and events would have developed more slowly. Perhaps it would have taken a few days for the truth to sink in that Regan did not intend to receive him in her home, unless he came virtually without followers. Perhaps the King would never have ventured out into the storm and Gloucester would never have followed to try to help him. Gloucester need not have had to confide his anxiety to Edmond and in doing so betray the secret of the letter. Perhaps, indeed, the letter would not even have been given to Gloucester. Who, after all, was the messenger who gave it to him? Was it not Kent, the one who conferred with France before he left England, who we know (from the scene at the play's center) was secretly in touch with France. From that scene it is clear that Kent already knows what Gloucester later learns. Gloucester even uses the very same phrase as Kent – "there is division between the Dukes". We may surmise that a letter from France was delivered to Kent for communication to suitable people to likely sympathizers. We may even surmise that Kent did not originally intend to hand it over to Gloucester, but that he was afraid, while in the stocks and in danger of further man-handling. His habit of incautious impetuosity is clearly illustrated in the strange scene at the play-center. He entrusts a man whom he only just recognizes with highly dangerous confidences, messages, tokens. The instructions he gives are minimal, he doesn't even bother to find out the man's name or explain how he is sure to meet Cordelia. Does not the quick handing over here of purse and ring echo the quick handing over of the letter to Gloucester?

If all this would be found on him. Yet it was also dangerous to give it to Gloucester just at the time when Regan, Cornwall, and their servants were staying in his house.

If all this is true, then Kent is indirectly responsible for the putting-out of Gloucester's eyes? Is the story telling us that his thoughtless impetuousness causes disaster? His nature is like the King's in this – perhaps why he loves and admires him so much.

The King's last unbearable words to Kent – "This is a dull sight" acquires a new meaning – "You are rather a stupid man, a blind man delivering blindness altogether too like me". Kent's journey to Dover with him becomes a time of atonement, a penance. His words, "My master calls me, I must not say no," imply perhaps that he did say no before – to that inane discipline that control which he had so much to despise? "Master" in Shakespeare always has reference to a hidden master of proceedings who stands behind the mysterious occult form of the plays.

The meaning of "Lipsbury Pinfold" - Longhborough and Leicester. The steward as image of a sheep. The five pointed star in the circle.

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See explanations of "Lipsbury Pinfold" in Arden's Penquin editorial and definition in Oxford Dict. The Arden explanation is ridiculous. I am sure Kent does not want to bite the steward. The "lips" is a comment on the stewards lips, his silly affected way of speaking, which Kent mimics. The meaning of "pinfold" is a sheep-fold and surely Kent is seeing Oswald as a sheep, whom he'd like to shear. Then he'd "make thee care for me". A little later, addressing Cornwall with explosive rage he compares Oswald with three more animals: the rat, the dog, and the goose. Clearly he is strongly disposed to see animal traits in men. 'Lipsbury' sounds like a place, a real place, and since it springs so promptly to Kent's mind it is surely a place he knows well. Yet a map of England reveals no Lipsbury. Could the word be a local version of a well-known place? Or, has Kent substituted the one syllable 'lip' – to make his point about Oswald's speech – for another similar syllable? Wherever that real place may be it must have an historical connection with sheep and it must be somewhere in England where Kent is likely to have spent some time. If we go to sleep with "Lipsbury" we wake up with "Loughborough" (pronounced, of course, "Luffboro") and this place, in the North Midlands, does indeed fulfill every required condition. Are there sheep around Loughborough? Yes. In the Shell Guide to England we find: "from 1400 to 1600 the town (Loughborough) was an important center of the wool trade". Also, "The Thursday Market has been in existence since the right was granted in 1206 by Hugh Despenser…" A pinfold or pound for animals may also be in a market.

Is Kent likely to have known Loughborough? Yes. If we are right that Leicester is 'leave forever' then Loughborough, less than 20 miles from the N.W. would almost certainly have been well known to Kent, who has surely spent the greater part of his life close to his "master" the king. The antiquity of Loughborough as a little hamlet "there before the Romans came or the Danes sailed up the River Soar to plunder, burn, and then to settle" adds weight to the above arguments. It was certainly there during the imagined reign of Lear."