The Two Lears:
Shakespeare’s Humanist Vision of Nature

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Abstract

Shakespeare is indeed the poet of nature. “Nature” is the one single word that defines the theme of King Lear. The word’s ambiguity in sense contains a number of binary oppositions: Great Nature vs. human nature, physical/material nature vs. spiritual/mental nature, natural affection between parent and child vs. natural affection between prince and subject, good nature vs. bad nature, normal nature vs. abnormal nature, etc. The binary oppositions suggest the psychomachia, the battle of the good soul against the evil soul. In Lear, most characters are flatly either good souls or bad souls. Lear and Gloucester, however, are round characters: they change from bad nature back to good nature. There are certainly two Lears in the play: the foolish, selfish Lear vs. the wise, unselfish Lear, or the unnatural Lear vs. the natural Lear. The two Lears explain the middle position of human nature in the Great Chain of Being. Lear has learned, too late, two lears (lessons): the difference of human nature and the disparity between appearance and reality. He has not learned the lear that natural justice is not equivalent to human justice. But he has learned the Shakespearean lear (doctrine) that nature is above art. In fact, in many other plays as well as in Lear, Shakespeare provides a humanist vision of nature: placing the primary, unfallen nature of innocence above the secondary, fallen nature of experience, opposing human art or nurture to divine art or nature, and making his comedies or tragedies and histories or romances according as man’s good natures or bad natures prevail in the fallen world. Meanwhile, we find this humanist vision of nature allows for the Neoclassic principles of moderation and of morality and yet recognizes the Romantic principles of change and of contrariety.

Keywords: Lear, nature, humanism, binary opposition, psychomachia
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The Poet of Nature

Shakespeare is often introduced as “the poet of nature.” But what exactly does the epithet mean? When Samuel Johnson praises Shakespeare as “above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature,” the critic’s mind is focused on the “naturalness” of the poet’s dramatic presentation, that is, on the playwright’s ability to “hold up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life,” thus creating typical characters who are “the genuine progeny of common humanity” and whose dialogues seem “to have been gleaned by diligent selection out of common conversation, and common occurrences” (330). As an advocate of neoclassicism, Johnson in fact praises Shakespeare’s “adherence to general nature,” his “making nature predominate over accident” (331). Yet, while praising Shakespeare’s “naturalness” (which refers in effect to such neoclassic merits as “faithfulness,” “commonness,” “genuineness,” “typicality,” and “generality”), Johnson also disparages Shakespeare for the defect, among others, of “sacrificing virtue to convenience,” of seeming to “write without any moral purpose,” which shows that the dramatist “is so much more careful to please than to instruct” (333).

Now, we must admit that Johnson is right in pointing out Shakespeare’s defect of prioritizing pleasure before instruction as well as his merit of dramatizing life naturally. However, we must also grant that it is only natural for a playwright to try to delight his readers or theatergoers first, and that Shakespeare as a delightful playwright is actually not without his moral purpose in writing any of his plays: if he has to sacrifice virtue to convenience at times, he has actually never forgot the importance of virtue. In truth, if Shakespeare “makes no just distribution of good or evil,” or if he “carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong,” it is not, as Johnson goes on to suggest, just a “fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate” (333). It is, rather, the natural outcome of Shakespeare’s seeing so much of the basic nature in humanity and seeing so much of the comic and the tragic in life.

At this juncture, we may recall Hamlet’s advice to the Players: “... you overstep
not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as it were the mirror to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.19-24). These words of Hamlet’s are no other than Shakespeare’s. They express the idea that art is a truthful representation (“mirroring”) of life and to be truthful is also to observe the principle of moderation, i.e., to show naturally the feature and image of both virtue and vice (“scorn”) in addition to showing the form and impression (“pressure”) of the “age and body of the time.” Therefore, for Hamlet or Shakespeare, those players are to be debased who have imitated humanity so abominably that they neither have “the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man,” and who have so strutted and bellowed that anyone might think “some of Nature’s journeymen had made men, and not made them well” (3.2.31-35). To overdo anything in acting virtue or vice is to overstep “the modesty of nature” or violate the natural principle of moderation.

In point of fact, moderation (besides commonness or generality) is another essential merit for neoclassical writers like Johnson. Theoretically, Johnson should have been glad of Shakespeare’s impartial treatment of both virtue and vice. Yet, as it is, Johnson’s didacticism has led himself to complain of Shakespeare’s essential amorality, or of his lack of “poetic justice.” Johnson “knows well that in this world justice is not poetic” (Eastman 28). Yet, in view of justice Johnson seems to prefer art to nature, wishing Shakespeare would go to the extreme of depicting the ideal, rather than the real, for the sake of promoting virtue and demolishing vice. In the light of poetic justice, then, Shakespeare as the poet of nature seems to be too “natural” for Johnson.

In actuality, Shakespeare’s “naturalness” or “over-naturalness,” as will be shown in this essay, has much to do with his understanding of nature, which can be termed a “humanist vision of nature.” But, before we come to the conclusion, we need to know first the meaning of the key word “nature.”
The One Single Word

In his “Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool,” George Orwell thus remarks with his critical acumen:

Shakespeare has a habit of thrusting uncalled-for general reflections into the mouths of his characters. This is a serious fault in a dramatist, but it does not fit in with Tolstoy’s picture of Shakespeare as a vulgar hack who has no opinions of his own and merely wishes to produce the greatest effect with the least trouble. And more than this, about a dozen of his plays, written for the most part later than 1600, do unquestionably have a meaning and even a moral. They revolve round a central subject which in some cases can be reduced to a single word. For example, *Macbeth* is about ambition. *Othello* is about jealousy, and *Timon of Athens* is about money.

After this, Orwell adds, “The subject of *Lear* is renunciation, and it is only by being willfully blind that one can fail to understand what Shakespeare is saying” (159-160).

Orwell’s critical acumen is really worthy of our admiration. For me Shakespeare did write a number of “one-word plays,” of which *Lear* is but one, and not an obvious one. If we want to give some other definite examples, we can refer to *Troilus and Cressida* with its subject of fidelity, *Measure for Measure* with its of justice, and *Coriolanus* with its of pride. However, in the case of *Lear*, I cannot agree with Orwell that “it is only by being willfully blind that one can fail to understand what Shakespeare is saying.” I do not believe that Orwell was himself being willfully blind when he maintained that the subject of *Lear* is renunciation. Nevertheless, I must say that in his consideration of the play’s theme Orwell was somewhat blindfolded by the main plot (the Lear plot) of the play. The subplot (the Gloucester plot) of the play simply has nothing to do with renunciation. If we take a whole view of the play, we must admit that we cannot say the play’s double plot is unified by the theme of renunciation.
Ironically, it seems, Orwell has forgot his own word. He has forgotten that "Shakespeare has a habit of thrusting uncalled-for general reflections into the mouths of his characters." As anyone can see, in King Lear Shakespeare is so preoccupied with his general reflections on the Great Nature and our human nature that the word "nature" is noticeably repeated again and again through the mouths of the characters. John Danby has observed that King Lear is a drama of ideas and it "can be regarded as a play dramatizing the meanings of the single word 'Nature'" (15). I really wonder why Orwell has failed to observe the significance and effect Shakespeare has intended to produce through this single word.

To be sure, some other critics have already noticed the frequent occurrence of the word "nature" in Lear. G. B. Harrison, for instance, observes in his Introduction to the play that apart from the use of animal images which constantly recur, Shakespeare "effected a grim irony by the use of two words which sound throughout the play like the tolling of a knell: 'nature' and 'nothing.'" And he proceeds to interpret the meaning of "nature" in this play, thus:

Lear, Gloucester, and Edmund each in turn call on Nature. To the old fathers Nature is the goddess of natural affection by whose law children are naturally loyal to their parents. To Edmund—the "natural" son—Nature is the goddess of the wild; he is "natural" man because he is by nature a beast. "Nature," "natural," and "unnatural" recur again and again with every shade of meaning and misunderstanding. (1139).

By the same token Northrop Frye has made his interpretive observations about "the intricate series of puns on 'natural' in King Lear," besides the "emphatic repetition of the words 'all' and 'nothing.'" (268). Unlike Harrison, however, Frye emphasizes the connection of "the lower physical nature of the elements" with an "amoral world" to which Edmund as well as the Yahoo or Caliban adheres, in contrast to the "still unspoiled and innocent" world of the fools (Lear, Kent, Gloucester, and the Fool) "in the middle of a fallen nature" (265-9).

John Danby finds that the words "nature," "natural," and "unnatural" occur
over forty times in *King Lear*. They cover the “expected range of the Elizabethan meanings of the word,” but have “two main meanings, strongly contrasted and mutually exclusive” (19). The “two main meanings” are for Danby two views of nature: first, the benignant nature of Bacon, Hooker, and Lear; second, the malignant nature of Hobbes, Edmund, and the wicked daughters.

According to Robert Fitch, the word “nature” has at least five significations in *King Lear*:

So Edmund speaks of “mine own nature” when he simply has reference to the characteristics of his own personality. Edmund may appeal to nature as a goddess who will liberate him from the restraints of custom and of the moral order. Shortly thereafter Lear can appeal to nature as a goddess who will enforce the penalties of the moral order against his daughter. Elsewhere Lear can speak of the natural needs of man in the Hobbesian sense of a natural condition which is short, brutish, and nasty. Then in a religious anachronism someone can speak of Cordelia as a daughter “Who redeems nature from the general curse” where nature is the fallen part of man that stands in need of redemptive grace. (91)

Wen-chung Hwang has also had a good discussion of the word “nature” in *Lear*. According to his analysis, the word has at least the following six lexical meanings in the text:

1. the power or force which rules the universe and creates all things in it.
2. natural phenomena, like thunder, eclipses, and rain.
3. the physical world or universe without spiritual or moral significance.
4. the physical strength, body or life of a person.
5. the inherent disposition or character of an individual.
6. the essential qualities of a human being. (27-28)

Basically, Hwang’s as well as the other critics’ interpretations of the word “nature” are all correct. However, I think we can go further to find a thematic pattern woven out of the word and its cognates. This job needs, of course, a thorough investigation of the contexts in which they occur, before the thematic
interparation can be made.

The Binary Oppositions

My investigation, based on the Arden Edition (1972) of Lear, shows that the word “nature” together with its cognates (“natural,” “unnatural,” “unnaturalness,” and “disnature’d”) appears fifty-one times altogether in the play. The words are mostly spoken by Lear (19 times), Gloucester (9 times), Edmund (8 times), and Kent (6 times). But many other characters also use the words in their speech: France (2 times), Cornwall (2 times), Albany (1 time), Regan (1 time), Cordelia (1 time), the Doctor (1 time), and a Gentleman (1 time). The meanings of the words are, to be sure, often ambiguous in their contexts. Consequently, different interpretations have easily resulted. For example, when in the opening scene Lear asks his daughters to tell him the depth of their love for him so that “we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth with merit challenge” (51-52), what is meant here by “nature”? The note in the Arden Edition gives two interpretations by Steevens: “Where the claims of merit are superadded to that of nature, i.e., birth. Challenge, to make title to, to claim as one’s right”; “nature = natural filial affection; but it means rather ‘parental affection,’ and merit, in the context, means ‘filial affection’” (Muir 6). For another example, after Edmund hoodwinks Edgar into fleeing to escape Gloucester’s anger and contrives the appearance of a murderous assault on himself by Edgar, the misled father says in private: “... and of my land/Loyal and natural boy, I’ll work the means/To make thee capable” (2.1.82-84). It is noted that here “Gloucester is quibbling on the two meanings of natural, “bastard” and “feeling natural affection” (opposed to the unnaturalness of his legitimate son).” “But,” the note goes on, “since natural could mean legitimate as well as illegitimate, he may also imply that Edmund is now his rightful heir” (Muir 61).

Despite the obvious cases of ambiguity as shown above, however, I find it fairly safe to divide the meanings first into two big categories: namely, nature as the Great Nature and nature as our human nature. When the first sense is meant, the word
nature often has its initial letter capitalized in the printed text and it may take the personified “she” or “her” as its pronoun. For instance, Lear refers to Cordelia as “a wretch whom Nature is asham’d/Almost t’acknowledge here” (1.1.211-2). And later Gloucester refers to Lear as a “ruin’d piece of Nature” (4.6.134). Yet, there are still cases of inconsistency, of course. For example, Lear once reasons thus to himself: “maybe he [Cornwall] is not well:/Infirmity doth still neglect all office/Whereto our health is bound; we are not ourselves/When Nature, being oppressed, commands the mind/to suffer with the body” (2.4.102-6). Here the “oppressed Nature” cannot possibly refer to the Great Nature; it may probably refer to the nature of man.

This leads us to a second division. Whereas “Nature” usually refers to the Great Nature and hence it is often personified and apostrophized (e.g., “Hear, Nature, hear” in I, iv, 274; and “Thou, Nature, art my goddess” in I, ii, 1), and whereas “nature” usually refers to human nature and hence it is not personified nor apostrophized, both “Nature” and “nature” can in fact focus on either the physical or the spiritual aspect of them. When Gloucester says, “These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourg’d by thesequent effects” (1.2.100-3), the first “Nature” he mentions in the statement plainly focuses on its intellectual side (it being a “reasoning” subject) while the second “Nature” focuses on its physical facet (it being a “scourged” object). Likewise, when Kent addresses Oswald as a “cowardly rascal” and affirms scornfully that “nature” disclaims in thee: a tailor made thee” (2.2.52-53), the spiritual aspect of our human nature is emphasized. And when, seeing Lear in the heath, he remarks that “the tyranny of the open night’s too rough/For nature to endure” (3.4.2-3), his attention is directed mainly to the physical part of our nature, of course.

When “nature” means our physical nature, it refers in effect to our body (in opposition to our soul). This meaning occurs in quite a few contexts in the play. Other examples besides the one just mentioned above are: “Oppressed nature sleeps” (3.6.95), and “Our foster-nurse of nature is repose” (4.4.12). But since our body is
where our spirit or soul or any mental quality is supposed to reside, it is often hard to
tell in certain contexts which quality (physical or spiritual) is meant particularly.
The “nature” in our last example can in fact refer to our mental state as well. As to
the “nature” in such contexts as below, the meaning is really ambivalent.

Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his
unkind daughters. (3.4.69-79)

Nature in you stands on the very verge Of her confine. (2.4.144-5)

My snuff and loathed part of nature should Burn itself out. (4.6.39-40)

Cure this great breach in his abused nature! (4.7.15)

Thou hast one daughter,
Who redeems nature from the general curse
Which twain have brought her to. (4.6.202-4)

In contexts like these, “nature” can indeed mean both physical and mental nature at
the same time.

When referring to the spiritual aspect, “nature” in Lear mostly means the
temper, disposition or instinct one is born with. This is the “nature” when Lear says
“I will forget my nature” (1.5.31), when France mentions Cordelia’s “tardiness in
nature” (1.1.234), when Edmund talks of his father’s “lusty stealth of nature”
(1.2.11), when Gloucester believes that “the King falls from bias of nature” (1.2.108),
when Cornwall judges that Kent marvels at such “smiling rogues” as able to “smooth
every passion that in the natures of their lords rebel” (2.2.70-74), and when Albany
fears “That nature, which contemns its origin” (4.2.32).

But is one’s instinctive nature good or bad? Normally, we suppose everyone
is born with instinctive love for his family members; therefore, “nature” is often
equivalent, in meaning, to the instinctive affection existing between parents and
children, i.e., parental love or filial love. In King Lear, such a “nature” is found in
such statements as these: “thou better know’st/The offices of nature, bond of
childhood” (2.4.175-6), “I may be censured, that nature thus gives way to loyalty” (3.5.2-3), “Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature/To quit this horrid act” (3.7.84-85), “Nature of such deep trust we shall much need” (2.1.113), etc.

Since “nature” is supposedly equivalent to “natural affection” between parent and child, it is only natural that in the play the child lacking such affection should be described as “unnatural” or “disnatured.” Examples are: Lear’s calling his daughters “unnatural hags” (2.4.276) and wishing Goneril’s child to be “a thwart disnatur’d torment to her” (1.4.281), Edmund’s talking of “unnaturalness between the child and the parent” (1.2.141) and of his brother Edgar’s “unnatural purpose” (2.1.49), Gloucester’s calling Edgar “Unnatural, detested, brutish villain” (1.2.73-74), etc. Yet, “natural affection” need not be limited to that between parent and child. It can be that between prince and subject as well. Thus, we have such a dialogue between Gloucester and Edmund concerning their being forced to ill-treat Lear:

Glou. Alack, alack! Edmund, I like not this unnatural dealing. When I desired their leave that I might pity him, they took from me the use of mine own house, charged me, on pain of perpetual displeasure, neither to speak of him, entreat for him, or any way sustain him.

Edm. Most savage and unnatural!

Moreover, in the play the terms “natural” and “unnatural” can mean “normal” and “abnormal,” respectively, in the consideration of happenings. Thus, France can reply to Lear this way concerning Cordelia’s behavior: “Sure, her offence/Must be of such unnatural degree/That monsters it, or your fore-vouched affection/Fall into taint” (1.1.217-9). And Kent can talk, thus, to a gentleman: “... you shall find/Some that will thank you, making just report/Of how unnatural and bemadding sorrow/The King hath cause to plain” (3.1.36-38).

So far I have analyzed the possible meanings of the word “nature” and its cognates in King Lear. We have come to understand that the word along with its cognates can refer to either the Great Nature or our human nature, either physical/material nature or spiritual/mental nature, and either natural affection
between parent and child or that between prince and subject. Meanwhile, we also understand that human nature is considered basically good (since it is equated to natural affection) but likely to be bad (called “unnatural” or “disnatured”), too. Thus, for Shakespeare in Lear at least, “nature” contains a number of binary oppositions such as Great Nature vs. human nature, physical/material nature vs. spiritual/mental nature, nature between parent and child vs. nature between prince and subject, good nature vs. bad nature, and normal nature vs. abnormal nature.

**The Psychomachia**

In the medieval times, Prudentius wrote a Latin allegorical poem entitled *The Psychomachia* (*The Battle of Souls*). The allegory initiates a long tradition of works (as diverse as *Roman de la Rose*, *Everyman*, and *Piers Plowman*) which “defines the earthly life of man as the arena of a Holy War between the contending forces of his own nature” (Spivack 73). In Henry Medwall’s *Nature* (1490-1501), for instance, the tradition continues as a pitched battle impending “between the Seven Deadly Sins, led by Man already seduced and depraved, and the forces of virtue whose leader is Reason” (Spivack 86). Medwall’s allegorical play is imitated by John Rastell’s *The Nature of the Four Elements* (c. 1517), in which the delinquent hero Humanity is seduced by his bad companion Sensual Appetite. It is significant that the medieval, Christian theme of a morality now takes “Nature” as the keyword in the title of a Renaissance allegory. Both Medwall’s *Nature* and Rastell’s *The Nature of the Four Elements* suggest clearly that nature, containing both good and evil, is the battlefield of the opposing souls.

In the Harvest New Critical Introduction to *King Lear*, Alexander Leggatt points out some relevant passages and concludes that we can recognize from them “the doubleness of nature in its dealings with man: destructive and terrifying on the one hand, beneficent on the other” (23). The “nature” Leggatt refers to here is of course the Great Nature. He thinks that both benevolent and malevolent aspects of the Great Nature “are objectively valid within the play,” and he adds, “yet this
doubleness of nature, though not simply imagined by the characters, also reflects the
doubleness of humanity” (23). “Humanity,” as used by Leggatt here, is equal to
what we call “human nature.” So Leggatt is asserting that in Lear the good and evil
aspects of the Great Nature reflect the two same aspects of our human nature.

I think Leggatt is all correct in making the assertion. Indeed, I think that the
play is a two-level speech act. On the first level, it is the playwright’s speech act,
by which Shakespeare tells us (through his good and evil characters as well as good
and bad things or happenings) that both the Great Nature and our human nature can
be either good or bad at times, and that there seems to be a correspondence between
them. On the second level, the play is a composite of the characters’ speech acts,
which may also directly or indirectly tell the same things. Gloucester, for instance,
suggests that the “late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us”
(1.2.100-101), thus connecting heavenly bodies with human bodies; and the
Gentleman says that Lear “Strives in his little world of man to out-storm/The
to-and-fro-conflicting wind and rain” (3.1.10-11), thus also linking the external
nature with man’s inward nature.

It is only natural, of course, that a play, be it a comedy or tragedy, should
contain both good and evil dramatis personae. In the light of characterization,
however, King Lear shows better than other plays Shakespeare’s impartial
understanding of human nature. The play, as we know, is centered around two
families, Lear’s and Gloucester’s. Lear has three daughters, of whom two are
“unnatural” for not showing “a child-like office” (2.1.105). The remaining filial
one has two suitors, of whom one does not, while the other does, possess “natural”
love for her. The two husbands of Lear’s two elder daughters are again opposite to
each other by nature: one good, the other evil. The same symmetry is found in
Gloucester’s family. His “natural” (bastard) son is in reality very “unnatural”
(without filial affection) while his legitimate son is “natural” in the sense of showing
“a child-like office.” Even among the retainers, some characters are good while
others are evil (e.g. Kent in contrast to Oswald). Robert Grudin has found this
remarkable “pattern of interconnecting parallels and oppositions” (138), and he takes
this pattern as a sort of circularity suggesting ethical and temporal roundness. For me, however, this balancing cast of good and evil characters side by side implies, naturally, that like the Great Nature, man’s nature can be good or bad.

Furthermore, the characters on the two mutually-contrasting (good vs. bad) sides are all “flat characters,” that is, characters each with but a single dominant trait that remains unchanged throughout the work. According to Enid Welsford, the “good” characters in King Lear are those who have the capacity for “fellow-feeling” (138). Such “good” characters as Cordelia, France, Edgar, Albany, Kent, and the Fool do have the capacity for “fellow-feeling,” in contrast to such “evil” characters as Goneril, Regan, Burgundy, Cornwall, Edmund, and Oswald, who are selfishly wicked. All such characters are simply “natural” or “unnatural” (if not to use the common label of “good” or “bad”) throughout the play. Thus, they are all “flat characters.” Essentially, in fact, they are all more or less like allegorical figures. They represent the “natural” (good) souls and the “unnatural” (evil) souls respectively in the psychomachia of humanity.

Besides casting flatly good and flatly evil characters side by side and engaging them in a sort of conflicting war, Shakespeare also utilizes “round characters” (that is, complex, realistic, and changeable characters who are neither downright good nor downright evil) to suggest the theme of psychomachia. Lear and Gloucester, the two family heads, are the “round characters” in the play. They are “round” because they combine opposing (good and bad) character traits in the same person and they grow in personality as “the battle of souls” goes on.

Lear and Gloucester are loving parents, but both favor unfairly a certain child at first: Lear favors Cordelia and Gloucester favors Edmund. Both parents are gullible: Lear is cheated by the sweet words of Goneril and Regan while Gloucester is cheated by Edmund’s false words. Both, again, are rash; Lear, therefore, denounces Cordelia unjustly while Gloucester denounces Edgar. Both, then, suffer for the rashness, come to know their stupidity, and repent of their wrongdoing. Meanwhile, both grow wise and show their “fellow-feeling”: Lear has “reason in madness” (4.6.173) and takes pity on the Fool, Poor Tom (Edgar) and the blinded
Gloucester while Gloucester sees feelingly “how this world goes with no eyes” (4.6.147-9) and sympathizes with the mad Lear. In the end, while Gloucester gropes on patiently for the time of “ripeness” (5.3.11) and finally dies happily reconciled to Edgar, Lear is reunited with Cordelia and finally dies heart-broken after bravely killing “the slave that was a-hanging” her (5.3.273). In both Gloucester’s case and Lear’s, the end may be tragic in the sense that both involve death. Yet, upon further consideration we know that their deaths are merely physical deaths. Morally they have in fact revived; their final reconciliation to their good children symbolizes that they have returned to their good nature. Therefore, the tragic end is actually like that of a traditional allegory: the Good Soul triumphs over the Evil Soul, as in the psychomachia.

The Two Lears

We have mentioned above some critics who see “two natures” in the universe: Harrison sees the contrast between nature as the goddess of natural affection and nature as the goddess of the wild; Frye sees the lower physical nature of the elements vs. the still unspoiled and innocent nature; and Danby sees the benignant nature of Bacon, Hooker, and Lear vs. the malignant nature of Hobbes, Edmund and the wicked daughters. Each dichotomy of nature is justifiable, of course. Yet, it is problematic to refer to “the benignant nature of Lear,” as Danby does. Lear does conceive nature as naturally benignant (he thinks nature ought to be good). But does Lear’s own nature benignantly good throughout the play? The answer is in the negative, of course. He actually shows two contrasting facets in the play.

There are indeed two Lears in the play. On one hand, we have the Lear that appears in the first two acts of the play. That Lear is seen in his own palace, in the Duke of Albany’s palace, and before Gloucester’s castle; he is not yet seen roaming on the heath. That Lear is the obstinate, arrogant, and hot-tempered Lear, the Lear that indiscreetly plans to divide his kingdom among his daughters, rashly banishes Cordelia and Kent, and then angrily cries against Goneril’s and Regan’s ill-treatment.
of him. That is the foolish Lear, though he is self-assured and overbearing as a parent and a monarch. He is so foolish that he takes words for actions and “has let the ritual appearances replace the internal reality” (Magill116). At that stage, Lear still thinks his power unchallengeable, still wears his regal garments, still tries to keep his train and trappings of royalty, and still demands love from his children and subjects. That is also the selfish Lear, the Lear that has no “fellow feeling” for others.

On the other hand, we have the Lear that appears in the last three acts of the play. This Lear is seen roaming on the heath and exposed to the storm before he is taken to the French Camp near Dover. This Lear is divested of all the accoutrements of kingship and reduced to the condition of a ragged, homeless madman. This Lear has admitted that he is but a “poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man” (3.2.20) or “a very foolish fond old man” (4.7.60), although he still believes he is “a man more sinned against than sinning” (3.2.60). This Lear is no longer the foolish Lear because his wits have begun to turn (3.2.67) and he has certified his evil daughters’ “filial ingratitude” (3.4.14). He has in fact become wise enough to tell Gloucester that “A dog’s obeyed in office” (4.6.157). In the meantime, he is also no longer selfish. Seeing the Fool still accompanying him in the cold outdoors, he says, “Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart/That’s sorry yet for thee” (3.2.72-73). He even takes pity on all those “naked wretches” that have to “bide the pelting of this pitiless storm” with only their “houseless heads and unfed sides” (3.4.28-30).

The foolish, selfish Lear demonstrates Lear’s bad nature; the wise, unselfish Lear demonstrates Lear’s good nature. In Freudian terms, Lear’s bad nature follows mostly the pleasure principle and partly the reality principle. At first, he seeks to “shake all cares and business from our age” (1.1.38) and yet retain the trappings of authority. Later, when his older daughters decide to fail him, he resorts practically to bargaining with them. In contrast, Lear’s good nature follows the morality principle. While he swears repeatedly at his evil daughters, he condescends at last to ask forgiveness of his good daughter. More importantly,
while he is himself in distress, he has sympathy for the cold Fool, the beggared 
Edgar, the blinded Gloucester, etc.

It is noted that the play is full of animal images (mentioned animal names 
include dog, kite, serpent, ant, hog, fox, wolf, lion, sheep, cat, horse, nightingale, 
herring, boar, fly, tiger, bear, crow, mouse, wren, adder, rat, and many others). 3 
Caroline Spurgeon agrees with A. C. Bradley and others that the large number of 
animal images in the play gives us the feeling that “humanity” is “reeling back into 
the beast.”  But she adds that because the images are portrayed chiefly in angry or 
anguished action, they distinctly augment the sensation of horror and bodily pain that 
goes with the effect of a tragedy (342).  I think both Bradley and Spurgeon are right 
in their interpretations.  However, I tend to agree more with those who hold that the 
animal imagery in the play “is designed partly to show man’s place in the Chain of 
Being, and to bring out the sub-human nature of the evil characters, partly to show 
man’s weakness compared with the animals, and partly to compare human existence 
to the life of the jungle” (Muir liv).

Man, as the Renaissance men believed, occupies the middle position in the 
Great Chain of Being.  Thus, human nature is in between beastly nature and divine 
nature.  According to Freudian psychology, man’s beastly nature (the libido) 
normally stays repressed in the id until it emerges in dreams or other unconscious 
states.  Now, in King Lear, do we see man’s beastly nature revealed only in 
unconscious states of mind?  We see all the evil characters (Goneril, Regan, 
Cornwall, Edmund, etc.), as well as all the good characters (Cordelia, Albany, 
Gloucester, Kent, Edgar, etc.), act consciously all the time for their purposes (to gain 
power, to gain love or to gain other things).  But Lear has once gone mad.  Is 
madness a conscious or unconscious state of mind?  If it is unconscious, can we say 
the mad Lear or the unconscious Lear is the “bad-natured” Lear or the beastly Lear?

The mad Lear in the last three acts of the play does speak mad words and act 
madly.  Cordelia says that he is “as mad as the vexed sea” (4.4.2).  Yet, what 
Edgar observes in the mad Lear is “matter and impertinency mixed; /Reason in 
madness” (4.6.172-3).  And what we observe in him now is a repentant Lear and a
righteous Lear that begins to feel sorry for other good suffering fellows. If to be
mad is to act wrongly with no sense, then this mad Lear is actually not mad now, just
like Edgar, the disguised mad beggar. In actuality, Lear is really mad in the first
two acts of the play, that is, when he acts consciously before he goes mad noticeably.
Hence, Kent is right in saying bluntly “be Kent unmannerly, /When Lear is mad”
(1.1.144-5) when he tries to defend Cordelia against Lear’s fury and unwise
dispensation of his kingdom.

If it is hard to say which Lear (the foolish and selfish one or the wise and
unselfish one) is really mad, it is also difficult to say which Lear is natural or
unnatural. We may think it natural for an old father to be foolish and selfish at
times. We may also think it unnatural for an old king to be as foolish and selfish as
Lear. Likewise, we may think it unnatural for a mad king to become insightfully
wise, and think it natural for an ill-treated father to become sympathetic towards
others. If “natural” means “normal,” the mad Lear, then, is “unnatural.” That is
why Gloucester calls Lear “a ruined piece of nature” (4.6.133) and Cordelia asks the
kind gods to “cure this great breach in his abused nature,” that is, Lear’s “untuned
and jarring senses” (4.7.14-16). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the first
(foolish and selfish) Lear is regarded as the unnatural Lear and the second (wise and
unselfish) Lear is regarded as the natural Lear, for “natural” actually can also mean
“original” in the play. Lear is thought to be originally wise and unselfish, but the
infirmity of his old age makes him “unnatural” (foolishly rash and selfishly
unloving).

Lear himself must be a believer in man’s original good nature, for he asks, in
the trial scene, “Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” (3.6.75-76).
Gloucester may be a similar believer, for he once blindly asks Edmund to “enkindle
all the sparks of nature /To quit this horrid act” (3.7.84). Kent, too, may belong to
the group, for he says to Oswald, “You cowardly rascal, nature disclaims in thee: a
tailor made thee” (2.2.52-3). It seems that good men believe man is good by nature.
How about wicked men, then? Do they believe man is wicked by nature? In the
play none among the evil characters have ever pronounced this belief. When
Edmund says that “... a brother noble,/Whose nature is so far from doing harms/That he suspects none” (1.2.176-77), the statement may imply that if a man is evil by nature, he can then suspect evil; but it does not imply that man is originally good or evil. Finally, when Edmund is dying, he says: “... some good I mean to do/Despite of mine own nature” (5.3.242-3). This statement implies that he knows he is evil by nature, and that he believes even an evil person like him can become good at last. But it does not imply that he believes man is originally evil. So, we can conclude that in King Lear Shakespeare does not suggest that man is all good or all bad by nature. He suggests instead that human nature is subject to change: a good Lear may become a bad Lear and a wicked Edmund may become a good Edmund.

The word “lear” is defined in O.E.D. as “instruction, learning; in early use, a piece of instruction, a lesson; also, a doctrine, religion.” And the set expression “lear-father” is said to refer to “a master in learning.” King Lear is a father in the play, indeed. But, ironically, he is not a “lear-father.” Instead of being a master in learning, he is an old and late learner. He learns too late two lessons: the lesson that human nature is not all alike (some people are good by nature and some are evil), and the lesson that human nature is not as it appears to be (words are not actions; both loyalty and filial piety need evidence). At the end, his learning is still incomplete. Even at the moment of his death, he has not yet learned the lesson that natural justice is not equivalent to human justice (or the lesson that nature’s real justice can be other than mankind’s ideal justice or “poetic justice”). That is why over Cordelia’s death he cries: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/And thou no breath at all?” (5.3.305-6).

According to natural law, every cause has its effect; every fault or folly as well as every guilt or crime has its punishment. Hence, Cordelia’s fault (call it pride or stubborness), no less than Lear’s fault or her sisters’ and Edmund’s crime, may lead to death. Her death is tragic, indeed. But nature is full of tragedies like Cordelia’s: an innocent dog, horse, or rat may also come to have no breath at all just because it has committed a fault (in falling into a pit, for instance).

It is sometimes suggested that the death of Cordelia is inevitable because as a
patriot or as a prudent playwright Shakespeare simply cannot let France conquer England and save Cordelia and Lear in time. This explanation is too far-fetched. The unhappy ending is in truth only part of Shakespeare’s forceful appeal to us to look boldly into the ambivalent face of natural and human reality. C. J. Sisson maintains that “there is in fact poetic justice enough in King Lear” because Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund all perish in their sins and finally Albany proclaims the restoration of the old King to his absolute power, and of Edgar and Kent to their just rights (234). Indeed, if we judge on the basis of the play’s entire action (with its double plots finally combined into one), we can only arrive at this “natural justice”: every folly as well as every vice must be punished in some way. We may regard Cordelia’s death as a “tragic waste,” to use a term explicated by Bradley (23). But we must know that Cordelia does not suffer for nothing; she has her own “tragic flaws.” To quote Gloucester’s cynical remark—“As flies to wanton boys, are we to the Gods;/They kill us for their sport” (4.1.36-37)—as Shakespeare’s theme for the play is to totally overlook “natural justice.” To ask a happy ending for the play is to ask like a still immature Lear, not yet fully wise about natural justice though well-experienced in human nature.

**Nature vs. Art or Nurture**

We have just distinguished the foolish and selfish Lear from the wise and unselfish Lear. We have also recognized the second Lear as not yet fully wise because he still cannot distinguish natural justice from human justice. To be fully wise is in fact to learn a lot of “lears” (lessons). The relationship between nature and art (or between nature and nurture) is another lesson Lear has learned, though.

In Act 4, Scene 6, let us recall, Lear is fantastically dressed with wild flowers. The mad Lear sees Edgar and says to him, “No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself,” and adds, “Nature’s above art in that respect” (4.6.83-86). The statement “Nature’s above art” in this context may mean, indeed, that “a born King can never lose his natural rights,” but since his natural rights include “coining,”
which is art. Nevertheless, the reference of “nature” need not be restricted to “natural rights” and that of “art” need not be restricted to the art of coining money. The word “nature” may mean anything one is born with, and the word “coining” may mean broadly any act of “making up or devising.” Thus, one’s naked body is one’s nature, too. And to dress oneself up with wild flowers as Lear does is an art of coining, too. In consequence, the statement that “nature is above art” seems to be a general truth pertinent to Lear in various ways.

Lear has in fact learned the importance of returning to nature when he is roaming madly in the wild. Let us recall again that Lear argues at first for the necessity of having superfluities:

O! reason not the need; our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life is cheap as beast’s. (2.4.262-5)

Yet, later when he sees Edgar’s “uncovered body” in the storm, he says: “Is man no more than this? ... Thou ow’st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. ... thou art the thing itself, un-accommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art” (3.4.100-6). After saying so, he tears off his clothes and becomes bare himself. Symbolically, he has rid himself of art (human clothes) and returned to nature (his body). At this mad moment, nature is really above art for him.

Nature vs. art was a topic often discussed in Shakespeare’s day. There were people, indeed, who placed art above nature. Sir Philip Sidney, for instance, argues in his An Apology for Poetry that “the poet ... doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature” and thus nature’s world is brazen while the poets’ world is golden (Adams 157). Shakespeare, however, does not think that art is above nature. He thinks instead with Lear that nature is above art. But “above” does not mean just “better”; it means “prior” as well. Sidney also agrees that nature is the primary
state of existence; all art comes from nature. But he emphasizes the aesthetic superiority of art to nature. Shakespeare’s aesthetic idea belongs mainly to mimetic theory, however. For Shakespeare nature is the model for artistic imitation; it is therefore always prior to art. In terms of science and ethics, Shakespeare also places nature before art, “nurture” being the equivalent for “art” in such categories.

In *The Winter’s Tale*, Polixenes says to Perdita:

> Yet Nature is made better by no mean
> But Nature makes that mean; so over that art
> Which you say adds to Nature, is an art
> That Nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
> A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
> And make conceive a bark of baser kind
> By bud of nobler race. This is an art
> Which does mend Nature—change it rather; but
> The art itself is Nature. (4.4.89-97, italics mine)

In this passage, through the mouth of Polixenes, using a horticultural example, Shakespeare has stated clearly the idea that nature is above art because art is (derived from) nature. This is a scientific truth. And so is the truth told by the King in *All’s Well That Ends Well* that “laboring art can never ransom nature/From her inaidible estate (2.1.118-9).

In *The Tempest*, Prospero describes Caliban as “a born devil, on whose nature/nurture can never stick” (4.1.88-89). According to Frank Kermode, learning is a major theme in the romance. While Miranda “is endowed not only with the melior natura, but with education,” Caliban’s education “was not only useless—on his nature, which is nature tout court, nurture would never stick—but harmful” (1958, xlvi). This Miranda/Caliban contrast implies that Shakespeare does regard nature as the primarily important factor in the development of one’s personality, nurture or art being dependent on nature for its successful influence on the person. In fact, Prospero has learned his “Art” at the risk of his dukedom, and finally he decides to
forsake his potent “Art” because he knows that whatever is achieved by his “Art” is nothing but “such stuff/As dreams are made on” (4.1.156-7). Ethically, Prospero (or Shakespeare himself) knows that art or nurture can do little to nature. Thus, nature is always above art.

In his book on patterning in Shakespearean drama, William Godshalk enumerates a good number of contrasting loci in Shakespeare’s plays: the city of Rome and the forest outside in Titus Andronicus, the court of the king and the tent of the princess in Love’s Labor’s Lost, the court in Athens and the woods outside in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the court of Duke Frederick and the forest of Arden in As You Like It, the citadel inside the walls of Troy and the Greek camp outside in Troilus and Cressida, Rome and Egypt in Antony and Cleopatra, Sicily and Bohemia in The Winter’s Tale, etc. (15-18). As Godshalk further explains, the contrasting loci may stand for the contrasts between order and disorder, illusion and reality, folly and wisdom, artificiality and naturalness, reason and desire, restraint and looseness, time-consciousness and timelessness, harsh militarism and pleasurable love, gloomy winter and hopeful springtime, etc. For me, the two major locales of a Shakespearean play are often representative of the polar contrasts between art and nature, indeed, if art is taken to mean any unnatural human effort made to utilize nature, which is the original substance, material or quality of being. Furthermore, one might argue indeed that in a Shakespearean play “the polarity of place is irrevocably linked with a polarity of character” (Godshalk 19). Thus, for Lear to leave his court and come to the stormy heath is for him to forsake his unnatural self and return to his natural self, just as the natural Duke Senior of Arden returns to replace the unnatural (“artful”) Duke Frederick of the court. Behind the polarity of place and of character, there seems to be a Romantic belief that under the greenwood tree of nature, life is better than in a court of art.

When we return to King Lear, we find all the characters that die at the end must have learned, if only too late, the vanity and even fatality of their art: the two old sisters’ art of speech, Edmund’s Machiavellian art, Cornwall’s cruel political art, Lear’s and Gloucester’s parental art, and Cordelia’s filial art. But do they repent of
their own nature? Shakespeare does not arrange for any of them to reflect upon their inborn nature as the first cause of their behavior. Edmund, the most wicked one, may know that he is himself of evil nature. He may regret that his Machiavellian art has failed. Yet, he only shows that he still has a conscience to do one last good thing. He does not blame his own nature or the “Nature” he apostrophizes as his goddess. Thus, it seems that ethically nature is above art because nature is not blamable while art is.

Why is nature not blamable? It may be logical and only natural that good nature should do good and evil nature should do evil. But is one’s nature predetermined to be good or evil? Or is one’s nature originally neutral (and so it becomes ethically good or evil only after it enters the empirical world)? Let us recall Friar Lawrence’s findings stated in Romeo and Juliet:

The earth that’s nature’s mother is her tomb,
What is her burying grave, that is her womb,
And from her womb children of divers kind
We sucking on her natural bosom find:
Many for many virtues excellent,
None but for some, and yet all different.
O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities;
For nought so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give;
Nor aught so good but, strained from that fair use,
Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse.
Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied,
And vice sometime by action dignified.
Within the infant rind of this weak flower
Poison hath residence and medicine power;
For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part,
Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart.
Two such opposed kings encamp them still
In man as well as herbs, grace and rude will;
And where the worser is predominant,
Full soon the canker death eats up that plant.

(2.3.9-30)

In this passage, nature refers to anything existing on the earth and it is conceived as originally all good (all things have “powerful grace” in their “true qualities”). But later we find this nature can “give some special good” or “stumble on abuse” from time to time since vice can be “dignified” and virtue can be “misapplied.” Thus, it begins to seem that two opposed natures (grace and rude will) are inherent in man and things, and when “the worser” is predominant, death will come. According to Roland Frye, this passage shows the Friar’s theological training and it is in complete accord with the Christine doctrine that evil springs not from nature but from the corruption of nature. And thus Shakespeare seems to speak through the Friar about two natures: the primary nature, which is all good or neutral, and the secondary nature, which is seen as either good or evil according as grace or rude will prevails. Before man falls, man is in the primary nature without any art; after man falls, man is in the secondary nature with all art. In the fallen world, “Nature hath meal and bran, contempt and grace” (Cymbeline 4.227) and man’s art or nurture is responsible for any failure in life.

The Humanist Vision

Shakespeare is a Renaissance man. Renaissance is often said to be a period of classical revival, a period felicitous again for secularism and humanism. But we should not forget that the revival is a gradual process going from feudal medievalism, from Christian dogmatism or, in a word, from Hebraism back to Hellenism. Therefore, any Renaissance man simply cannot get clear of medieval thought, Christian doctrine, or Hebraic culture in his classical revival or his return to secularism or humanism, which is characteristic of Hellenism. And, therefore, it is only natural that Shakespeare should combine both Hebraism and Hellenism in his
Robert Fitch claims that in Shakespeare’s last plays “there is a bold affirmation of the triumph of innocence over evil.” And he adds: “There is a peculiar blending of the Hellenic and of the Hebraic in the resolution of the priorities and the meanings of wisdom and of love. But in the metaphysical concern with nature, the moral order, time, and eternity, the Hellenic perspective prevails over the Hebraic” (234, italics mine). I agree that just as Renaissance became more and more secularly Hellenic as time went on, so Shakespeare grew more and more Hellenic and humanistic in writing his plays.

Humanism, as Tony Davies points out, “is a word with a very complex history and an unusually wide range of possible meanings and contexts” (2). For me, Renaissance humanism is a rejection of Calvinistic predestination; it is a belief that recognizes humans “as born not with a burden of inherited sin due to their ancestry but with potential for both good and evil which will develop in this life as their characters are formed.” Renaissance humanists do recognize man’s middle position in the Great Chain of Being; they recognize the contrast of humans “with other earth-creatures (animals, plants), and with another order of beings, the sky-dwellers or gods” (Davies 125-6). Man is therefore “both mortal flesh, as those below him, and also spirit” and man’s struggle between flesh and spirit becomes a moral one. As the Italian Renaissance humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola says, man is neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal; man is the maker and molder of himself; humans can grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes, or grow upward into the higher natures which are divine.

Shakespeare is a poet of nature and a Renaissance humanist. All his plays deal with human nature struggling in the Great Chain of Being, that is, in the Great Nature that includes natural beings (human beings and such non-human beings as beasts, plants, and rocks) and supernatural beings (gods, goddesses, demons, witches, ghosts, spirits, etc.). Human nature is indeed depicted in Shakespeare as capable of growing either downward or upward, either into the lower natures or into the higher natures. In all types of his plays (histories, comedies, tragedies or romances) we
see both “good guys” and “bad guys.” We see honorable or noble men and women clearly distinguished from despicable or ignoble men and women in histories, comedies and romances. But mostly in his tragic heroes (Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, Lear, etc.) do we see the characters’ own good natures marred by their own bad natures.

We have pointed out two Lears. The two Lears exist not just in King Lear. As two opposing natures (the good, wise, unselfish nature vs. the bad, foolish, selfish nature), the two Lears actually appear in all plays and in all societies. The two Lears are forever combating each other like two opposing souls in the psychomachia. They bring about comedies or tragedies now and then as vice and folly affect small figures or great ones. They may make histories, too, by entering “real figures” or make romances by entering “ideal figures.”

Drama is an art of representing life or nature. In King Lear, Shakespeare’s art has tried to turn human ethics and politics into a cosmological debate originated from Greek philosophy. Regarding the state of nature, as we know, there are two Lears (doctrines) opposing each other in Greek thought. On one hand, we have Heraclitus and his followers, who believe that “change is ultimate and permanence a mere sensory appearance”; on the other hand, we have Pamenides and his adherents, who believe that “the permanent is fundamental and change a mere appearance” (Thilly 17). At first, Lear is a Pamenidean. He believes “nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.89), that is, “from being only being can come ... nothing can become something else ... everything remains what it is ... there can be only one eternal, unchangeable thing” (Thilly 37). We know Lear has at first told Cordelia the truth that ethically no parental love will come of no filial piety, but he has not learned the truth that politically no authority will come of no power. When this drama goes on, it proves to Lear that actually something can come of nothing (Cordelia’s lack of sweet words can turn into action of true love) and nothing can come of something (the older sisters’ eloquence can turn into no love at all). So, Lear must have become a Heraclitean at last, believing that every person as well as everything can change in time: change is ultimate and permanence a mere sensory
appearance.

According to the lear (doctrine) of Heraclitus, “Everything is changed into its opposite and everything, therefore, is a union of opposite qualities”; hence, “the world is ruled by strife: ‘War is the father of all and the king of all’” (Thilly 33). In King Lear, we do find that Lear is a union of sanity and insanity, love and hate, wisdom and foolishness; Gloucester is a union of insight and blindness; the other characters are the union of virtue and vice; the action of the play is a union of order and chaos, peace and war; everything is a union of nature and art, naturalness and unnaturalness. And the direction of change is from the former element through the latter element back to the former element again. This change is a permanent change, a perpetual alternation of goodness and badness, and hence a natural course seen in nature, implied in all types of drama, and felt in life.

The tempest is a natural phenomenon. It is in fact Shakespeare’s recurrent metaphor for one’s violent nature or a violent period of life. Thus, a character can speak of a tempest in the heart or a tempest of the soul, and Marina can say, “This world to me is a lasting storm” (Pericles, 4.1.20). “The most dramatic blending of the tempest without and the tempest within,” as Fitch has suggested, “is in the third act of King Lear” (232). But Lear’s “tempest in my mind” (3.4.12) must cease like the storm outside. Both a natural storm as experienced by Caliban and Trinculo and an unnatural tempest raised by the Art of Prospero and seen by Miranda must cease, too. There may indeed be a time when foul weather is hardly distinguishable from fine weather as the witches in Macbeth have mentioned. Yet, in life as in time it is only natural to alternate foulness with fairness. To stay all fair or all foul is to transcend nature and go into the ideal world beyond nature.

Under the influence of Hebraism, Shakespeare cannot detach himself from the Christian ideal of returning to paradise, the unfallen nature. Hence, there is actually no lack of moral concern in his plays, e.g. in a tragedy like King Lear or a romance like The Tempest. However, under the influence of Hellenism, Shakespeare is even more immersed in the humanist reality, the everyday nature of human life, which can be uplifted into a higher divine nature or dragged down into a lower beastly nature,
depending on whether the superego or the libido prevails. Hence, it seems to Johnson and to us, too, that Shakespeare prefers natural justice to poetic justice since he must hold the mirror of drama to reflect faithfully the changeable fallen nature.

It may not be very sensible to ascribe Shakespeare’s art to Neoclassicism or Romanticism as the two terms refer to two post-Renaissance periods. Yet, in the light of nature as a thematic focus, we do find Shakespeare partakes of both Neoclassic and Romantic tendencies. On one hand, Shakespeare’s plays do recognize man’s middle position in the Great Chain of Being as does Pope’s *Essay on Man*, and they do attack “the vanity of human wishes” as does Johnson’s satiric poem. Hence, in Shakespeare human nature is always dragged dramatically between conscience and desire; human vices and follies (due to the vain desire for love, power or other things) have constantly brought about comedies or tragedies. In this respect, Shakespeare is a Neoclassical humanist indeed.

On the other hand, however, Shakespeare is also like a visionary Romantic such as Blake, Shelley, and Keats. Like Blake, he envisions man’s fall as a fall from “The Universal Man” into “Selfhood,” that is, a foolish and selfish fall which perpetuates a cyclical change in life between innocence and experience as the two states of nature. Like Shelley, who places even Jupiter in the process of change, Shakespeare envisions mutability as the sole principle of nature. And, like Keats, he envisions contrariety as the essence of life and nature and tells us the coexistence of binary oppositions.

In a sonnet, Keats compares *King Lear* to a “bitter-sweet fruit” (“On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once again,” l. 8). We may not know for sure why Keats should describe the play as both bitter and sweet. Maybe it is because the tragedy is mixed with comic elements—a Shakespearean feature both Dryden and Johnson approve of. Anyway, as Johnson has observed, “Shakespeare’s plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow” (Adams 331). Thus, the entire Shakespearean oeuvre displays a humanist vision of nature, a vision in which nature contains the primary
unfallen nature (which is neutral or all good) and the secondary fallen nature (which is contaminated with art or nurture), and in which human natures romantically group into two Lears, one aspiring with conscience for the innocent, primary nature of the Eden and the other wallowing in the secondary “sublunary nature,” letting his good soul forever battle with his bad soul, and allowing binary oppositions to create a mystery of nature in the alternation of life’s tragedies and comedies, or histories and romances. This vision allows for the Neoclassic principles of moderation and of morality and yet recognizes the Romantic principles of change and of contrariety.
Notes

1. Gloucester’s belief is immediately flouted by Edmund, who says: “... when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars” (1.2.116-8). Yet, Gloucester’s belief was common in Shakespeare’s time.

2. As first proposed by E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*, flat characters are simple, typical and two-dimensional while round characters are unique, fully developed, capable of rotundity and of surprising in a convincing way, and as real to readers as their own acquaintances. See Forster, 72-78.

3. According to Kenneth Muir, “as early as 1879, one industrious critic pointed out the prevalence of animal imagery—133 separate mentions of sixty-four different animals—and several later critics have commented on the significance of these figures” (liv). A. C. Bradley mentions that a very striking characteristic of *King Lear* is “the incessant references to the lower animals and man’s likeness to them,” and his list of such animals include “the dog, the horse, the cow, the sheep, the hog, the lion, the bear, the wolf, the fox, the monkey, the pole-cat, the civet-cat, the pelican, the owl, the crow, the chough, the wren, the fly, the butterfly, the rat, the mouse, the frog, the tadpole, the wall-newt, the water-newt, the worm” (214).

4. Quoted from Schmidt in note 86 of Muir’s edition of *King Lear*, p. 163.

5. From *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.14.3) are quoted these of Calvin’s words: “The orthodox faith does not admit that any evil nature exists in the whole universe. For the depravity and malice both of man and of the devil, or the sins that arise therefrom, do not spring from nature, but rather from the corruption of nature.” See Roland Frye, p. 217.


9. See *3 Henry VI*, 2.5.86, *Richard III*, 1.4.44, *King John*, 5.2.50
Works Consulted


The Two Lears: Shakespeare’s Humanist Vision of Nature

Shakespeare.  *All’s Well That Ends Well.*  In Evans, 499-544.
--------.  *Cymbeline.*  In Evans, 1517-1563.
--------.  *3 Henry VI.*  In Evans, 671-707.
--------.  *King John.*  In Evans, 765-799.
--------.  *Pericles.*  In Evans, 1479-1516.
--------.  *Richard III.*  In Evans, 708-764.
--------.  *Romeo and Juliet.*  In Evans, 1055-1099.
--------.  *The Winter’s Tale.*  In Evans, 1564-1605.
兩個李爾：莎翁的人文自然觀
董崇選*

莎翁為自然/本性詩人。「自然/本性」為《李爾王》之主題。劇中呈現許多兩面的對立，說明了人心善惡的永恆爭鬥。有兩個李爾：一愚蠢自私，一明智無私；一個不自然/非本性，一個很自然/即本性。但李爾始終不知「自然的正義」不等於「人為的正義」。不過，他相信「自然/本性」勝過/先於「人為/法術」。

其實，莎翁在《李爾王》及其他許多劇本中，都提供一種人文主義的自然/本性觀，一方面讓良心嚮往原始無為的自然/本性，一方面卻認知墮落後的、有為的自然/本性，把人擺在「大存在鏈」的中間，上通神性，下接獸性，而把人生視為好壞人性不斷更替造成的悲劇或喜劇、歷史或傳奇。

關鍵詞：李爾、自然、人文主義、二元對立、靈魂之爭、自然對技藝

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