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Oedipus at Colonus and *King Lear*: Classical and Early Modern Intersections

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‘More than two tens to a score’: Disquantification in *King Lear*

David Lucking

Abstract

Although Shakespeare’s use of mathematical imagery in *King Lear* has been touched on by various commentators on the play, adequate attention has not always been paid to the function such imagery performs in dramatizing the problem of what constitutes value in a period in which different conceptions of value were coming increasingly into conflict among themselves. It is the purpose of this paper to make a more concentrated effort to investigate the language of mathematics pervading the tragedy – most particularly that having to do with measurement and other forms of quantification – in its relation both to the mentality it reflects and to the rival principles of division and unification which contend with one another throughout the work. If the language of numbers and of comparative value figures processes of mensuration and partitioning that operate ubiquitously and destructively in the universe of *King Lear*, it is also deployed obliquely as a symbolic notation of a countervailing impulse towards unification that, also present in the play, offsets to some degree what might otherwise seem to be the unmitigated pessimism of its conclusion.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *King Lear*; mensuration; numbers

“They are but beggars that can count their worth”
Romeo and Juliet 2.6.32

Although there are other works in the canon that make significant use of numerical and arithmetical imagery, it is perhaps *King Lear* that qualifies as Shakespeare’s most mathematically self-conscious play, intensely interested as it is not only in numbers and what can be done with them, but even more importantly in what they

can do to those who use them. This is not by any means a merely abstract concern, nor one unrelated to the historical circumstances in which the tragedy was produced. The age in which Shakespeare lived was one in which mathematics – if only in the form of those fundamental arithmetical operations indispensable to the commercial activities of every day – was acquiring ever greater ascendancy in the minds of people belonging to all walks of life. The new economic order that was consolidating itself was one in which value was increasingly expressed, whether with literal or figurative intent, in the vocabulary of numbers, as something that could be measured or otherwise quantified according to the criteria of the marketplace, and Shakespeare often evinces a deeply troubled awareness of the implications this might have for the conception of value itself. It is only a short step from Shylock's debating with himself whether he should lend Antonio "Three thousand ducats for three months" in *The Merchant of Venice* (1.3.9),[1] to the kind of confusion that arises when he goes on to observe a moment later that "Antonio is a good man" (1.3.12). What he means by this is simply that the merchant is sound in a financial sense, but Bassanio construes his words in different terms altogether, and his error in some ways reflects the ambivalent perceptions of the society in which he lives.

As this example illustrates, the question that inevitably presents itself, in a world so radically in transition in ideological as well as strictly economic terms, is that of the relation existing between the different categories of value according to which people think and act. These are categories that Shakespeare himself brings into juxtaposition when, as is not infrequently the case, he draws upon the language of commodity exchange to supply metaphors for the world of human emotions. In *The Merchant of Venice*, to continue with the example already cited, he contraposes words belonging to different realms of value – "dear", "worth", "value" itself – in order to show not only that these domains are incommen-

1 With the exception of those to *King Lear*, all references to Shakespeare's works throughout this article are to the single volume *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (2001). References to *King Lear* are to the edition of the play edited by Kenneth Muir (1993).

surate with one another in their very nature, but also that the values that lend moral and spiritual significance to human life cannot without peril be confounded with those of the marketplace, however tempting it might be to conceive them, as our language often seems to invite us to do, as analogues of one another. Although Portia, in assuring Bassanio that "Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear" (3.2.312), is using the idiom of commerce merely as a displaced notation for personal feeling, her words cannot fail to generate disturbing overtones in a play in which a character claims very real rights of ownership over the body of another person, and in which we are reminded that the institution of slavery continues to flourish in the actual world as well (4.1.90ff.). Sonnet 87, which begins with the line "Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing", similarly plays on the multiple meanings of words such as "dear" and "worth" in order to contrast different categories of value. The drift of the poem is that the person to whom it is addressed appraises his own worth in terms wholly different from the poet's, terms once again reminiscent of those employed in the world of mercantile and property transactions, and that he is merely betraying his own deficiencies on the emotional and moral levels when he does so. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare has one of his titular characters remark that there is beggary in the love that can be reckoned (1.1.15), and this is a sentiment that is frequently echoed elsewhere in his work as well.

In *King Lear* Shakespeare goes somewhat further, because what are at stake are not only affective or even moral values alone but the very identities of people themselves, as well as the fabric of the societies to which they belong. In a manner recalling that of *The Merchant of Venice*, in which a pound of human flesh is engaged as surety for a loan of three thousand ducats, the logic of measurement and quantification is taken to the extreme of absurdity in this play, as is the language through which that logic is articulated. The note is sounded in the opening dialogue of the drama, when to Kent's remark that "I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall", Gloucester rather tortuously replies that "in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the Dukes he values most; for equalities are so weigh'd that curiosity in neither can make choice of ei-

ther's moiety" (1.1.1-6).[2] In such a context as this the verb "values" becomes deeply ambiguous in its import, and the fact that the word which appears as "equalities" in the Quarto version of the play is transformed into "qualities" in the Folio,[3] the implication being that something as intangible as a quality can somehow be weighed as if it had substance, renders it even more so. This brief exchange is laden with words having to do mensuration and partitioning in one form or another – "more", "most", "equalities", "weigh'd", "division" and "moiety" – the idea being introduced from the very beginning that even a sentiment such as "affect" might in some sense be measured on a metaphorical balance and translated into the apportioning of property and wealth as well. This becomes even more evident in the bizarre ceremony which precipitates the events of *King Lear*. The aging king of Britain, determined to unburden himself of the onus of rule, announces that he has "divided / In three our kingdom" (1.1.36-7), and invites his daughters to produce verbal attestations enabling him to assess "Which of you . . . doth love us most" (1.1.50) so that he can bestow upon them portions of his realm proportionate to the degree of devotion they profess. His eldest daughter Goneril plays the game with consummate dexterity, cynically fanning the flames of her father's egotism with a series of specifications of what her love is to be measured against which though vehemently formulated are also patently hollow:

2 It is curious that Kent and Gloucester should refer at this point to Lear's two sons-in-law rather than to his three daughters as being the beneficiaries of this division, although the king soon makes it clear that the distribution he has planned is in fact threefold. This is perhaps to be attributed to the fact that one of the immediate catalysts precipitating some of the concerns of *King Lear* would seem to have been the project that King James was pursuing in the years following his accession to unify England and Scotland under one rule. For a lucid account of the relevance of this play to the debate that was taking place over this issue see Shapiro 2015: 33-45. Shapiro points out that the phrase "dividing your kingdoms" appears in King James's *Basilikon Doron* (33), and that James's two sons held the titles of Duke of Albany and Duke of Cornwall (40).

3 Although he adopts the Quarto's "equalities" in his edition of *King Lear*, Kenneth Muir concedes that the Folio's "qualities", accepted by other editors, "may be the correct reading" (Shakespeare 1993: 3n).

> I love you more than word can wield the matter;
> Dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty;
> Beyond what can be valued rich or rare;
> No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
> (1.1.54-7)

The crucial words "more" and "less" will be reiterated almost obsessively throughout the play, reflecting the mentality of those who barter meanings as they barter goods. Not to be outdone by her sister in the devious art of flattery, Lear's second daughter Regan launches into a speech employing very much the same idiom, declaring that she is made of the identical "metal" as Goneril and, in a phrase whose gist is clear even if its syntax is less so, "prize me at her worth" (1.1.68-9). She too invokes an implicit metaphor of mensuration when she proclaims that "I find she names my very deed of love; / Only she comes too short" (1.1.70-1). Very fittingly, considering the character of the process that is underway, a map of Lear's kingdom is prominently on display during these proceedings, representing with almost iconic immediacy what Henry S. Turner well describes as "a 'modern' idea of space as a quantifiable and measurable geometric abstraction" (1997: 172). Having received precisely those tokens of adulation he has expected from two of his daughters, the gratified Lear instantly transcribes their effusive protestations into cartographic demarcations, converting what are supposed to be asseverations of boundless devotion into real estate: "To thee and thine, hereditary ever, / Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom" (1.1.78-9). But when he proceeds to ask his youngest daughter Cordelia what she can say to "draw / A third more opulent than your sisters" (1.1.84-5) she shatters the spell of numbers he has been weaving by pronouncing the words "Nothing, my lord" (1.1.86), thereby throwing the old man's carefully contrived game of weights and measures into complete disarray. Words like "more", "less", "prize" and "worth", and the notion of relative value they encode, have no meaning before a nothingness that admits of no possibility of negotiation.[4]

4 For the significance of the word "nothing" in this play, see for instance McGinn 2006: 113-18; Rotman 2001: 78-86; Tayler 1990; Calderwood 1986;

As it happens, Cordelia is not entirely immune to the language and its associated mode of thinking that prevail at her father's court, and this is something that has sometimes occasioned consternation even in her most fervent admirers. The first words we hear her utter in an aside are "I am sure my love's / More ponderous than my tongue" (1.1.76-7), the image hovering in the background once again being that of a figurative balance on which genuine feeling is somehow capable of measuring itself against and outweighing mere words. In tones that Millicent Bell accurately though somewhat unsympathetically describes as "coldly legalistic" (2002: 144-5), she goes on to declare that "I love your Majesty / According to my bond" (1.1.91-2), turning the idiom of the court to devastatingly literal use when she appends to this the punctilious phrase: "no more nor less" (1.1.92). Somewhat inconsequentially, perhaps, notwithstanding the disconcerting exordium with which she has announced that she has nothing to say, Cordelia does in the event deliver a speech, and one that rather surprisingly not only avails itself of the language of quantification and partition that is current at her father's court, but does so in a manner which is almost pedantically precise: "Happily, when I shall wed, / That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry / Half my love with him, half my care and duty" (1.1.99-101). But although what Cordelia is doing here is indeed, as Meredith Skura puts it, echoing her father's "account-book attitude toward emotion" (2008: 126), employing a mode of expression congruent with the rules of the game imposed upon his daughters by Lear, in her case the language she uses is one of emotional sincerity and not of vacant flattery. A.D. Nuttall argues that Cordelia, "bewildered by her sudden apprehension of the dangerous social context, tries to resolve the matter by moving into the cooler medium of rationally demonstrable desert", and that it is this that renders her language "uncomfortably similar to that employed by her sisters in their wholly destructive application of mathematics to human flesh and blood" (2007: 317). Whether Cordelia's motives are quite as delib-

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Fleissner 1962. For more general discussions of the concept of "nothingness" in Shakespeare, see Lucking 2017: 151-78; White 2013; Barrow 2001: 87-91; Willbern 1980; Jorgensen 1954.

erate as this or not, what is certain is that in using such mathematical language to define the nature and extent of her emotional obligations to her father, rather than simply to assert unconditional adoration to the exclusion of all other affective ties as her sisters do, she is testifying to what she actually does feel and not merely rehearsing what, to anticipate the words with which the play concludes, she ought to say (5.3.323).

But Lear fails to understand this. From his blinkered point of view the ceremony of devotion he has so carefully choreographed has been aborted in the most mortifying way possible, and the incensed king retaliates by dispossessing Cordelia of her dowry and disowning her as a daughter, thereby depriving her both of prospects and of social station. "Nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.89), he has warned her, using the word "nothing" in the most literal sense, and it is this threat that he proceeds to make good by effectively annihilating Cordelia as a social entity and so far as possible as a human being as well. The language in which he addresses Cordelia's suitors is now, overtly and demeaningly, that of the marketplace, as if she were no more than an item of spoiled merchandise to be disposed of as expeditiously as possible. To Burgundy he asks "What, in the least, / Will you require in present dower" (1.1.190-1), to which the duke replies, once again in the conceptual language typical of the British court, "I crave no more than hath your Highness offer'd, / Nor will you tender less" (1.1.193-4). But Lear rescinds that earlier offer, and in so doing makes the mercantile paradigm according to which he has been operating only too explicit: "When she was dear to us we did hold her so, / But now her price is fallen" (1.1.195-6). At least in her own world, Cordelia has been reduced to being the nothing she invoked in her first extended speech, Lear cruelly asserting indeed that "we / Have no such daughter" (1.1.261-2). It is the King of France who saves the day for her when he magnanimously takes up the castaway, endowing her with a fresh identity as the future queen of his country and in doing so articulating a series of apparent paradoxes that depend once again on the tension between different categories of value. Cordelia, he says, is "most rich, being poor; / Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despis'd" (1.1.249-50). She has been transformed in his estimation into an incarnate oxymo-

ron whose contradictory identity is summed up in his description of her as an "unpriz'd, precious maid" that no number of "dukes of wat'rish Burgundy" could "buy" of him (1.1.257-8). If the language in which he expresses himself remains that of commerce, it is here used to enhance the sense of Cordelia's human value rather than to diminish it. What the king is implying through such language is, in effect, that the precious but unpurchaseable Cordelia has in his eyes escaped the trammels of the market paradigm altogether.

As the French king's paradoxical formulas also suggest, however, Cordelia has in a sense been divided into two selves, split between a British identity that has by now been emptied of substance, and the elevated French role with which she has newly been invested. This process of division, initiated by Lear's twofold partitioning of his kingdom, is one that becomes a general principle operating in the play. Characters such as Edgar and Kent are analogously riven, as they are obliged to abdicate their endangered former selves and fabricate artificial personas for themselves as Tom the beggar and Caius respectively. "Edgar I nothing am" (2.3.21), says Edgar, who resorts to the expedient of literally effacing himself – "my face I'll grime with filth" (2.3.9) – in order to mask his identity, while Kent has similarly "raz'd my likeness" (1.4.4) so as to render himself unrecognizable. Not only Lear's kingdom, and not only individual inhabitants of it, but the social fabric itself is rent at every level, as Gloucester remarks when he informs his natural son Edmund that the eclipses which have recently been observed presage rifts and insurrections in various spheres:

> Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father: the King falls from bias of nature; there's father against child. (1.2.103-9)

Gloucester does not know it, but such divisions are correlated less with eclipses in the heavens than with that less visible occultation in the domain of personal relationships that Lear has somewhat ominously described as his "darker purpose" (1.1.35), which perhaps in symbolic terms amounts to the same thing. Edmund will

travesty his father's astrological interpretation of events shortly afterwards when he mockingly says that "O! these eclipses do portend these divisions" (1.2.133-4), and in speaking to the brother he is plotting to rob of his inheritance he takes up Gloucester's words once again, talking of

> unnaturalness between the child and the parent; death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities; divisions in state; menaces and maledictions against King and nobles; needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of cohorts, nuptial breaches, and I know not what. (1.2.141-6)

The leitmotif of division permeates the language of the play from beginning to end, reflecting what has become in effect a universal condition. At one point Kent says that "There is division . . . 'twixt Albany and Cornwall" (3.1.19-21), shortly afterwards describing what was once Lear's unified realm as a "scatter'd kingdom" (3.1.31). Kent's words are repeated almost verbatim by Gloucester, himself the victim of the rift between father and son, when he says that "There is division between the Dukes" (3.3.8-9). In a letter Edmund has forged to deceive Gloucester, Edgar is represented as promising his brother that if their father were put out of the way "you should enjoy half his revenue for ever" (1.2.51), and thus that the proceeds of the estate, in despite of the law of primogeniture, would be distributed in equal measure between the two sons. Ironically, Edmund himself is stigmatized as being a "Half-blooded fellow" by Albany (5.3.81), the reference being to the bastardy that allows him only partial recognition as his father's son. Lear tells Regan that if she failed to welcome him with the filial solicitude he is entitled to expect "I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb" on the suspicion of her being an adulteress (2.4.128-9) – this being, rather sadly, the sole reference to the late queen to be found in the drama. Regan and Goneril, initially complicit with one another in their determination to subdue their father to their wills – Goneril herself asserts that in this matter their minds "are one" (1.3.16) – mutate into ferocious adversaries when they both become enamoured of Edmund, their antagonism growing to the point that one will eventually murder the other before killing herself as well. Accusing the opportunistic Oswald of fo-

menting discord in order to gain his own advantage, Kent says that "Such smiling rogues as these, / Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain / Which are too intrince t'unloose" (2.2.70-2). Even the human body is not exempt from this process of division. The Fool remarks at one point that the reason "why one's nose stands i'th'middle on's face" is "to keep one's eyes of either side's nose" (1.5.19-20, 22). This is humorous enough, but later in the play, after one of Gloucester's eyes has been gouged out of its socket by Cornwall, Regan viciously complains that "One side will mock another" (3.7.69), and urges Cornwall to rectify this asymmetry by tearing out the other eye as well. Lear's gruesome suggestion that his daughter's body be dissected in order to seek out the cause of her malicious conduct – "let them anatomize Regan, see what breeds about her heart" (3.6.74-5) – partakes of the same pattern. Symbolically at least, the impetus towards division culminates in the tempest both in his mind and in the elements that Lear confronts in the third act of the play.

Not only has he divided his kingdom into two, but in more than one way Lear has divided his kingly identity as well. For a start, as Bell relevantly points out (2002: 159ff.), he has effected a divorce between those different facets of the monarch's character that Ernst H. Kantorowicz describes as the "king's two bodies" – between the "body natural", or his mortal and personal self on the one hand, and the "body politic", or his mystic identity as the embodiment of his realm on the other.[5] At the same time, and as part and parcel of the same process, in seeking to "shake all cares and business from our age" (1.1.38), while retaining his nominal status as sovereign, he has driven a wedge between his formal and effective roles, between title and function:

> Only we shall retain
> The name and all th'addition to a king; the sway,
> Revenue, execution of the rest,
> Beloved sons, be yours: which to confirm,

5 Although he does not consider *King Lear*, Kantorowicz dedicates an entire chapter to *Richard II* in his classic study of the distinction between the two bodies of the king (1997: 24-41).

> This coronet part between you.
> (1.1.134-8)

It is ironic that Lear should believe he can retain the "addition" to kingship when he is in fact subtracting from himself the power which is the only means by which kingship can be sustained. Goneril scornfully, but not for that reason inaccurately, points out the contradiction latent in his attitude when she describes Lear as an "Idle old man, / That still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away!" (1.3.17-19). That the crown he has "parted" between his sons-in-law is parted in other ways as well is something that the Fool taxes him with in his typically mocking manner:

> Fool Nuncle, give me an egg, and I'll give thee two crowns.
> Lear What two crowns shall they be?
> Fool Why, after I have cut the egg i'th'middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i'th'middle, and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt: thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away. (1.4.152-60)

And the Fool continues to harp upon the theme of division and the cloven condition it gives rise to, a doubleness which in the case of kingship, as of anything else held to have absolute and intrinsic value in itself, is tantamount to nothingness: "thou hast pared thy wit o'both sides, and left nothing i'th'middle" (1.4.183-4). Once the mystique of kingship has been subjected to the logic of numbers, it evaporates altogether. "Now thou art an O without a figure . . . thou art nothing" (1.4.189-91), says the Fool, apparently alluding to the cipher or zero that is used as a placeholder in positional number systems, and that has no value when unaccompanied by an integer.[6] Lear, like his crown, has been reduced to the status of mere

6 There are indications in some of his plays that Shakespeare had some familiarity with Robert Recorde's textbook on arithmetic entitled *The Ground of Artes*, which was published in 1543 and reprinted in a number of subsequent editions over the next century and a half. Among the items of mathematical lore to be found in Recorde's book is the information that of the ten figures employed in arithmetic, "one doth signifie nothing, which is made like an O, and is privately called a Cypher" (quoted in Blank 2006: 122). It is

cipher, a placeholder without a place, and he himself comes to define himself as the absence of his former self when he says that "This is not Lear" (1.4.223).

As the Fool several times intimates in his characteristically cryptic but always trenchant fashion, to live by numbers is to run the risk of perishing by numbers. Lear exclaims at one point that "this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere I'll weep" (2.4.282-4), and it is essentially this that happens to him. The symbol of Lear's regal status, by now purely honorific, is the hundred knights he stipulates must be allowed to attend him as he divides his time equally between the residences of Regan and Goneril, another arrangement that reflects the manner in which his existence has been fractured into two. On the pretext that his retinue is guilty of riotous conduct that offends the decorum of her palace, Goneril tells Lear that it is necessary "A little to disquantity your train" (1.4.246),[7] a threat that is carried out with ruthless dispatch when he is deprived of "fifty of my followers at a clap; / Within a fortnight!" (1.4.292-3). Lear complains to Regan that Goneril "hath abated me of half my train" (2.4.156), and to persuade her to treat him with greater consideration reminds her of the "half o'th'kingdom . . . Wherein I thee endow'd" (2.4.178-9). He is by now frankly bartering, however much he thinks he is merely pleading for justice and common decency, but at this stage in the proceedings he has been shorn of the least semblance of bargaining power. Regan tells him that when he next comes to reside at her palace he must limit himself to bringing "but five-and-twenty" (2.4.246) of his retainers, and at this point Lear, realizing that he is by now inextricably immersed in a universe of relative values in which "Those wicked creatures yet do look well favour'd / When others are more wicked" (2.4.254-5), decides to accept Goneril's marginally more advantageous terms:

I'll go with thee:

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possibly Recorde's words, or a reiteration of them in some other work, that is echoed in the devastating phrase "Signifying nothing" which concludes Macbeth's most nihilistic meditation on the meaning of life (5.5.28).

7 This is the only instance of this rather cumbersome verb to be found in Shakespeare.

> Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,
> And thou art twice her love.
> (2.4.256-8)

Lear is reduced at this point to evaluating his status in the world, and his standing in the affections of his daughters, according to the crudest criteria of quantity, but his trial by numbers is not yet over:

> GONERIL Hear me, my Lord.
> What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
> To follow in a house where twice so many
> Have a command to tend you?
> REGAN What need one?
> (2.4.258-61)

After "one" there is only that nothing which, both as a word and as a concept, tolls ominously throughout the play. As Brian Rotman remarks, "the language of arithmetic, in which his train of followers is counted down to nothing, and in which the Fool articulates the loss of Lear's kinghood as a thing reduced to zero, becomes the vehicle and image of the destruction of Lear's self" (2001: 83). It is Lear himself who has implicitly invoked an arithmetical paradigm in his dealings with others, and that very paradigm which now, in accordance with its own inexorable logic, progressively erodes his identity to what in mathematical as well as psychological terms would seem to be a point of no return.

But Lear's journey does not end here. His response to Goneril's question "What need you five-and-twenty?" is "O! reason not the need" (2.4.262), an exclamation that signals the bankruptcy of the kind of calculus he himself has brought to bear even on human relationships. To this he adds that "Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is cheap as beast's" (2.4.264-5), the word "cheap" once again recalling the market and the activity of bartering through which values are negotiated rather than simply affirmed. In the course of his ordeal on the heath he confronts what he thinks to be the living image of such radical cheapening, of man's essential nature denuded of the social and cultural appurtenances that make human life something more than merely bes-

tial, in the person of Poor Tom. "Thou art the thing itself", he says: "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (3.4.104-6). The spectator of the play recognizes the irony latent in this revelatory encounter, because Poor Tom is really Gloucester's son Edgar, who has reduced himself to such a threshold condition solely for the purposes of self-preservation, and who will subsequently go to considerable lengths to reaffirm his social identity and restore himself to his rightful place in the world. Nonetheless the symbolic significance of Lear's confrontation with what he believes to be a Bedlam beggar is unaffected by this circumstance, and that significance is a positive one. Having reached a nadir of seemingly total disintegration, the play presents unmistakable tokens that the process of division that Lear has set in motion is in some respects reversing itself. From a psychological perspective, the unity from which he has been sundered is one based on his own egotism, on his arrogant belief in his unassailable centrality in the order of things. Now, buffeted by the winds upon the heath that "make nothing" (3.1.9) of the white hair that was previously shielded by a crown, Lear becomes increasingly aware that such a belief has been a spurious one, that he has been inhabiting a fictitious vision of reality that has prevented him from attending to more humane imperatives which are in essence also his own. Even before meeting Tom Lear expresses his sympathy for the "Poor naked wretches . . . That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (3.4.28-9), adjuring himself to "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.34) in a speech that A.C. Bradley hyperbolically but very comprehensibly says is "one of those passages which make one worship Shakespeare" (1971: 237). Shortly afterwards he manifests even further his personal identification with Tom, and everything that Tom represents, when he begins to tear off those "lendings" (3.4.106-7), the garments which are among the few trappings of his former identity remaining to him,[8] that screen him from his own unaccommodated humanity.

If Lear's descent into madness, and his progressive separa-

8 For a fine discussion of how the "play's imagery of clothing . . . enforces the implication that most of the human qualities that make up personhood are things put on or taken off", see Bell 2004 (this quotation 55).

tion from the world of delusive appearances that he has mistaken for reality, has been represented figuratively in the mathematical language of *King Lear*, the transformation in his outlook which opens up the possibility of reintegration and reunification on another level is rendered in very much the same language, a point that has perhaps not sufficiently been remarked by commentators on the play. It is the return of Cordelia to Britain for the purpose of rescuing her father from the abuses of her malevolent siblings which suggests that some at least of the schisms that have developed in consequence of, or as symbolic correlatives to, Lear's perverse mode of perceiving the world are being healed. If, as was suggested earlier, there is a sense in which Cordelia has been divided into a British and a French self in the opening scene of the play, then those two selves merge when she returns to Britain with a French army in order to restore things to rights in her native country. One of the first things that Cordelia does upon arriving at Dover, significantly enough, is issue instructions that a "century" of soldiers be dispatched to search for her distracted father (4.4.6), this recalling the hundred knights, so crucial to Lear's sense of his own identity, that her sisters have so calculatingly deprived him of. In contrast to the devastating literalness of the process by which Lear's escort has been reduced by his other two daughters, this mobilization of a hundred soldiers on his behalf is an essentially symbolic gesture of restoration which indicates that the language of quantification has itself been transposed into another register altogether. This is of a piece with what occurs elsewhere in the drama as well. The Cordelia who at the beginning of the play has used a self-contradictory language of mensuration to signify her refusal to measure, to weigh the extent of her filial devotion on the same scale as that of her sisters, asks Kent upon encountering him after her return to Britain "how shall I live and work / To match thy goodness?", and then adds that "My life will be too short, / And every measure fail me" (4.7.1-3). Kent is speaking a similar language when, in response to this affirmation of virtues whose worth cannot be gauged according to any system of measurement, he says that "To be acknowledg'd, Madam, is o'erpaid" (4.7.4). He, no less than Cordelia, is an exponent of values that can neither be assessed in quantitative terms nor converted

into any currency other than their own.

The language of numbers is deployed obliquely as a symbolic notation in other ways as well. As the impetus towards unification begins, at least on the personal and interpersonal levels, to gather momentum in the play, a character identified only as a "Gentleman" observes that Lear has "one daughter, / Who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to" (4.6.202-4), the suggestion being that an almost religiously conceived "one" will ransom the world from the blight of twoness into which it has fallen.[9] Examining the play from a perspective very different from that adopted in the present discussion, but illuminating nonetheless concerns highly relevant to it, Janet Adelman argues that "two is the first number, the beginning of the counting and accounting that ends in Cordelia's giving away half her love . . . the sign of separation and division", and in connection with Goneril and Regan that "in setting their twain against Cordelia's one, the Gentleman names the play's most primary loss: the fall into division, the loss of one-ness that only the return of the one can redeem" (2008: 122-3). It is precisely the possibility of overcoming division and restoring unity in all spheres that the play continues to hold out as a distant prospect even as it precipitates fatally towards a tragic conclusion which, as Kent painfully remarks, is not the "promis'd end" that has been expected (5.3.262). After their capture by the British forces Lear assures Cordelia that "We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage" (5.3.9), that they will be united in their captivity, and although his prediction as to how their future lives will evolve proves to be mistaken this does not detract from the significance of the moment. "He that parts us", Lear tells Cordelia, "shall bring a brand from heav-

9 A number of critics have argued that the figure of Cordelia, who seems to be echoing Luke, 2: 49 when she says "O dear father! / It is thy business that I go about" (4.4.23-4), recalls that of Christ. See for instance John Reibetanz's comment that "Shakespeare has . . . prepared us for the play's final, pitiful tableau by associating Cordelia with Christ" (1977: 111), Derek Peat's reference to "the reversed Pieta after Lear enters with Cordelia in his arms" (1982: 48), and, more recently, Nuttall's observation that "the entry of Lear with Cordelia dead or near death in his arms immediately evokes . . . the Pietà of Christian iconography" (2007: 307).

en, / And fire us hence like foxes" (5.3.22-3), words which suggest – with ironic prescience given that they will both be dead within a few hours – that no merely earthly agent will henceforth be capable of dividing them. Elsewhere as well, instances of twoness give way to oneness, or vanish altogether. As early as the first scene of the drama Cordelia's honesty in the matter of expressing emotion serves to reduce the two candidates for her hand to one, Burgundy desisting from his suit when he learns that the only dowry that remains to her is her truth (1.1.107), and this establishes a pattern that intensifies as the play proceeds. If, as has often been maintained, there are respects in which Cordelia and the Fool are the virtual doubles of one another, then the disappearance of the latter when Cordelia returns to Britain might intimate that they have in some symbolic manner coalesced into one, to the point that, as Thomas B. Stroup suggests, "in death she and the Fool are united . . . at least in Lear's mind" (1961: 131).[10] Towards the end of the play, Goneril poisons Regan, and subsequently kills herself as well, thus ridding the world of a singularly unsavoury twosome. Having torn out Gloucester's eyes, Cornwall is killed by his own servant, leaving Albany as Lear's only surviving son-in-law. The two half-brothers, Edgar and Edmund, fight to the death, and not only does Edgar emerge victorious from the contest, vindicating his claim to be sole heir to their father's title and estate, but the dying Edmund attempts, as he says, to do some good despite his own nature (5.3.242-3), and thereby implicitly assimilates himself to his brother's value system.

From a more strictly political perspective, the necessity of promoting this principle of singularity over plurality, of unity over division, is affirmed in the manner in which regal authority is allocated at the conclusion of the play. All other potential contenders for the role of monarch except himself now being dead, Albany makes the wholly symbolic gesture of resigning his "absolute power" (5.3.299) to a man who is no longer capable of wielding it, to that Lear who is therefore at least formally reinstated in

10 Harold Bloom asserts in a similar vein that Lear's lament that "my poor fool is hang'd" (5.3-304), indicates that "the identities of Cordelia and the Fool blend in Albion's confusion" (1999: 499).

his role as the undisputed sovereign of his realm in the brief interval before he dies. In the immediate aftermath of the king's death, however, the spectre of division appears once again to rear its head when, instead of reclaiming the crown himself as he might be expected to do, Albany proposes to Kent and Edgar that "you twain, / Rule in this realm, and the gor'd state sustain" (5.3.318-9). However worthy the two designated co-monarchs might be in this case, such an arrangement would effectively replicate the error that Lear has committed at the beginning of the play when he tells his sons-in-law that "I do invest you jointly with my power" (1.1.129), an error that would have led to civil war had the invasion of the French army not necessitated a tactical alliance between the two parties. The threat is averted however when Kent declines Albany's proposal, anticipating his own imminent death when he says that "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go" (5.3.320), and thus leaving Edgar sole incumbent of the throne.[11] The mystique of royalty is thus vested once again in a single individual, and what Kantorowicz describes as the "body politic" of the king restored thereby to its original unity.

But the story of the king's "body natural", the personal saga of Lear the man, plays out to another conclusion than this, and also to an intimation, at least, of another kind of unification. At one point in *King Lear* the Fool delivers himself a sequence of rhymed maxims which, though somewhat rough-hewn and seemingly banal, reflect so cogently on some of the central concerns of the play that they perhaps merit more attention than they are generally accorded:

> Have more than thou showest,
> Speak less than thou knowest,
> Lend less than thou owest,
> Ride more than thou goest,
> Learn more than thou trowest,
> Set less than thou throwest,

11 Unless, as the Quarto seems to imply by assigning to him the final lines of the play, it is Albany who takes up the sceptre, which from the point of view of the mathematical symbolism of the drama amounts to the same thing.

> Leave thy drink and thy whore,
> And keep in-a-door,
> And thou shalt have more
> Than two tens to a score.
> (1.4.116-25)

These lines play insistently on the words "more" and "less" which, as has already been mentioned, reverberate throughout the tragedy. Kent's response to the Fool's set of variations on these words is to remark that "This is nothing, fool" (1.4.126), to which the Fool, once again setting off disparate domains of value against one another, rejoins that "Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer; you gave me nothing for't" (1.4.127-8). On this occasion as well, as in the ceremony with which the play opens, the logic of "more" and "less", of greater and slighter quantities, comes up against the fatal word "nothing", and once again Lear finds himself reiterating his formula "nothing can be made out of nothing" (1.4.130). But perhaps on this occasion he is wrong, and something can after all be made of the Fool's nothing. The final two couplets involve a modulation in the meaning of the word "more", one that has to do with the Fool's persistent concern, manifested at various points in the tragedy, with the "house" and all it represents.[12] The implication of the final lines of his verse would seem to be that by keeping "in-a-door", remaining securely within the confines of the home and what those confines signify in the existential life of the individual, the sterile logic of numbers that equates two tens with a score is somehow transcended. Keeping "in-a-door" is of course something that Lear, who has divided his own house in the name of numbers, and who has in consequence forfeited any stable domestic haven in which he can ground his sense of self, has con-

12 The Fool repeatedly alludes to the house throughout the play. He tells Lear that the reason why "a snail has a house" is "to put's head in; not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case" (1.5.27-30). Later he says that "court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o'door" (3.2.10-11), and shortly after that "He that has a house to put's head in has a good head-piece" (3.2.25-6). While enduring the tempest on the heath, Lear also uses the notion of "houseless poverty" (3.4.26) and "houseless heads and unfed sides" (3.4.30) to describe human beings reduced to destitution and obliged to confront the elements without protection.

spicuously failed to do. But it is also something that, in envisaging an impossible future in which he and Cordelia will live together like two birds in a cage, he perhaps learns the true value of in the final hours of his life.

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