

Whilst I was big in clamour, came there a man
Who, having seen me in my worst estate,
Shunn'd my abhorr'd society ; but then, finding
Who 'twas that so endured, with his strong arms
He fasten'd on my neck, and bellow'd out
As he'd burst heaven ; threw him on my father ;
Told the most piteous tale of Lear and him
That ever ear received ; which in recounting,
His grief grew puissant, and the strings of life
Began to crack : twice then the trumpet sounded,
And there I left him tranced.

Alb. But who was this !

Edg. Kent, sir, the banish'd Kent ; who in disguise
Follow'd his enemy King, and did him service
Improper for a slave.

Enter a Gentleman hastily, with a bloody knife.

Gent. Help, help, O, help !

Edg. What kind of help ?

Alb. Speak, man.

Edg. What means that bloody knife ?

Gent. 'Tis hot, it smokes ;

It came even from the heart of — O, she's dead !

Alb. Who dead ? speak, man.

Gent. Your lady, sir, your lady : and her sister
By her is poison'd ; she hath confess'd it.

Edm. I was contracted to them both : all three
Now marry in an instant.

Edg. Here comes Kent.

Alb. Produce their bodies, be they alive or dead : —
This judgment of the Heavens, that makes us tremble,
Touches us not with pity.

[*Exit Gentleman.*]

Enter KENT.

O, is this he ?

The time will not allow the compliment
Which very manners urges.²⁹

Kent. I am come

To bid my King and master aye good night :
Is he not here ?

Alb. Great thing of us forgot ! —

Speak, Edmund, where's the King ? and where's Cordelia ? —

[*The bodies of GON. and REG. are brought in.*]

Seest thou this object, Kent ?

Kent. Alack, why thus ?

Edm. Yet Edmund was beloved :

The one the other poison'd for my sake,
And after slew herself.

Alb. Even so. — Cover their faces.

Edm. I pant for life : some good I mean to do,
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send —
Be brief³⁰ in't — to the castle ; for my writ
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia :
Nay, send in time.

Alb. Run, run, O, run !

Edg. To whom, my lord ? — Who has the office ? send
Thy token of reprieve.

Edm. Well thought on : take my sword, give it the captain.

Alb. Haste thee, for thy life. [*Exit EDGAR.*]

Edm. He hath commission from thy wife and me
To hang Cordelia in the prison, and

²⁹ " There is no time now for the interchange of courtesies which mere good-breeding requires, to say nothing of old friendship and affection." The Poet often has *very* in the sense of *mere*. See *Hamlet*, page 192, note 14.

³⁰ *Brief* for *quick*. *Briefly* for *quickly* has occurred before.

To lay the blame upon her own despair,
That she fordid herself.³¹

Alb. The gods defend her! — Bear him hence awhile.

[EDMUND is borne off.]

*Enter LEAR, with CORDELIA dead in his arms; EDGAR,
Officer, and Others.*

Lear. Howl, howl, howl, howl! — O, you are men of
stone!

Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. — Lend me a looking-glass:
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.

Kent. Is this the promised end?

Edg. Or image of that horror?³²

Alb. Fall, and cease!³³

Lear. This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,
It is a chance that does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.

Kent. [Kneeling.] O my good master!

Lear. Pr'ythee, away.

Edg. 'Tis noble Kent, your friend.

³¹ To *fordo* signifies to *destroy*. See *Hamlet*, page 95, note 21.

³² Kent, contemplating the scene before him, and the attempt of Goneril and Regan against their father's life, recollects those passages of St. Mark in which Christ foretells to His disciples *the end of the world*, and hence his question, "Is this the end of all things, which has been foretold to us?" To which Edgar adds, "Or only a representation of that horror?"

³³ To *cease* is to *die*. Albany, looking on the pains employed by Lear to recover Cordelia, and knowing to what miseries he must survive, when he finds them to be ineffectual, cries out, "Rather fall, and cease to be at once, than continue in existence only to be wretched."

Lear. A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever! —
Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
What is't thou say'st? — Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, — an excellent thing in woman. —
I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee.

Off. 'Tis true, my lords, he did.

Lear. Did I not, fellow?

I've seen the day, with my good biting falchion
I would have made them skip: I am old now,
And these same crosses spoil me. — Who are you?
Mine eyes are none o' the best: I'll tell you straight.

Kent. If Fortune brag of two she loved and hated,
One of them ye behold.³⁴

Lear. 'Tis a dull light.³⁵ Are you not Kent?

Kent. The same,

Your servant Kent. Where is your servant Caius?

Lear. He's a good fellow, I can tell you that;
He'll strike, and quickly too. He's dead and rotten.

Kent. No, my good lord, I am the very man, —

Lear. I'll see that straight.

Kent. — That, from the first of difference and decay,
Have follow'd your sad steps, —

Lear. You're welcome hither.

³⁴ This is said, apparently, in answer to Lear's question, "Who are you?" By *two*, Kent means, of course, himself and the King; by *one*, himself. In former days, Fortune had indeed seemed to love them both; but, of late, her persecutions have been as bitter as her smiles were sweet before.

³⁵ The old King is dying; and, as often happens on the approach of death, he mistakes the sudden dimming of his eyes for a defect of light. Goethe's last words are said to have been "More light!" In fact, hardly any thing is more common than for dying people to complain that it is growing dark; and physicians will tell us there is no worse sign than such a calling for light.

Kent.—Nor no man else. All's cheerless, dark, and deadly :

Your eldest daughters have fordone themselves,
And desperately are dead.

Lear. Ay, so I think.

Alb. He knows not what he says ; and vain is it
That we present us to him.

Edg. Very bootless.

Enter an Officer.

Off. Edmund is dead, my lord.

Alb. That's but a trifle here. —

You lords and noble friends, know our intent.
What comfort to this great decay³⁶ may come
Shall be applied : for us, we will resign,
During the life of this old Majesty,
To him our absolute power. — [*To EDGAR and KENT.*] You,
to your rights ;

With boot, and such addition as your honours
Have more than merited. — All friends shall taste
The wages of their virtue, and all foes
The cup of their deservings. — O, see, see !

Lear. And my poor fool³⁷ is hang'd ! No, no, no life !
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all ? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never ! —

³⁶ "This *great decay*" is Lear. Shakespeare means the same as if he had said, "this piece of decayed royalty." Gloucester calls him in a preceding scene "ruin'd piece of nature."

³⁷ *Poor fool* was often used as a strong expression of endearment. Here the words refer, not to the Fool, as some have supposed, but to Cordelia, on whose lips the old King is still intent, and dies while he is searching there for indications of life.

'Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir. —
Do you see this ? Look on her, — look, — her lips, —
Look there, look there !³⁸ [*Dies.*]

Edg. He faints ! — My lord, my lord !

Kent. Break, heart ; I pr'ythee, break !

Edg. Look up, my lord.

Kent. Vex not his ghost : O, let him pass ! he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.

Edg. He is gone indeed.

Kent. The wonder is, he hath endured so long :
He but usurp'd his life.

Alb. Bear them from hence. — Our present business
Is general woe. — [*To KENT and EDGAR.*] Friends of my
soul, you twain

Rule in this realm, and the gored State sustain.

Kent. I have a journey, sir, shortly to go ;
My master calls me, I must not say no.

Alb. The weight of this sad time we must obey ;

³⁸ But Lear himself, the central figure of the tragedy, what of him ? What of suffering humanity that wanders from the darkness into light, and from the light into darkness ? Lear is grandly passive, — played upon by all the manifold forces of nature and society. And — though he is in part delivered from his imperious self-will, and learns at last what true love is, and that it exists in the world — Lear passes away from our sight, not in any mood of resignation, or faith, or illuminated peace, but in a piteous agony of yearning for that love which he has found only to lose for ever. Does Shakespeare mean to contrast the pleasure in a demonstration of spurious affection in the first scene, with the agonized cry for real love in the last scene ? and does he wish us to understand that the true gain from the bitter discipline of Lear's old age was precisely this, — his acquiring a supreme need of what is best, though a need which finds, so far as we can learn, no satisfaction ? — We guess at the spiritual significance of the great tragic facts of the world, but, after our guessing, their mysteriousness remains. — DOWDEN.

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most : we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.

[*Exeunt, with a dead march.*]

CRITICAL NOTES ON KING LEAR.

ACT I., SCENE I.

Page 59.

Now, our joy,

Although our last, not least ; to whose young love

The vines of France and milk of Burgundy

Strive to be interest'd ; &c. — So the folio, except that it

has "Although our last *and* least." White prefers this reading, on the ground that Cordelia was literally the smallest of the three daughters ; "that she was her father's little pet, while her sisters were big, bold, brazen beauties." He makes a good argument to the point, so that I find it not easy to choose ; but the phrase "though last, not least" appears to have been something of a favourite with the Poet. The quartos give the passage thus : —

Although *the* last, *not* least in our deere love,
What can you say to *win* a third, more opulent
Than your sisters?

P. 60. For, by the sacred radiance of the Sun,

The mysteries of Hecate and the night ; &c. — So the second folio. Instead of *mysteries*, the quartos have *mistresse* ; the first folio, *miseries*.

P. 61. Peace, Kent !

Come not between the dragon and his wrath :

I loved her most, and thought to set my rest

On her kind nursery : hence, and avoid my sight. — It is somewhat in question whether the words "hence, and avoid my sight!"