

**SHAKSPEREAN FLY-
LEAVES. NEW SERIES.
KING LEAR. THE TEMPEST**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649309962

Shakspearean Fly-leaves. New series. King Lear. The tempest by H. T. Hall

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Cover @ 2017

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H. T. HALL

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New Series.

KING LEAR.
THE TEMPEST.

BY

H. T. HALL,

*Author of Shakspearean Fly-leaves and Jottings; Shakspearean Statistics; Shakspeare's Plays,
with the Alterations done by various Hands; Dramatic Album; &c.; &c.; &c.*

"To instruct by delighting is a power seldom enjoyed by man, and still seldomer exercised. It is in this respect that Homer may be called the second of men, and Shakspeare the first."—LONDON MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 1, 1834.

Cambridge :

PUBLISHED FOR THE AUTHOR, BY
H. WALLIS, BOOKSELLER, SIDNEY STREET.

M. DCCC. LXXIX.

KING LEAR.

THIS tragedy was produced at the Globe Theatre in the spring of 1606. There was an elder play, under the title of *King Leir*, which was entered on the Stationer's register in 1594, and had been played by Henslowe's company in 1593. There is but little doubt that Shakspeare derived some hints from the elder play, particularly in relation to the character of the faithful enduring Kent. From the chronicle of Holinshed the chief materials have been derived, though the catastrophe of Shakspeare's tragedy differs from all other accounts. In 1608, three editions were published of *Lear*, which is really one of the greatest of all tragedies, though it is not composed only of tragic elements. Parental love and filial ingratitude are the leading features of the tragedy, and out of their development is evolved all the results of this tragedy of tragedies, which is really sublime, and may be "judged to be the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world."

The fool is a splendid set-off to the sorrows of the fallen monarch, and he also serves to render those sorrows more impressive than they otherwise would be.

The introduction of the fool is a wonderful example of the dramatic power of Shakspeare, and shows how clearly and completely he was versed in true dramatic construction. In this tragedy, the fool differs from all the other fools and clowns in Shakspeare. The poet hath carefully prepared for his introduction, and he makes him a portion of the pathos which is so strongly developed in this play. His babblings, characterised as they are by wildness, add most forcibly to the contrast and deepen the interest in this great tragedy. Who but Shakspeare could have conceived and rendered the power, might and majesty of nature in convulsions, combined with such a knowledge of humanity as that which he has here displayed. Physical nature is in a state of constant contention, and a like result is found in the moral world. In Act III. we see the fullest development of the storminess of human passions, the instability of moral worth, combined with elemental strife, in which "hurricanes spout," and the "all-shaking thunder" almost smites "flat the thick rotundity of the world."

The passions of Lear weave the web by which he is enmeshed and bring on those events which lead to those consequences fatal to himself and to his family, for the guilty and the innocent suffer alike and their deaths are involved in the catastrophe. So it is with nearly all the other characters with which the tragedy abounds; and the higher those passions are carried the more fully they are developed in action, the greater is their fascination, and the

more completely are we absorbed in the result. Tragedy is said to be the refiner of the passions by awakening pity, and this is so; and there is no tragedy written by Shakspeare that more completely fulfils this condition. The sorrows of Lear, though they are brought on and caused by the violence of his passions and the impetuosity of his temper,—the result of the possession of unlimited authority, the misfortunes of Cordelia and the punishment of Gloucester, develop a high state of tragic feeling, which is still further increased by the period in which the tragedy is laid; a period in which savage barbarity is combined with some heroic feeling, thus producing those special circumstances in which the horrors and terrible incidents of the tragedy could be possible; a period in which the vile natures of Regan and Goneril could find room for development, and a period in which acts of the most savage character, and deeds of the most cruel kind could be performed. The entanglement wove by the passions in this tragedy is most complete; the horror of the acts and deeds which are enacted is of the most intense character, producing an impression of the most powerful kind. There is no opportunity afforded to avoid the natural result of such entanglement, and the higher and loftier the passions are carried, the more their influence is expanded and felt, and the more tragic is the result.

In Lear the tragic element is carried to its utmost limits, and Shakspeare, ever true to himself and to the law of humanity, does not in this effort of his

wondrous genius fail to sustain his superiority above all other dramatists, for in Lear he attained the highest excellence of his art: it is a tragedy containing the truest development of the highest poetic genius; and nothing less than the existence of such power and the practice thereof could have grappled with the greatness of the circumstances, could have seized upon the incidents, depicted the passions, determined the motives, and have shown the fulness of the knowledge of humanity in its treatment. The phase of humanity in this tragedy is of such a character that it is true to the period it represents, and it is also true to all other periods wherein passion, not reason, is the guiding star. It is a humanity, not of a cultivated character, a humanity but little removed from the worship of fetishism, owning no moral law nor religious feeling, but only a love of self; and this love of self, resulting as it does in selfish acts, tears asunder the strongest ties of nature. Relationship of blood, family feeling, parental respect, are all sacrificed to the mighty passions which for ever mark the existence of humanity. These are so wrought out and brought in serious contact with each other, and so great is the shock, that the natural boundaries of humanity are invaded by these monsters who slay each other, who, had they alone remained successful, would have fulfilled the words of Albany, that—

"Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep."

The position occupied by Lear, his rank,—“every inch a king,”—would not and could not allow of con-

tradiction, and it also must not be forgotten that his temperament was of that fierce turbulent character, that it could not bear to be opposed; in fact, would not and could not brook opposition. The circumstances of the period in which the time of the tragedy is laid, were of such a peculiar character that they would materially tend to foster and encourage manifestations of turbulence and self-will. Lear possessed no self-control,—he was never master of himself; and his position greatly served to increase this evil tendency, so that it became a fixed habit. His constant success, the ever-ready compliance with which his commands were executed, each and all, added to the strength of this fatal habit, so much so, that it completely blinded his powers of perception and almost destroyed whatever power of reflection he had ever possessed. His course of action towards his children was only calculated to produce hypocrisy, more especially in those who were possessed of similar turbulent and imperious feelings as himself; and this turbulence of feeling was a characterisation of the age. His nature was naturally irritable, and the flattery and adulation with which he was always received served strongly to increase his irritability. It also further served to obscure his mental vision, to prevent him from detecting that which the tongue only uttered, the loyalty of lip, not that of the heart. This is evidenced in his acceptance of the professions of Goneril and Regan, and in his rejection of the true filial love of Cordelia. The form of test he applies, is also a result of the state and manner in which he had

so long been accustomed to live. He would have his daughters say, "which of you doth love us most"—

"That we our largest bounty may extend,
Where nature doth with merit challenge."

The answers he receives from the two eldest are such that they serve to gratify the vanity and onesidedness of his nature; they are in accordance with that which he wishes to have said, and also in unison with what he holds should be said. The answer of Goneril is of that pompous assertive character, that in itself conveys no sense of the possession of true filial love; it is too high flown to be true, for her love is "more than words can wield;" it is "dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty, beyond what can be valued;" it is "a love that makes breath poor and speech unable; beyond all manner of so much, I love you." Regan's answer is of a similar character to her elder sister, for she is "made up of that self-metal," and in "her true heart" "she names my very deed of love, only she comes too short." These loud professions satisfy the wishes of Lear; they are as sweetest music to his ears, for they are what he wanted to be said; and his highest and fullest expectations are thus fulfilled. It is owing to this prepossession of his thoughts that his anger is awakened against Cordelia, who, true to herself and equally true to Lear, cannot admit that she loves her father wholly. She readily admits to what extent she is bound to him:—

"You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you."