

Between the Divine and the Absurd:

King Lear

Susan Snyder

It is a striking fact that, although Shakespeare's main source for *Lear* was a tragicomedy, he himself added or expanded most of the comic elements I have been discussing: double plot, green world, upended hierarchies, commentary by the Fool, disguise. All together they carry strong suggestions of a final comic ordering—or they would if the outcome of Shakespeare's play were not so well known. As familiarity with *Hamlet* diminishes the uncertainty we ought to be sharing with the hero in the early acts of the play, so familiarity with *Lear* mutes the full effect of these implications of comic pattern. If we did not know what was coming, we would surely recognize and respond to the play's evident thrust beyond madness and misery to growth, reintegration, and new harmony.¹ We might recognize too that this comic movement, carried on as it is in terms of serious moral issues instead of the more purely social concerns of romantic comedy, points to an analogue with the Christian divine comedy of redemption. It is analogue only, because for reasons that I shall explore later Shakespeare placed the action of *Lear* in an emphatically non-Christian milieu. But in the sequence of pride, fall, recognition of guilt, forgiveness, and reconciliation, Christian audiences might well see something akin to their faith's basic pattern of inevitability: sin and its consequences dissolving in new opportunity, the birth of the new man.

Sure enough, the last scene of Act IV brings a moving reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia. The Prodigal Son undercurrent joins with more overt allusions to Cordelia as savior—holy water, going about her father's business, redeeming nature from the general curse.² Lear's perception moves from death and hell to new life. And mercy supersedes justice:

