

## LEAR'S LEARNED NAME

Even as the key word in the first scene of *King Lear*, namely "love," may derive from the Old English "lofian," meaning "to praise,"<sup>1</sup> so the King's name may also have some basis in Old English. Though "Lear" is usually thought of as Celtic,<sup>2</sup> with a likely analog in the legend of the Irish Lir,<sup>3</sup> there may well be resonances of OE *lære* ("empty"), which then evolved into ME *lære* (with the variant form of *lear* — see *OED*). The same word in Renaissance times was spelled *lear(e)*, as in Turberville's translation of the Epistles of Ovid: "Some lustfull lasse will not permit Achylles couth be leare" (1567). The origin is approximately the same as Modern German *leer*. If Camden was one of the sources of the play, which seems likely, it is noteworthy that several other names which are in the play, and which he also mentions, are of Saxon origin.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, a resonance of OE "empty" in the name Lear is a distinct possibility too. The affinity has some bearing on the Buddhist origin of the story of *Barlaam and Josaphat*,<sup>5</sup> an important analog to the Lear story, for it suggests that the "empty" condition of the King is a state of mind awaiting spiritual fulfillment. Moreover, the linkage points to a "nirvana theme" in the Shakespearean version of the story,<sup>6</sup> implications of which are subtly present already in the name of the protagonist.

That characters' names in the plays may relate to their function ultimately derives from the Morality Play tradition. Though this correlation certainly need not be thought of as true for most of Shakespeare's figures, a number of etymological connections that have been discovered are worth serious attention. For example, it is clearly more than coincidental that the name Romeo is contrasted with his rival for the hand of Juliet, namely Paris (the two capital cities, Rome and Paris, aesthetically balancing each other off, as it were). It is remarkable enough that the name Iago relates to Sant'Iago Matamoros (meaning "Moor-slayer St. Iago"), though given England's enmity with Spain it is understandable.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it is difficult to think that the combination h-e-l-l in the name

<sup>1</sup> Terry Hawkes, "'Love' in *King Lear*," *RES*, N.S., X (1959), 178–181.

<sup>2</sup> L. L. Schücking, *Character Problems in Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1922), pp. 176–190.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton, in *Links Between Ireland and Shakespeare* (Dublin, 1919), posits such a relationship.

<sup>4</sup> For comment on Old English origins of names in *King Lear* as derived from Camden's *Remaines* (e.g. Edgar, Edmund, Oswald, but not Lear), see S. Musgrave, "The Nomenclature of *King Lear*," *RES*, N.S., VII (1956), 294–298.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, in *The Development of Arthurian Romance* (New York, 1963), pp. 35–36, cites Geoffrey of Monmouth on this.

<sup>6</sup> On this, see R. B. Kulshreshtha, "Shakespeare's Feeling for Words," *The Literary Criterion*, VII (Summer 1967), 6–19. It is curious, in this connection, that T. S. Eliot apparently had some understanding of these resonances in his poetry. The concept of hollowness awaiting fulfillment has been noted in "The Hollow Men" and also in *The Waste Land*, where there are decided echoes of the first scene in *King Lear*. See D. E. S. Maxwell, *The Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (London, 1952), p. 107. I should add that Eliot's own (perhaps unconscious) awareness of the affinity between the name Lear and the German *leer* arises in the famous quotation of *The Waste Land*, "Oed' und leer das Meer."

<sup>7</sup> G. N. Murphy, "A Note on Iago's Name," in *Literature and Society*, ed. Bernice Slotte (Lincoln, 1964), pp. 38–43.

Othello would adumbrate his being damned at the end of the tragedy, for, if so, what about the d-e-m-o-n in innocent Desdemona?<sup>8</sup> Her name is scarcely demonic, in spite of the Moor's nicknaming her *Desdemon* (l. 1651), inasmuch as it derives from the words *desde* ("from") and *mona* ("monkey"), suggesting that her behavior is considered by several characters to be ape-like (or that she behaves as Elizabethans thought monkeys behave).<sup>9</sup>

Could Shakespeare have been aware of the resonances of OE and ME "empty" in the name of perhaps his most tragic hero? If they work in the play, it is not necessary to assume that he was. Perhaps the author of the old play of *King Leir* was better aware of such etymology, and Shakespeare may have taken over his scholarship inadvertently. Already in Geoffrey of Monmouth's version of the Lear legend, the name Cordelia was *Cordeilla*, suggesting *cor de illa* ("with, or from, the heart").<sup>10</sup> Hence it is helpful to think of her heartfelt nature as balanced off against Lear's sterile emptiness, with his "darker purpose"<sup>11</sup> ironically already hinted at in a name reflecting his need to be filled with grace.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On the etymology of Othello's name, see particularly F. N. Lees, "Othello's Name," *N & Q*, N.S., VIII (1961), 139–141; also T. Sipahigil, "Othello's Name, Once Again," *N & Q*, N.S., XVIII (1971), 147–148. The name Othello may also be considered a portmanteau name combining "Othoman" with "Leo," for which it is a partial anagram (or metathesis). That Shakespeare used John Leo's *The History and Description of Africa* and probably based the Moor on Leo's career is well-known.

<sup>9</sup> Citation is to the Norton facsimile of the 1623 Folio.

<sup>10</sup> J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), writes: "As to Leir's daughters, whatever any earlier form of Cordeilla's name, the good Latinist author must have meant Cor-de-illa to fit her loyal love" (p. 382).

<sup>11</sup> J. R. Dove and P. Gamble, in "'Our Darker Purpose': The Division Scene in *Lear*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, LXX (1969), 306–318, make the interesting point that Lear's "darker purpose" is his decision to give Cordelia the richest third of the kingdom as a bait for her to remain with him.

<sup>12</sup> For a useful introduction on Shakespeare's etymological use of names, see Harry Levin, "Shakespeare's Nomenclature," in *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. Gerald W. Chapman (Princeton, 1965), pp. 59–90. Also interesting as a study on Cordelia's name as based on "*Cor*, which is Italian and Latin for 'heart'" and "*Delia* as being a witty anagram for 'ideal'" is Joseph Satin's "The Symbolic Role of Cordelia in *King Lear*," *Forum* (Houston), IX (Fall-Winter, 1972), 15–17. He writes, "Michael Drayton's playful semi-parody of Daniel's sequence in part confirms this, since Drayton calls his lady-fair *Idea*. And for a fuller perspective . . . we may turn to Daniel's direct anterior source, Maurice Scève's 449 dizains in praise of *Délie*" (p. 15). He does not consider that, in contrast, the name Lear may also be taken as an anagram for "real," pointing up the theme of appearance and reality.