

Ronald Huebert

The Paganism of *King Lear*

The setting of *King Lear* is the pagan Celtic world of ancient Britain. Holinshed has Leir assume power "in the yeare of the world 3105", more than a century before the founding of Rome and almost nine hundred years before the birth of Christ.¹ To a remarkable degree, the imaginative world of Shakespeare's play is a hypothetical reconstruction of the dark antiquity which Holinshed's account suggests. There are no cities, no clergymen, and no middle classes in the landscape of *King Lear*; "unaccommodated man" lives instead in a world of cliffs, meadows, warriors, and fortresses. In this world the goddess Nature is a primary force in human affairs; indeed, the storm scenes draw the elements and man into an intimate embrace that civilization seldom permits. The very texture and tone of the play depend, in part, on a primitive and pagan setting.

Against such a background it is surprising and even disconcerting to find that Christian assumptions dominate much of the critical writing about this technically pagan play. G. Wilson Knight must bear a large responsibility for the modern critical habit of discerning hidden Christian symbols beneath the surface of paganism. Despite his sensitivity to the primitive atmosphere of the play, Knight interprets Lear's spiritual crisis as a transition from belief in magic to faith in God. The gods with classical names and attributes are merely "figments of the human mind", Knight observes; the "purgatorial" experience of suffering leads man beyond these subjective deities and "into his destined inheritance of human nature and supreme love".² Cordelia of course is the figure who represents "supreme love" in ideal and spiritual form; her symbolic function is to redeem the world of the play from madness, cruelty, and absurdity.

The implicitly Christian principles of Knight's interpretation become glaringly militant doctrines in the hands of less cautious or less

perceptive critics. Oscar James Campbell attributes "the redemption of Lear" to his discovery of "the healing power of Christian love". Again Cordelia is the agent of salvation, for she alone is prepared to accompany Lear "through death up to the throne of the Everlasting Judge".³ John F. Danby locates Lear's conversion in the speech he addresses to those "Poor naked wretches" who must endure the storm without physical shelter or moral protection. For Danby, this speech is a prayer which expresses "the sentiment of Christian 'communism'", and the play as a whole is "at least as Christian as the *Divine Comedy*".⁴ Critics who adopt a Christian approach to *King Lear* may acknowledge the pagan background, of course, while insisting that Jacobean spectators would of necessity judge the play from a Christian point of view. "The antiquity of setting may have had the irrelevant effect of releasing certain inhibitions in the playwright's mind", J. Stampfer admits, "but the playgoers in Shakespeare's audience did not put on pagan minds to see the play."⁵

There have been dissenting critical voices.⁶ The most awesome of these is William R. Elton's massively documented "minority report", which concludes that *King Lear*, "despite its Christian allusions, is intentionally more directly a syncretically pagan tragedy."⁷ A Jacobean spectator might retain his Christian mind, Elton would argue, but the characters he watches on stage may nevertheless be decidedly pagan. Starting from this assumption, Elton plunders the huge reservoir of Elizabethan and Jacobean religious writings, in order to discover what Shakespeare's contemporaries might have thought about the heathen characters in the play. The results of this procedure are fourfold. Some of the virtuous heathen characters, like Cordelia and Edgar, are eligible for salvation even though they live before the time of the New Covenant. A second group — consisting of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund — must be damned as pagan atheists. Gloucester occupies a third position; his belief in astrology identifies him as a superstitious heathen. Lear himself is the most interesting case, for he develops through an ironic progression from a firm belief in pagan polytheism to ultimate skepticism about the metaphysical meaning of life. Occasionally a character's actions and attitudes can be glossed by referring to a particular pagan doctrine; Kent's resolution and fortitude, for example, identify him as the representative of Renaissance Neo-Stoicism (p. 291).

Elton's book is a characteristic specimen of the horses of scholarship forging ahead unchecked by the bridle of criticism. The nature of the scholarly materials which Elton selects in itself guarantees that

paganism will not get a fair hearing. He draws his definitions of paganism largely from those Renaissance polemical or didactic writings which set out to condemn heathenism and all its works.⁸ To the partisan engaged in a war against atheism, one brand of paganism will of course be much like any other. Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Saxon beliefs are equally unregenerate, equally heathen. The vague and unlocalized notion of paganism which Elton extracts from his theological sources is given the shelter of a convenient scholarly rubric: the "syncretic Renaissance climate" allows all forms of paganism to flourish simultaneously (p. 174).

I do not wish to linger over the specific errors of fact, of logic, or of interpretation which follow from Elton's approach to the question of paganism. One example must suffice. On the subject of the afterlife controversy, Elton cites Bishop Jewel and a number of comparable Christian apologists to order to establish that, in the Elizabethan view, heathen characters would not believe in life after death. "In sum," Elton concludes, "Lear as a pre-Christian pagan could only with difficulty have believed in a type of Christian corporeal life after death in eternity" (p. 260). This conclusion is either a tautology or a misrepresentation of the truth. It is of course true that Lear could not have believed in a Christian heaven, but Christian polemical treatises do not furnish a reliable guide to the metaphysical dimensions of Celtic paganism. The accounts of Celtic society and religion available in Shakespeare's day, or for that matter the accounts available today, unanimously stress the otherworld beliefs of Celtic philosophy. The Celts were fearless in battle, one may read in numerous authors from Caesar onwards, at least partly because their warriors believed in the doctrine of continuing "life beyond the grave".⁹ Indeed Lear lives in a pagan universe, but not I believe in the world of paper paganism that emerges from Elizabethan biblical commentary or Jacobean refutations of atheism.

In the argument that follows I will isolate for special attention the principal Celtic landmarks of the *King Lear* universe. This approach, like any other, is necessarily partial and by no means exclusive; in stressing the pagan environment of the play I do not wish to deny the ecumenical breadth of Shakespeare's mind or the diversity of his intellectual heritage. The language of the play does include Christian resonances, but these are muted by comparison with parallel instances in *Doctor Faustus*, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, or *The Atheist's Tragedy*. The theme of endurance does allude to the doctrines of

Neo-Stoicism, though in a less pointed way than in plays such as *Bussy d'Ambois*, *Sejanus*, and *The Broken Heart*. Christian and Neo-Stoic principles influence the shape of *King Lear* only in so far as they pervade the religious and philosophical environment of the English Renaissance; by contrast, pagan Celtic beliefs, customs, and attitudes are particular and local materials in the texture of the play itself. Celtic paganism, in short, is a limited but crucial factor in the expansive design of *King Lear*.

Shakespeare's technique in constructing the world of *King Lear* differs remarkably from his relatively simple solution to the problem in *Hamlet*. Claudius clearly prays to a Christian God, Hamlet's father is confined by day to an orthodox purgatory, and Horatio seems adequately versed in the properties and functions of angels. For the corresponding characters in Saxo Grammaticus (Feng, Horwendil, and Amleth's nameless companion) none of these Christian refinements would have been possible.¹⁰ But in *Hamlet* the Old Norse origins of the legend did not prevent Shakespeare from transposing the story into a contemporary and Christian idiom. In the case of *King Lear*, Shakespeare inherited a legend in which the pagan setting had already been compromised or discarded in favour of explicitly Christian terms of reference. The commentator who glossed one version of the story in the *Gesta Romanorum* had worked out a system worthy of G. Wilson Knight. "This Emperour," he remarks, "may be callid ech worldly man, the which hath thre doughters." These daughters correspond respectively to the "worlde", which inevitably disappoints those who love it; to the family and "kyn", who eventually forsake man in his time of greatest need; and to "our lord god", who is always willing to extend mercy to the humble.¹¹ *The True Chronicle Histoire of King Leir* continues the Christian emphasis. The Leir of the *Chronicle Historie* is almost too willing to exercise the Christian virtue of patience in adversity. His daughter Cordella resolves to be more punctual in her devotions so that she may gain the blessing of her "Saviour". The play as a whole bears out the advice Leir gives to Perillus when the king and his loyal servant are threatened by would-be murderers. "Even pray to God", Leir counsels, "to blesse us from their hands: / For fervent prayer much ill hap withstands."¹² Shakespeare conspicuously chose *not* to retain the modern European atmosphere and the ready-made Christian morality that accompanied the legend of King Lear.¹³ He abandoned the ethnocentric technique by which Danish pagans could become Elizabethan Christians in *Hamlet*. He respected the pagan setting of

King Lear in much the same way that he respected the classical worlds of *Coriolanus* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Anachronisms do occur of course, both in the Roman plays and in *Lear*, but these accidental features indicate only that for Shakespeare a pagan environment is imaginative rather than historical.

If but little Latin and less Greek were sufficient for a dramatist who required information about Roman philosophy and Republican government, then presumably the same dramatist might also have explored contemporary accounts of pagan Celtic society and its religious traditions. William Camden's *Britannia*, first published in 1586 though not available in English translation until 1610, would have been the natural source for information about Celtic religious beliefs and practices. According to Camden, both the continental Gauls and the British Celtic people worshipped a god who corresponds to the classical Jupiter. To the Gauls he was known "under the name of *Taranis*", and since "*Taran* with the Britains betokeneth *Thunder*" it is reasonable to suppose that the Celtic deity would have been known by the same name.¹⁴ Indeed, modern archeological findings bear out Camden's conjecture. There is evidence for the cult of a composite god *Jupiter Taranis* in the neighbourhood of Chester, and at least presumptive evidence to suggest that *Taranis* might have been widely known in the British Isles.¹⁵ For the Gauls and Celts alike *Taranis* was above all a military god, so his primary function would be to assist man in wreaking vengeance on his enemies. John Fletcher's *Bonduca*, another Jacobean play with a Celtic setting, provides interesting corroborative evidence for the importance of *Taranis* in the military affairs of the Celts. The British amazon queen *Bonduca* is determined to defend her country against the Roman invading force, led by *Suetonius*. She addresses her native gods as "Revengeurs" and asks for "claps of thunder" to assist the British warriors. *Nennius*, a commander in the British army, cries out for help to the "great *Tiranes*", god of "dreadful thunder" (III.i).¹⁶ The metaphysical significance of thunder in *King Lear*, then, may be due in part to its apparent origin. Thunder, in a Celtic world, is not the voice of the classical *Jupiter Tonans*, but the angrier cry of a revenging *Jupiter Taranis*.

"Most certaine it is", Camden continues, "that the Gaules worshipped *Mercurie* under the name of *Teutates*, as the Inventor of Arts, and guide of their journeys"¹⁷ This time the Celtic parallel is less apparent, though Camden does insist that the British also maintained the cult of

this pagan god. Caesar's observations about the Celts certainly support the identification of a Mercury figure among their deities. "Of the gods they most of all worship Mercury," Caesar writes. "He has the largest number of images, and they regard him as the inventor of all the arts, as their guide on the roads and in travel, and as chiefly influential in making money and in trade."¹⁸ In view of Mercury's fertility associations, in view of his close connections with such pastoral gods as Faunus and Silvanus, it is extremely probable that Caesar's Celtic Mercury figure is in fact *Cernunnos*, the horned god, also known as the "stag-god". Though worshipped under many different names and for many different attributes throughout the Celtic world, the horned god was primarily associated with "fecundity, human and animal". He could take the form of a phallic deity, and frequently presided over flocks, herds, and woodlands.¹⁹ Clearly less militant in character than the revenging Taranis, the horned god brings into focus those elements of Celtic belief represented by the "kind gods" of *King Lear*.

The Celtic supernatural does not consist of gods alone. Anyone familiar with *The Mabinogion* will recall the bewildering profusion of intermediate supernatural beings, ranging from wild boars and sacred birds to forbidden maidens and evil enchanters. Such folk elements of Celtic belief have of course persisted far more tenaciously than the gods themselves, perhaps because the gods sacrificed divinity in order to become human incarnations in the Arthurian legends. Folk tales and ballads kept alive many of the Celtic superstitions at least until Shakespeare's day. Camden mentions one particular folk motif, the belief in "the foule Spirits named *Incubi*", also known by the Gaulish name of "*Dussi*".²⁰ The pervasive Celtic belief in threatening evil spirits may be another clue to understanding the metaphysical structure of *King Lear*, for the incubi in Camden would apparently correspond to Shakespeare's foul fiends.

Camden's scholarly treatise on ancient Britain is by no means the only source of information from which Shakespeare might have gathered Celtic materials. William Harrison's *An Historical Description of the Iland of Britaine* contains much of the same material in more popular form. Since the *Description* was published as a prefatory section to Holinshed's *Chronicles*, it is difficult to see how Shakespeare could have escaped its influence. The first Celtic settlers, Harrison claims, believed in a fairly unobjectionable form of monotheism. Samothès, the first human inhabitant of Britain, was reputedly a grandson of Noah, so he

was able to bring with him some "true knowledge and forme of religion". But after the conquest of the British Isles by Brute, the lineal ancestor of King Lear, a serious degeneration set in. The Celts became polytheists, Harrison claims, and he mentions again the Roman names for Celtic gods as they appear in Caesar and Camden. In addition to elevating Samothres himself to the rank of a god, Harrison points out that the Celts also began to worship "*Jupiter, Mars, Minerva, Mercurie, Apollo, Diana; and finallie Hercules.*"²¹ Like Harrison, Shakespeare must have been perfectly aware that the arbitrary Roman names did not alter the Celtic attributes of the gods. They were named and classified by foreign tourists like Caesar and Tacitus, but no imperial power could divest them of their national British character.²²

"*Shakespeare makes his Lear too much a mythologist.*"²³ Samuel Johnson declares in his usual authoritative way, and I am aware that the following account of the metaphysical structure of the play may meet similar and more strenuous objections. However, in view of the Celtic background which Camden and Harrison help to supply, I believe that Shakespeare proves himself a more sophisticated mythologist than Johnson could have suspected. The three major divisions of supernatural powers in *King Lear* in fact conform to the three layers of the Celtic spirit world. The "revenging gods" (II.i.45)²⁴ speak to mankind with the voice of thunder, and correspond to Taranis, the native god of war. The "kind gods" (II.vii.34) are more domestic in character; like the traditional horned god, they are chiefly concerned with natural processes and fertility. Edgar's "foul fiend" (III.iv.50) is the leader of a rabble of evil spirits, who resemble the incubi or threatening fairies of Celtic tradition.

The primary function of the revenging gods in *King Lear* is to measure out justice in human affairs. During the storm scene Lear calls upon the god of thunder (Jupiter or Taranis) because he has become painfully aware of human injustice. "And thou, all-shaking thunder," he says in one of his many invocations, "Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world" (III.ii.6-7). Lear has felt the sharp sting of a monster or serpent which he identifies as filial ingratitude, so it is natural that his cry for vengeance should be directed against those forces which make "ingrateful man" (III.ii.9). And since the god of thunder and his retinue are traditionally associated with warfare, the objects of divine wrath are visualized as military opponents:

Let the great gods,
That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads
Find our their enemies now. (III.ii.49-51)

Alone on the heath, alienated from everyone but Kent and the Fool, stripped of both the "sway" and "all th' addition to a king" (I.i.136), Lear develops an acute sense of social justice. Now is the time, he tells his gods, to take revenge on all the enemies of mankind who dress themselves in robes of seeming virtue. Still, he is unwilling to admit that the thunder may speak directly to him. When he describes himself as "a man / More sinned against than sinning" (III.ii.59-60), he is claiming exemption from the wrath and terror which he is willing and anxious to call down on others.

Lear's attitude toward the revenging gods carries both social and psychological meaning. In a society frequently divided by internal conflict it is tempting to assume that "my enemies" are also the enemies of the gods. Curiously, Lear tries his best to avoid all reference of the revenging gods when he curses his daughters, for even these detested and disloyal vermin still belong to him. He curses Cordelia by invoking the sun and Hecate, but without the thundering wrath of his later moral explosions. He curses Goneril by calling on the goddess Nature, but again avoids naming the gods of justice. "I do not bid the thunder-bearer shoot," he explains to Goneril, "Nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove" (II.iv.222-23). The angry justice of the revenging gods is too terrible to bring down on one's own children, no matter how unfaithful those children have been. What Lear says to Goneril is not quite the truth, of course, for a moment before in Regan's presence he began to call upon the "nimble lightnings" to blast Goneril (II.iv.160). He began his curse, but Regan interrupted it in shocked amazement: "So will you wish on me when the rash mood is on" (II.iv.164). Despite her pragmatic outlook, Regan retains fearful respect for the divinities of thunder and destruction. And indeed there is ample cause for Regan's terrified response; Lear will revoke the bonds of kinship under the pressure of the storm and the Fool's savage but realistic reminders. Following the Fool's example, he will stage a mock trial in the hopeless attempt to exact justice from his unnatural daughters.

A man so accustomed to authority as King Lear will hardly imagine that the justicers may point their threatening darts not only at his family but at himself. The very people who convinced the king of his own wisdom before his beard turned grey have also lured him into a belief in his own immunity to the revenging gods. This armour of emotional protection will begin to erode when Lear discovers that he is "not ague-proof" (IV.vi.103); it will dissolve entirely when he awakens from

his dream of madness only to imagine himself "bound / Upon a wheel of fire" (IV.vii.46-47). The revenging gods have at last struck down the very man who thought he could defy the thunder.

Edmund's wry skepticism allows him to use the gods for his own purposes. He tells Gloucester a cock-and-bull story about Edgar's vicious intentions, and pretends to believe in the gods of justice merely to make his fabrication more convincing. "I told him", Edmund says with ironic gravity, "the revenging gods / 'Gainst parricides did all the thunder bend" (II.i.45-46). Clearly Edmund has no more faith in these justicers than in Ursa Major, for if he did he would stand condemned by his own beliefs. Perhaps this is what Edgar means when he accuses Edmund of being "a traitor, / False to thy gods" (V.iii.134-34). Yet, there is something quite attractive about Edmund's ironic and skeptical stance. The characters who passionately believe in the power of the revenging gods are tempted, at times, to interpret any act of cruelty as a sign of divine justice. Edgar justifies the ways of the gods to men with an argument that borders on sadism:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
 Make instruments to plague us.
 The dark and vicious place where thee he got
 Cost him his eyes. (V.iii.171-74)

If this is a fair indication of how the revenging gods operate, then Gloucester's description of man's position in the cosmic scheme is more accurate than Edgar will admit. "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods," Gloucester laments in a moment of dark despair; "They kill us for their sport" (IV.i.36-37). From a purely human perspective, the gods of thunder appear to act out cruelty beyond all justification. So long as they act against one's enemies, the justicers may drink their fill of "horrible pleasure" (III.ii.19). But as soon as man sees himself as the object of divine wrath, the "dreadful summoners" become unbearably savage and perverse (III.ii.59). So savage and so perverse, in fact, that Gloucester's blasphemy and Edmund's skepticism become tolerable human defences against weapons of unknowable destructive power.

Just as thunder is the defining symbol of the revenging gods, so natural growth and ripeness in the vegetable world become the visible signs which identify the "kind gods" of the *Lear* universe (IV.vii.14). These gods make their most striking appearance through the figure of the "dear goddess" whom Lear calls simply "Nature" (I.iv.266). Lear curses Goneril by asking the kind goddess to suspend her kindness:

Into her womb convey sterility,
Dry up in her the organs of increase. (I.iv.269-70)

The normal function of this goddess is to preside over human reproduction and childbirth. Thus she corresponds to the standard Celtic goddess type, whose most "fundamental concerns" are with "sexuality and maternity".²⁵ The "dear goddess" of Lear's curse is the female counterpart of the horned god, and indeed she may appear in iconography as the consort of the god. Her normal intention, which Lear's curse so brutally interrupts, would be "To make this creature fruitful" (I.iv.268). Centuries of abuse have robbed the word "fruitful" of its metaphorical freshness, but not of its archetypal significance. The modern ear requires the stimulation of Edgar's statement, "Ripeness is all" (V.iii.11), to regenerate the metaphor. The kind gods teach man to accept the natural cycle of birth, copulation, and death by comparing his life to the seasonal structure of the plant world.

Edmund's devotion to the goddess Nature is just as ironic as his reference to the revenging gods. He ridicules the lackadaisical lovemaking which produced his legitimate brother, and implies that the "lusty stealth of nature" gives him a greater right by far to claim the goddess as his own (I.ii.1-22). But Edmund's actions relentlessly undercut the profession he makes. Both Goneril and Regan find him sexually attractive, and he pretends to return the compliment; however, in Edmund's private musings about the rival claims of the two sisters there is not the slightest hint of anything so natural as lust. "Which one shall I take?" he asks; "Both? One? Or neither?" (V.i.57-58). For a skeptic like Edmund, the motives which make these women cling to him seem rather foolish. He discusses the problem in cold-blooded pragmatic terms. So alienated from the kind gods is Edmund that he is indifferently ready to take either Goneril or Regan, depending on the outcome of the battle. With only a slight change in emphasis, Edmund could borrow Master Ford's ironic proverb from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: "Money buys lands, and wives are sold by fate" (V.v.219). Edmund, in short, lives in a world where intellect has all but smothered instinct.

Edgar and Cordelia, the good children of the play, are much more responsive to the kind gods than any other characters. Perhaps this is what led Nahum Tate to discover such a natural affinity between the two that he mated them in a love-embrace.²⁶ For Edgar the gods of nature are also "the clearest gods". They participate in human life if man is

willing to accept the rhythms of nature; they turn human "impossibilities" into divine "honors" (IV.vi.72-73). Thus Edgar can assure his father that the kind gods have preserved him from the disgrace of suicide, and that they will take his life away when the time is ripe. And of course with Gloucester's physical blindness comes a spiritual insight that allows him to accept Edgar's interpretation of death: ²⁷

You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again
To die before you please. (IV.vi.213-15)

No longer is Gloucester worried about the savagery of the thundering gods, for he has come into contact with another plane of supernatural reality. He places himself inside the seasonal rhythm of human life as defined by the gods who govern the cycle of fruitfulness and ripeness, birth and death.

Cordelia's "kind gods" are concerned not with death but with rebirth. She returns from France to find her father in the spiritual death of madness. At once she appeals to the spirits of nature for assistance:

All blessed secrets,
All you unpublished virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears; be aidant and remediate
In the good man's distress. (IV.iv.15-18)

Cordelia's counsellor in this scene is the soft-spoken doctor, who in a primitive and pagan environment has a function more priestly than medicinal. He wisely prescribes "repose", calling this remedy the "foster nurse of nature" and implying that Nature herself is the real nurse (IV.iv.12). The kind gods have become the source of healing for the troubled soul of man. Deprived of his kingdom and bereft of his children, Lear withdraws into the isolation of madness; only by submitting to the gods of nature can he be restored to his "own kingdom" (IV.vii.76) and to his proper self.

No clear moral boundary separates the revenging gods from the kind gods. ²⁸ The two groups have different spheres of activity, but within these separate spheres they may either promote or thwart man's wishes and purposes. Quite to the contrary, the third group of supernatural beings in the *Lear* universe are consistently sinister in character. These are the foul fiends. Lear himself defines the moral quality of this third supernatural level when in an outburst of sexual nausea he remarks on the dual nature of women:

But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
Beneath is all the fiend's. (IV.vi.125-26)

Of course these are lines of invective, motivated by Lear's own acute sense of betrayal. But in the attempt to describe the most poisonous and destructive forces within womankind, Lear falls back on the belief that evil spirits possess the human being. "There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit," he continues (IV.vi.127-28). Albany, who shares some of Lear's reasons for disillusionment, shares also his belief in fiendish spirits. When he discovers that Goneril is capable of unlimited cruelty, he first compares her to a devil, and then suggests that only her "woman's shape" distinguishes her from a true "fiend" (IV.ii.60, 66-67). Unlike the gods then, who may act in a confusing of ambiguous manner, the fiends of the play are uniformly dark, threatening, and evil.

In his Poor Tom persona, Edgar introduces Lear to his amazing gallery of fiendish companions, ranging from Modo and Mahu to Smulkin and Flibbertigibbet (III.iv.108, 132-35). The names are slightly scrambled versions of the titles assumed by the fake demons in Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*.²⁹ Once again Shakespeare has gone out of his way to avoid the Christian expectations that such traditional devils as Beelzabub or Lucifer would invariably have aroused. Instead he selects from a list of what Harsnett himself describes as "uncouth non-significant names" for imaginary spirits of evil. These he combines with a cluster of witchcraft associations, such as Poor Tom's evocative murmur, "Purr, the cat is gray" (III.vi.45). When Edgar describes one of the fiends in detail to his blind father, the result is a surrealistic vision of a creature with spiralling horns, a thousand noses, and moon-shaped eyes (IV.vi.68-72). These fiends are more real than any theological abstractions invented to describe them, for they populate the important nether regions of a vital and primitive supernatural imagination.

As we should by now expect, Edmund shows nothing but contempt for the love of witchcraft and evil spirits. Because he is skeptical, he can exploit even this obscure layer of belief for his own pragmatic ends. He tells Gloucester that he accosted Edgar in darkness and overheard him "Mumbling of wicked charms" (II.i.39). This is just the sort of realistic detail that will appeal to his father's vulnerable imagination; as always, Edmund is quick to capitalize.

But if Poor Tom's fiends are nothing but "excellent foppery" from Edmund's point of view, to Lear they become powerful motivating forces in a world that he cannot explain without them. In the crucial scenes on the heath, Lear begs for a solution to the fundamental riddle of tragedy — the problem of evil. "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" he asks in one of his many attempts to formulate the question (III.vi.75-76). Kent replies, as always, with the voice of truth. Face reality as it is, he seems to say, and it will become bearable. Just as predictably the Fool speaks with the voice of reason, though reason (like truth) has gone underground and can assume only a disguised shape. By behaving irrationally, the Fool says, kings become beggars and wise men fools. But Lear is satisfied with neither of these explanations. Facing reality does not make it bearable, and reasonable behaviour is not in itself humane behaviour. The true philosopher is Poor Tom: he is familiar with the "act of darkness" (III.iv.83), he understands the misery of human suffering, he knows the cause of evil. For Lear, the ill-defined spirits of Edgar's imagination are far more real than Kent's truth or the Fool's wisdom. The cause of hard hearts lies not in nature at all, but in the supernatural world of the foul fiends.

If the metaphysical universe of *King Lear* is, as I have argued, an imaginative reconstruction of pagan Celtic beliefs, then it is only fair to confront an apparently glaring omission. Why, a skeptic might enquire, is there not so much as a single reference to the famous Druids in Shakespeare's play?

The answer to this objection is twofold. First, if Shakespeare trusted Harrison's summary of Celtic religion, he would have supposed that the Druids belong to an earlier stage of Celtic civilization than Lear and his contemporaries. Harrison describes three segregated Celtic dispensations, instigated respectively by Samothēs, Druiyus, and Brute.³⁰ The priesthood of the Druids properly belongs to the second of these three phases, so by the time of Lear it might well have been obsolete. Of the Druidic practices which Harrison enumerates, two are of special significance: astrological observation and human sacrifice. Both of these practices are mentioned of course in *King Lear*. Gloucester's attempt to interpret the eclipses and the planets yields only vague and general results — precisely the kind of results that still grace astrological forecasts. To say that the constellations "portend no good to us" (I.ii.102) is a fairly accurate prediction under almost any circumstances. "There needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this."

Gloucester, in short, retains a vestigial respect for old-fashioned superstitions that are no longer functional for the other characters in the play. Similarly, the ritual of child sacrifice has no place in the Celtic society of King Lear's day. Lear can dismiss those who continue this outrageous practice with a disdainful comparison to the "barbarous Scythian" (I.i.116). In the Celtic world after the conquest of Brute, the distinctive teachings of the Druids live on only as echoes of a barbaric past.

Even if Shakespeare had ignored such chronological refinements, it is unlikely that dramatic presentation of stage Druids would have contributed positively to the atmosphere of the play. Fletcher's technique in *Bonduca* illustrates by contrast some of the pitfalls that Shakespeare avoided. Having been informed (perhaps from his classical reading) that the Celts were headhunters,³¹ Fletcher provides for a battle scene in which his British chieftain enters "with a head" (IV.i, p. 130). The same instinct for the spectacular prompts him to prescribe a procession of singing Druids who have no spoken lines and little organic relation to the action of the play.³² Shakespeare had no delicate scruples about spectacular theatrical effects, but in a play like *Lear* these are always dramatically and thematically justified. Perhaps the absence of Druids from the canvas of *King Lear* is yet another demonstration that Shakespeare's judgement is equal to his genius.³³

The paganism of *King Lear* is not confined to the religious patterns of the play. Less noticeable but equally important are the ethnic attitudes and conventions which often prescribe characteristically pagan behaviour. In a discussion of the manners of the Celtic people, Camden places special emphasis on the strong family ties which bind relatives into close-knit groups.³⁴ *King Lear* certainly develops this theme, with particular focus on the "bond" which unites parent and child. All writers on Celtic ethnography agree in stressing the reckless valour of the Celts in battle: among classical authorities, Strabo describes the Celts as "madly fond of war", and Athenaeus remarks laconically that "the Celts sometimes engage in single combat at dinner."³⁵ Within such a cultural context the duel between Edgar and Edmund takes on special resonance. Edmund is not acting out the code of chivalry, but responding rather to his native thirst for violent confrontation. Following Caesar's account, Camden records that Celtic noblemen were required by tradition to retain a "traine of servants and dependants, whom they called *Ambacti*". The size of this entourage would indicate the status of their

leader; indeed, the band of retainers "*was the onely grace, countenance, and port they carried.*"³⁶ In Shakespeare's play, the cruel reduction of Lear's train, then, robs him also of the principal symbol of authority. Goneril is wrong. The hundred knights are necessary if only to defend Lear's sense of his own value, rank, and status within Celtic society.

The social role of women is an area of Celtic ethnography with special importance for the world of *King Lear*. According to classical tradition, the Celtic women "are not only equal to their husbands in stature, but they rival them in strength as well."³⁷ Camden, with an appropriate citation from Tacitus, remarks that the "Britans" select their rulers without regard to sex, and even "*make warre under the conduct of women.*"³⁸ Fletcher's *Bonduca* illustrates the political and military prestige that a woman is able to earn in Celtic society through sheer heroic leadership. The women of pagan Britain, it would appear, have very little in common with the passive, idealized maidens of later Arthurian romance. And indeed in *King Lear* the aggressive woman is the rule rather than the exception. In the blinding of Gloucester episode, Regan proves that she is the woman of action. She initiates the crescendo of violence by plucking Gloucester's beard. When the loyal servant takes his stand against Cornwall's cruelty, Regan solves the problem with instinctive physical force: she simply snatches the nearest available sword and impales the "peasant" (III.viii.80). Goneril is just as capable of managing crises. When Gloucester is discovered to be disloyally true to Lear, Goneril at once suggests the plan of retaliation: Regan's "Hang him instantly" is discarded in favour of Goneril's "Pluck out his eyes" (III.vii.5). At the first hint of military trouble, it is Goneril who gives "the distaff" to her passive husband and begins to issue commands for mobilization with the calm and confidence of a born general (IV.ii.17-19). Even Cordelia takes on the commander's role with no more than a hasty apology about her husband's busy affairs in France.

These aggressive female talents are equally apparent in the theatre of sexual warfare. Goneril is clearly disappointed with her husband's lethargic sexual performance, but she wastes no time in middle-class laments or pathetic self-scrutiny. She simply formulates a plan of action designed to bring Edmund to "the forfended place" (V.i.11). Quite correctly she surmises that Regan will contrive a similar plot. When Goneril's plan is publicly exposed, she responds with a blatantly shameless appeal to her own strength. "Say if I do," she challenges Albany, "the laws are mine, not thine" (V.iii.159). *King Lear* alone

among the major tragedies is completely barren of sexual love. Goneril and Regan would agree with Lear's decision to "Let copulation thrive" (IV.i.113); the concept of love, however, would escape them entirely. The relationship between France and Cordelia is the only hint of genuine sexual love in the play, and it is ruthlessly understated. Like truth (in the person of Kent), love must be banished from the *Lear* universe as soon as it has been declared. It is significant, I believe, that literacy and archeological research have discovered "no trace of a Celtic goddess of love".³⁹ Sexuality, fertility, maternity, and even virginity can be attributed to the Celtic goddesses, but never love. Surely in this sense the ancient Celtic world is "cheerless, dark, and deadly" (V.iii.291). The gloom of a world without love between man and woman is a frightening shadow in Shakespeare's imaginative landscape.

Ethnic practice and metaphysical belief are never entirely separate departments, particularly in relatively primitive societies. There is one notable feature of Celtic tradition which brings the two spheres together in a way that bears directly on the world of *King Lear*. Predictably, it is the spectre of death that accomplishes this important purpose. Caesar's description of the Celtic attitude toward death deserves quotation, because it forms the basis of most subsequent accounts. "They are chiefly anxious to have men believe the following," he writes: "that souls do not suffer death, but after death pass from one body to another; and they regard this as the strongest incentive to valour, since the fear of death is disregarded."⁴⁰ With only minor alterations, this principle is repeated or quoted by the major Elizabethan purveyors of Celtic lore: Camden, Harrison, and Drayton.⁴¹

Now, according to Celtic tradition, if a human soul passes through death to a happy afterlife, it may take the form of a beautiful bird rapturously engaged in song. In *The Mabinogion*, for example, singing birds appear repeatedly as otherworld symbols. After the deaths of the three principal characters in the Branwen legend, the mourners are allowed a glimpse of the world beyond the grave: "even as they began to eat and drink there came three birds and began to sing them a certain song, and of all the songs they had ever heard each one was unlovely compared with that. And far must they look to see them out over the deep, yet was it as clear to them as if they were close by them; and at that feasting they were seven years."⁴² The normal laws of space and time have been suspended here in order to allow man a preview of pagan paradise. Even when the symbolic connections between birds and the

afterlife are not so clearly drawn, birds will still tend to function as representatives of the divine realm or as messengers from the Celtic gods.⁴³

Against this background Lear's famous lines of comfort to his faithful daughter gain special richness. The military venture has failed, and the king has at last been captured. He faces certain death. "Come, let's away to prison," he says to Cordelia:

We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage.
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
 And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too—
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out—
 And take upon's the mystery of things
 As if we were [gods'] spies. (V.ii.8-17)⁴⁴

Lear admits that he and Cordelia have been deprived of everything that life on this earth has to offer. In a sense, he argues, life in prison with Cordelia will belong more properly to the afterlife than to real life. They will share mysterious truths of the kind denied to mere morals; they will occupy the intermediate level of "spies" or divine messengers; their souls will assume the shape and sound of otherworld birds. In short, even such a tentative affirmation of belief — still reverberating perhaps with echoes of Lear's madness — even tentative belief is enough to help man face death with indomitable courage.

The Christian spectator will not share the symbols of Lear's dream, at least not in his conscious theological mind. By the same token, the objective observer will not see Cordelia's breath move the feather. And even a sympathetic listener will say that so much misery is too great a price to pay for so little hope. But Lear has enough of the pagan Celtic spirit to frustrate such ready responses. Although the world of the play is both dark and unredeemed, although the death of Cordelia is both avoidable and absurd, Lear is able to draw at least on the strength of his dying illusion. That is the fate of the tragic hero in a pagan world.

NOTES

1. *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles*, 2nd ed. (London, 1587), sig. 2A6'. This paper is a slightly modified version of a public lecture given at Dalhousie University in March 1975.
2. *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy with Three New Essays*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 1949), pp. 187-89, 206.

3. "The Salvation of Lear," *ELH*, 15 (1948), 106-107. To be fair to Campbell, one should point out that he finds in the play a systematic combination of Christian and Stoic doctrines. Thus Lear is both the "erring Christian" and the "unstoical man"; he reaches at last "a state of mind which is a mixture of Stoic insight and Christian humility" (94). For a general account of Renaissance Neo-Stoicism and its relation to Christianity, see Herschel Baker, *The Dignity of Man: Studies in the Persistence of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1940), pp. 301-12.
4. *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear* (London: Faber, 1949), pp. 186, 205.
5. "The Catharsis of *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Survey*, 13 (1960), 1. For additional Christian interpretations ranging from strict orthodoxy to near heresy see Robert Bechtold Heilman, *This Great Stage: Image and Structure in King Lear* (1948; rpt. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963), pp. 260-71; Irving Ribner, "The Gods are Just: A Reading of *King Lear*," *Tulane Drama Review*, 2 (May 1958), 47-48; Paul N. Siegel, "Adversity and the Miracle of Love in *King Lear*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 6 (1955), 325-36; Lawrence Rosinger, "Gloucester and Lear: Men Who Act Like Gods," *ELH*, 35 (1968), 495-96; and G.F. Waller, "Time, Providence and Tragedy in *The Atheist's Tragedy* and *King Lear*," *English Miscellany*, 23 (1973), 60-74.
6. See for example Sylvan Barnet, "Some Limitations of a Christian Approach to Shakespeare," *ELH*, 22 (1955), 91-92; Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 73-74; Barbara Everett, "The New *King Lear*," *Critical Quarterly*, 2 (1960), 328-33; and Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), pp. 325-26. For a rigorous assessment of Christian interpretations in general see Roland Mushat Frye, *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 19-42.
7. *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino: Huntington, 1966), p. 338.
8. See, for example, the copious references to Calvin's *Institutes* (pp. 18, 30-33, 165); Nashe's *Christ's Teares over Jerusalem* (pp. 50-51, 128, 206); Bishop John Jewel's commentaries on the Bible (p. 55, 206-207, 255-60); and John Dove's *A Confutation of Atheisme* (pp. 51-52, 177, 184, 249).
9. Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain: Studies in Iconography and Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 54.
10. See *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus*, trans. Oliver Elton, Publications of the Folk-Lore Society, 33 (London: David Nutt, 1894), pp. 104-109.
11. *The Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum*, ed. Sidney J.H. Herrtage, EETS, ES 33 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1879), p. 53.
12. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (London: Routledge, 1957-74), VII, 363, 373.
13. For detailed discussions of the gap separating the Christian *Chronicle Historie* and the pagan *Lear* see H.B. Charlton, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1948), p. 190; Elton, pp. 63-71; and Bullough, *Sources*, VII, 281-83.
14. *Britain: Or a Chorographical Description of the Most Flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the Ilands Adjoyning, out of the Depth of Antiquitie*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1610), sig. B3. Elton quotes this passage (p. 203) but fails to see its significance.
15. See Ross, pp. 273, 379.
16. *The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher*, ed. Arnold Glover and A.R. Waller (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1905-12), VI, 111.
17. *Britain*, sig. B3. Cf. Ross, p. 171.
18. From *Bellum Gallicum*, trans. J.J. Tierney, "The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 60, Sec. C (1960), 272. In the useful appendix to this article Tierney edits and translates the primary classical sources relating to Celtic lore. Subsequent references to classical authors will be taken from Tierney's translation.
19. See Ross, pp. 151, 158-60; and Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1970), p. 44.
20. *Britain*, sig. B3.
21. *Chronicles*, sigs. CE, C4^v. For relevant excerpts from Harrison's *Description* see Bullough, *Sources*, VII, 320-22.
22. Ethnographers call this procedure of identifying native gods by Roman names the *interpretatio Romana*. See Ross, pp. 367-68; and MacCana, p. 23.

23. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh, revised ed. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1931), p. 155.
24. *The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage et al., revised ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969). Subsequent Shakespeare citations refer to this edition.
25. Ross, p. 204. See also Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, trans. Myles Dillon (London: Methuen, 1949), p. 18.
26. See *The History of King Lear* (1681; facsimile rpt. London: Cornmarket, 1969), sigs. F2-F2'.
27. See Heilman, p. 50; and Kenneth Burke, "King Lear: Its Form and Psychosis," *Shenandoah*, 21 (Autumn 1969), 16.
28. In this respect the revenging gods and the kind gods resemble respectively the AESir and the Vanir of Norse mythology. See Ernst Alfred Philippson, *Germanisches Heidentum bei den Angelsachsen*. Kölner anglistische Arbeiten, 4 (Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1929), p. 13; and E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), pp. 156-59.
29. For the relevant passages see Bullough, *Sources*, VII, 415-18. Kenneth Muir discusses Harsnett's influence at length in *Shakespeare's Sources*, I (London: Methuen, 1957), 148-61.
30. *Description*, sigs. C3-C4'. Harrison does not draw very clear or consistent distinctions between the three stages of Celtic belief, but at least he controverts the popular notion of the supreme importance of the Druids throughout Celtic civilization.
31. According to Strabo "they embalmed the heads of distinguished enemies with cedar-oil, and used to make a display of them to strangers, and were unwilling to let them be redeemed even for their weight in gold." See Tierney, 269.
32. These brief comparative remarks cannot, of course, do justice to the relative merits of Fletcher's play. For a positive analysis see Geoffrey Bullough, "Pre-Conquest Historical Themes in Elizabethan Drama," *Medieval Literature and Civilization: Studies in Memory of G.N. Garmonsway*, ed. D.A. Pearsall and R.A. Waldron (London: Athlone Press, 1969), pp. 297-98.
33. The terms are taken from Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, 2nd ed. (London: Dent, 1960), I, 197.
34. *Britain*, sig. B2.
35. Tierney, 267, 247.
36. *Britain*, sig. B2'.
37. Diodorus Siculus, in Tierney, 252.
38. *Britain*, sig. C3'. In mythological terms this aggressive militant urge of Celtic women is expressed in the figure of the Mórrígan, the native goddess of war; see Ross, pp. 219-22.
39. Ross, p. 204; see also Sjoestedt, p. 37.
40. Tierney, 272.
41. See respectively *Britain*, sig. A6'; *Description*, sig. C3'; and *Poly-Olbion* (ix.415-29) in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1931-41), IV, 179.
42. *The Mabinogion*, trans. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London: Dent, 1949), p. 39.
43. See Ross, pp. 234, 268-70; and MacCana, p. 45.
44. I have emended "God's" in line 17, since there appears to be no sound textual evidence to support such a reading. See T.M. Parrott, "'God's' or 'gods' in *King Lear*, V.iii.17," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 4 (1953), 427-32.