# The Mystical Paradigm in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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**Abstract**

*This article takes as its starting point the statement by Caroline Spurgeon that mysticism, with its aim of the union with the One, does not appear in Shakespeare's works. It is initially pointed out that any suggestion that mysticism is present in any work is fraught with serious reception problems, since mysticism is very adversely viewed at present, even by supposedly open-minded literary critics.*

*After providing a definition of mysticism in terms which attempt to alleviate these reception problems, evidence will then be presented from* ***King Lear*** *to suggest that the play is built on the basis of an affirmation of unity, and a perception of disunity as resulting from the destructive effects of difference, division and duality. This, it is suggested, implies that Shakespeare was thinking in terms of the mystical paradigm when he wrote the play.*

*In conclusion, some indication is given of possible significances of the presence of the mystical paradigm in the play, and how richly suggestive the presence of such a paradigm is in a play such as this.*

## 1. Introduction

In her *Mysticism and English Literature*, Caroline Spurgeon dismisses Shakespeare's work as having any relevance to her study in the following way:

> Shakespeare must be left to one side ... because the dramatic form does not lend itself to the expression of mystical feeling and ... because even in the poems there is little real mysticism .... Shakespeare is metaphysical rather than mystical, the difference being ... that the metaphysician seeks to know the beginnings or causes of things, whereas the mystic feels he knows the end of things, that all nature is leading up to union with the One (Spurgeon, 1970:13)

In this article I would like to use Spurgeon's statement as the starting point for a diametrically opposed reading. Through an examination of specific linguistic and dramatic patterns in *King Lear*, I will suggest that central to the play is a deep and widespread concern with precisely what Spurgeon defines as being central to the mystical experience: the knowledge that, ultimately, all is One.

## 2. Current attitudes to mysticism

Given current attitudes to mysticism, such an attempt is not without its dangers. Mysticism is an area of human experience even more problematic than 'conventional' religion, with which it is often inexactly associated, arousing all sorts of misconceptions, from simple misunderstandings through to outright ignorance and prejudice. As Spurgeon (1970:1) herself points out, "... mysticism is often used in a semi-contemptuous way to denote vaguely any kind of occultism or spiritualism, or any specially curious or fantastic views about God and the universe". It is probably true to say that mysticism is *generally* seen in negative terms, being perceived as a process of "confused, irrational thinking" associated with "spiritualism and clairvoyance, with obscure psychological states and happenings, some of which are the result of ... morbid pathological states". Or it is used as "a synonym for other-worldliness, or to describe a nebulous outlook upon the world ..." (Happold, 1964:36). It "means to many hocus-pocus and confusion and uncritical and unscientific" (Kvastad, 1980:15). And we have all at some stage either used or heard the common phrase 'mystical flights of fancy,' the pejorative sense of which is self-evident. Specifically in the realm of literary criticism, critics "have carefully avoided the word 'mystical'. It reminds everyone of old-fashioned theologies; it evokes the scorn of rationalist critics" (Libby, 1984:2). Against such attitudes, an attempt to indicate the presence of patterns in *King Lear* which imply Shakespeare's thought functioning within the mystical paradigm seems almost foolhardy. Yet, as I will indicate extensively in what follows, the patterns *are* present in the play, and in such strength and clarity that their presence seems to demand some kind of explanation, even if that explanation seems to be expressible only in terms of a paradigm that to most seems outdated and rather ridiculous.

## 3. Mysticism as alternative paradigm

I will start by suggesting that from the preceding list of prejudices and misconceptions – and from Spurgeon's initial comment – it becomes apparent that one's perception of mysticism – and one's perception of its possible presence in Shakespeare's work – will depend upon one's definition of what exactly mysticism *is*. Before providing a definition, however, I would like to indicate a useful attitude which may help to dispel initial doubts about mysticism, by seeing it

instead of something rather peculiar and extraordinary, as a *paradigm*: i.e., as basically just another way, among many others, of perceiving and interpreting the world. Speaking within these terms, F.C. Happold asserts that mysticism is a

> ... particular form of consciousness, out of which arises types of experience, akin to, but not to be confused or equated with, those labelled 'religious', and which results in a special sort of 'spirituality', giving that word a wide connotation, and *a predisposition to interrogate and interpret the universe in a particular way'* (Happold, 1964:17; my emphasis).

This assertion is useful partly because it distinguishes mysticism from the blanket term *religion*, and partly because it defines mysticism as a type of consciousness, at a time when we are becoming increasingly aware of the role of consciousness in the human activity of both literally and figuratively 'constructing' the world. But its usefulness lies mainly in its placement of mysticism within the broad range of all the other paradigms within which human beings have the choice of living; i.e. it is another way, among many other ways, of "interrogat[ing] and interpret [ing] the universe". It therefore falls within Thomas Kuhn's definition of a paradigm as "an accepted model or pattern" (Kuhn, 1970:23), and can be said to be what has been called by a modern sociologist a "*reality definition*"; i.e. a series of formulae which define "whatever people experience as real in a given situation" (Berger *et al.*, 1981:18). It is thus a definition conceived in broadly and commonly-accepted human terms and need therefore be given none of the extraordinary, other-worldly qualities commonly attributed to mysticism – or some types of mysticism. As a result, it becomes, I hope, unproblematic to say that if we are capable of conceiving that a tribesman from Papua New Guinea will view the world very differently from a citizen of modern Chicago, because each constructs and perceives the world in terms of a very different paradigm, according to his own particular needs, those needs being socially defined (i.e. his perceptions are not *wrong*, merely *different*), then we should also be able to conceive of mysticism as a different way of perceiving reality, another paradigm, and so need not be provoked to the kind of extreme reaction of the sort noted earlier.

## 4. Mysticism defined in terms of unity

The question then arises as to what constitutes the particular and unique qualities of the mystical paradigm; i.e. what is the nature of the 'particular way' in which mystics 'interrogate and interpret the universe'? Among many definitions of mysticism, the most useful I have discovered is that of Alan Watts, who sees "mystical experience" as "the experience of relationship" (Watts, 1986:56) or "mutual interdependence" (Watts, 1986:54). According to this definition, then, what characterises the mystical experience in whatever time, creed or culture it appears is its tendency to see the world as a unified system of interdependent parts all existing in relation to rather than independent of each other. Further-

more, those who think in mystical terms perceive any system that sees the world in relational terms as positive, and making for human happiness, while defining that which is negative and problematic anything which leads to or results from perceiving and constructing the world in terms of difference, division, or duality, all of which shatter unity. This is in keeping with Spurgeon's comment, quoted in the opening paragraph of this paper, that mysticism can be defined as perceiving the world in terms of the ultimate aim of "union with the One".

The unanimity on this subject in writings from a wide range of cultures dealing with the mystical experience is truly remarkable, making this affirmation of the unity of all life into a belief that is effectively both trans-cultural and trans-historical. Bertrand Russell (1918:10) confirms that central to all mystical teachings is the fundamental concept of the unity or oneness of all things, all life, all experience: "the ... characteristic of mysticism is its belief in unity". The moment that this unity is in any way broken, discord and disharmony follow: "Behold but one in all things; it is the second that leads you astray" (Kabir, in Huxley, 1969:17). Jalal al-Din Rumi, "the greatest of all the Sufi poets" (Scharfstein, 1973:7) states, "I have put duality away, I have seen that the two worlds are one; One I seek, One I know, One I call" (Scharfstein, 1973:8). Brahman, the supreme state of Indian Vedic philosophy, from which Buddhism and Taoism sprang, is One, not as opposed to many, but simply "without duality" since "all duality is falsely imagined" (Watts, 1957:39, 40). Meister Eckhart, the 14th century Christian mystic, speaks in the same terms, defining God "... as He is, a sheer, pure absolute One, sundered from all two-ness" (Huxley, 1969:41). Modern commentators on mysticism have defined it in similar terms (cf. Russell, above). W. Johnston sees mysticism as a kind of "vertical thinking" (he takes this term from C.G. Jung) "that ... does away with differences, distinctions, quiddities and essences *in order to find the unity of all things*" (1970:98; my emphasis). Similarly, W.R. Inge states that "Philosophically, mysticism rests on the doctrine that reality consists in the unity in duality of mind and its objects" (148). The mystical way, then, is what Evelyn Underhill has called the "Unitive Life" (Underhill, 1949:chap. X). It sees – or rather, since mysticism is so quintessentially something that is experienced rather than something that is merely seen – it experiences unity as the supreme, the only state; all disunity of any sort is untrue to the actual nature of reality, and the source, therefore, of everything that we would call evil in the world, and hence the cause of human suffering: as Aldous Huxley puts it, "Good is that which makes for unity, evil ... for separateness" (Saher, 1969:132. There is a similar statement in Huxley, 1969:210-11). What is remarkable about these statements, especially in the context of the pressure to see all values as relative in the postmodern world, is that they define an *absolute* moral code. It is perhaps this quality, more than anything, that makes an understanding of mysticism problematic to the modern mind, pressured as it is to see relativity in all things, including morality.

## 5. The problem of duality

Duality "arises only when we classify, when we sort our experiences into mental boxes .... We have begun to classify as soon as we notice differences .... " (Watts, 1957:73-4). The essential problem of dividing the world up, of turning it into a series of discrete objects and then splitting those objects up into different categories is that the mind ends up "divided against itself" (Watts, 1957:53), accepting only a part of its experience and rejecting the remainder (the classic example here is the good-evil duality intrinsic to conventional morality), not realising that all experience is a seamless garment into which humankind is fully integrated. To reject or dismiss a part of experience is effectively therefore to reject or dismiss a part of oneself.

Such ideas are not merely abstract, esoteric and 'weird'. Aldous Huxley points out that the negative associations of duality are built into the basic structures of Indo-European languages:

> ... how significant it is that in Indo-European languages ... the root meaning 'two' should connote badness. The Greek prefix dys- (as in dyspepsia) and the Latin dis- (as in dishonourable) are both derived from 'duo'. The cognate bis- gives a pejorative sense of such modern French words as *bévue* ('blunder,' literally 'two-sight'). Traces of that 'second which leads you astray' can be found in 'dubious', 'doubt', and *Zweifel* – for to doubt is to be double-minded. Bunyan has his Mr Facing-both-ways, and modern American slang its 'two-timers'. Obscurely and unconsciously wise, our language confirms the findings of the mystics and proclaims the essential badness of division – a word, incidentally, in which our old enemy 'two' makes another decisive appearance (Huxley, 1969:17).

Alan Watts points to precisely the same phenomenon: "the ... Sanskrit root *dav-* from which we get the word 'divide' is also the root of the Latin *duo* (two) and the English 'dual'" (Watts, 1957:39). So complete is this stress on non-duality, on oneness, in the mystical view of things, so fully is even the slightest form of duality seen as destructive, that:

> A split hair's difference,
> And heaven and earth are set apart!
> (Watts, 1957:115).

These then are the basic terms within which the mystical paradigm functions. The remainder of this article will attempt to show that these concepts are present on a massive scale in *King Lear*, while the concluding sections will concern themselves with the implication of this presence for any interpretation of *King Lear*.

## 6. Difference and division in *King Lear*

If we turn to *King Lear*, then in the light of what has been said above it is significant that the notion of oneness is central, references to it occurring in some form throughout the play, almost invariably associated with wholeness; while it is played off against specific references to difference, division or duality, equally invariably with negative connotations. An awareness of the significance of such concepts is particularly illuminating of the opening scene between Gloucester, Kent and Edmund, a scene either ignored by critics, or dismissed as a low-key bit of social or (depending on the individual writing at the time) slightly bawdy chit-chat to provide a contrast against which the appalling family and national falling-out that follows is to be highlighted. But in fact the scene – and therefore the play – opens with a discussion between Kent and Gloucester which focuses immediately on the kind of issues I have referred to above, for it deals specifically with the notion of a *lack* of any kind of difference in the King's perception of his two sons-in-law, this lack of difference, since Albany and Cornwall are effectively the heirs to the kingdom, being reflected on both the national and personal level (the two levels on which the play will function):

> *Kent*: I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.
>
> *Gloucester*: It did always seem so to us; but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the Dukes he values most; for equalities are so weigh'd that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.[1]

The kingdom is to be divided (which in terms of the mystical paradigm automatically portends suffering), yet the key point at this stage is that there is no 'division' in the king's mind, not the slightest "split hair" of difference in Lear's perception of his heirs to "set heaven and earth apart", for the part given to each son-in-law is so perfectly balanced that there is no perceptible difference between them. A little later in the same scene, Gloucester makes precisely the same kind of statement about his own feelings for his two sons (the subplot thus echoing and reflecting the main plot in the manner with which we are so familiar in Shakespeare's work). Though born legitimately, Edgar is "no dearer in [Gloucester's] account" than the illegitimate Edmund. The notion of a lack of any differentiation or favour in human affections, then, has been introduced twice within twenty lines, a central concept (particularly in the light of what follows) initiated at the

1 *King Lear*, I.i.1-6. All references are taken from the Peter Alexander collected edition (Shakespeare, 1970).

beginning of the play. It is from this situation that the action develops. This sense of a lack of difference in affections in very real terms becomes the yardstick against which the rest of the play is to be measured, particularly given that the central feature of the next scene is the love test which Lear applies to his daughters, which operates on the basis of defining *difference* in human affections towards one another ("Which of you shall we say doth love us *most*?" I.i.50; my emphasis). Furthermore, the reference to the division of the kingdom is linked to the notion of unity (and later division) in human affections. Not only the kingdom, but the human inhabitants of the kingdom, will be horrendously divided both in themselves and from one another as a result of Lear's application of the love test.

The idea that there is initially *no* difference in Lear's perceptions of his sons-in-law is extended into Lear's opening speech – he has "divided / In three [his] kingdom", yet maintains the balance between his heirs: he refers to "Our son Cornwall, / And you, our no less loving son of Albany". But such harmony is not to last (as the reference to the "division" of the kingdom pre-figures), and it does not last specifically because Lear starts to lose this precisely fair sense of balance and starts defining differences in his perception of his daughters. So, as we have seen, when he applies the test of protestation of love to Regan, Goneril and Cordelia, he expects them to compete for supremacy by saying "Which of [them] shall we say doth love us *most*?" (my emphasis). The tragedy starts at this moment. Lear's tendency to favour in love, to make differences between his daughters is emphasised again and again as the scene progresses. Cordelia is his "joy," who was to "draw / A third more opulent than [her] sisters" (ll. 84-5). Lear himself admits that "I lov'd her most" (l. 122) while France confirms that she was his "best object," "The best, the dearest" (ll. 214, 216). From such differences, disharmony follows, disharmony of the massive, agonising sort that we find in *King Lear*, unique for the intensity of its suffering in the history of tragic theatre. Kent is uncompromising in his perception of what has taken place: by applying the love test the king, in Kent's opinion, is doing 'evil' (I.i.166). We here enter the realm of absolute moral values which, as I have indicated, is central to the mystical paradigm.

Illuminatingly, it is Cordelia who takes this notion of dividing love to its logical conclusion – but in order to make a mockery of it, and to ironically undercut her sisters, who say they love their father entirely, when it is obvious (to everyone except Lear) that they do not:

> Haply, when I shall wed,
> The lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
> Half my love with him, half my care and duty.

> Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
> To love my father all
> (I.i.99-103).

It is important to note that this *is* ironic – the taking of a position to an extreme to show its absurdity. As her behaviour in the rest of the play shows, Cordelia is fully aware that one does not and cannot split love up in the way that she describes here. Cordelia's manner has been much criticised in this scene, most of all for its supposed coldness, however much such behaviour is obviously out of kilter with her characterisation throughout the rest of the play, which is specifically designed to be everything but cold, calculating and inhuman (IV.vii in particular is relevant here). Her sisters go to one lunatic extreme, so she exaggerates their position, ultimately to make Lear 'see better.' She is possibly naive to think that the (at this stage) literal-minded Lear will take her send-up at anything but face-value (just as he takes her sisters' equally absurd protestations of love at face value), but cold she is not, and to criticise her in those terms is to impose realistic expectations upon a highly symbolic drama. The opening scene is designed to set up specific positions against which the rest of the action is played out. As such, it should not be judged in realistic terms.

As the scene develops, the division of the kingdom is reflected in increasing division within society, as the various characters take opposing views of the process that Lear's initial act of division and differentiation inspires: Lear, Regan, Goneril and Burgundy stand opposed to Cordelia, Kent and France. Gloucester, commenting on these divisions later, describes them in the following terms: note the general process of division that he describes, and the number of words he uses of the type of which Huxley speaks (which I have emphasised throughout):

> ... love cools, friendship falls off, brothers *divide*; in cities, mutinies; in countries, *discord*; in palaces, treason; and the bond *crack'd* 'twixt son and father. ... We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous *disorders*, follow us *disquietly* to our graves
> (I.ii.103-14).

Edmund, mocking his father's belief in portents, comments that "... these eclipses do portent these *divisions*" (I.ii.130) and gives the following ironic speech to Edgar about a prediction he has read; precisely the same kind of divisive actions are described; precisely the same kind of language is used (again, my emphasis throughout):

> I promise you, the effects that he writes of succeed unhappily; as of unnaturalness between the child and the parent, death, dearth, *dissolutions* of ancient amities; *divisions* in state, menaces and maledictions against kings

> and nobles; needless *diffidences*, banishment of friends, *dissipation* of cohorts, nuptial breaches, and I know not what
>
> (I.ii.137-42).

Very specifically, then, both dramatically and linguistically, the pattern has been set. The perception of human relationships in terms of difference leads to increasing division. Increased division in turn leads to increasing conflict, a process that is continued throughout the play, with the key word *division* or the action of division appearing over and over again: Kent talks of "division ... 'twixt Albany and Cornwall" (III.i.19-21) a process which Gloucester confirms in identical terms a few lines later: "There is division between the Dukes" (III.iii.8-9). John Reibetanz, in a comment that indicates how easy it is to miss the significance of the division/difference/duality references in the play, refers to these speeches, but comments: "The wars never materialize and the rumour is ... so widely spaced that it becomes completely lost in more major issues" (Reibetanz, 1977:39). In other words, he sees them as irrelevancies, tagged on to the action and then forgotten, whereas in the light of the persistent references to and acting out of the process of division, these speeches become verbalised reinforcements of what is in fact a major, if not *the* major dramatic and linguistic pattern in the play. The divisive patterns in the later stages of the action systematically bear this out. There is division between Lear and his daughters Regan and Goneril; they in turn have divided from Cordelia; Edmund turns secretly against Edgar; under his tutelage Gloucester turns on Edgar; Edmund betrays Gloucester, Albany rejects Goneril; Goneril and Regan become deadly enemies over Edmund; and so on, more or less *ad infinitum*.

The divided, fragmented or "scatter'd" (III.i.31) kingdom, causing suffering on the national level, is reflected in the splitting into fragments (i.e. the division) of the human heart, signifying the suffering of the individual as the result of division or fragmentation. Lear defiantly but foolishly talks of his heart "break[ing] into a thousand flaws/Or ere [he'll] weep" (II.iv.284-5), this being foolish because within the paradigm operating in the play a cracked heart automatically means suffering or weeping; the one cannot exist without the other. Gloucester's "old heart is is crack'd, it's crack'd!" (II.i.90); Edgar describes how at the end "His grief grew puissant, and the strings of life/Began to crack" (V.iii.216-7). At the end, as Lear dies, Kent says "Break, heart; I prithee break" (V.iii.312). Albany reverses the image, but still uses it to make the basic point, linking a cracked or divided heart with hatred: "Let sorrow split my heart if ever I / Did hate thee or thy father!" (V.iii.177-8). Albany also specifically points to the consequences for humankind if a person is divided against him/herself in any way:

O Goneril!

. . .

I fear your disposition:
That nature which contemns its origin
Cannot be border'd certain in itself;
She that herself will *sliver and disbranch*
From her material sap perforce must wither
And come to deadly use.

. . .

It will come
Humanity must perforce prey on itself
Like monsters of the deep
(IV.ii.29-50; my emphasis).

But Edgar, in a crucial speech, seems to indicate that, given the nature of the world, a broken heart is inevitable. Watching the mad Lear and the blind Gloucester play out the terrible scene on the beach at Dover, he says: "I would not take this from report. It is, / And my heart breaks at it" (IV.vi.141-2). This would seem to imply that the world as it is constituted causes inevitable pain.[2]

## 7. Difference

The pain caused by division on the national and personal level is reinforced by the concept of difference, which, as we have seen, is a central cause of suffering in mystical thought.

The main theme of Edmund's "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" speech is his complaint against the artificial differences imposed by society upon people, thus causing the resentment which leads to his later behaviour (suggesting in a different way a world structured to cause suffering):

2 Edgar's "it is" is of course balanced (the linguistic pattern indicates this) against Cordelia's crucial "I am" at IV.vii.70 which promises infinite love and gentleness instead of, as here, infinite suffering and torment. The full interpretation of the significance of the presence of the mystical paradigm has to be left to another paper – here I am merely indicating the presence of the paradigm in the play. But it is important to note that Edgar's "it is" and Cordelia's "I am" essentially make the same statement about the same world, yet one points to the potential for suffering, and the other for redemption. This is in keeping with the mystical view that the world is a seamless garment, and that good and evil, virtue and vice – all the normal conditions which we see as mutually exclusive polar opposites – co-exist within the same material universe.

Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue?
(I.ii.6-9).

The dreadful suffering of Gloucester and Edgar follows quite logically from this artificially contrived state of social difference.

Like *division*, *difference* contains to appear at key points in the play, while characters continually draw artificial distinctions between other characters which continue to cause suffering. The disguised Kent, after tripping Oswald up by the heels, in the incident that initiates the breach between Lear and Goneril, says to Oswald "I'll teach you differences" (I.iv.88-9); Regan tells Gloucester that "Our father he hath writ, so hath our sister, / Of differences" (II.i.122-3); Cornwall asks Oswald and Kent "What is your difference?" (II.ii.48); Goneril, weighing up her husband and Edmund as lovers (which will lead to a choice that will eventually cause her own death), exclaims "O, the difference of man and man!" (IV.ii.26). Kent, however, points to the difficulty in coming to terms with a world in which differences between people are so apparent when he says that

It is the stars,
The stars above us, govern our conditions,
Else one self mate and make could not beget
Such different issues
(IV.iii.32-5).

Kent at the end identifies himself to Lear as "the very man ... That from your first of difference and decay / Have follow'd your sad steps" (V.iii.286-9). Here again difference is equated with sadness and decay.

So what one experiences, throughout the play, is a literally massive reference to the concepts that I am dealing with in this paper: division, duality and difference, all pointing directly to the experience that lies at the heart of this play more than any other in the canon of tragic literature – the causes and extent of human suffering.

## 8. Unity and oneness

To extend the point, with images of the destructive effects of difference, division and duality is juxtaposed a series of images, statements etc. which point implicitly or explicitly to the positive effects of unity or oneness (when I say 'implicitly' here, it is obvious that every example of the destructive effects of duality, division and difference implicitly advocates the positive effects of unity). This is extended

even into the behaviour of characters traditionally seen as unrelievedly evil, for example on the occasion of Regan quite rightly asking of her father: "How in one house / Should many people under two commands / Hold amity?" (II.iv.239-41). Similarly, the strength of unity, even for an evil purpose, is emphasised by Goneril pointing out that Regan and she "are one" in their resolve "Not to be overruled" (I.iii.16-17). It is encapsulated in Kent's striking image of "rogues as these" (referring to Oswald) who "Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain / Which are too intrinse t'unloose" (II.ii.69-70). This image presents once again the damaging effects of evil (Oswald is a "smiling rogue" and is compared to a "rat") in terms of duality or twoness ("a-twain") but also asserts that the state of oneness ("intrinse") is "holy."

The positive power of oneness however is encapsulated in Cordelia, who is described in terms of someone who contains and reconciles opposites and so creates oneness:

> ... patience and sorrow strove
> Who would express her goodliest. You have seen
> Sunshine and rain at once: her smiles and tears
> Were like a better way
> (IV.iii.16-19).

This is explicitly stated by the Gentleman when he says to the departing Lear at Dover beach:

> Thou hast *one* daughter
> Who redeems nature from the general curse
> Which *twain* have brought her to
> (IV.vi.207-9; my emphasis).

The terminology he uses here is broadly suggestive: it refers explicitly to the potential power of Cordelia (the 'one' daughter) for good, and that of Regan and Goneril ('twain') for evil; it links up in many critics' minds with the original 'two' in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, who were the cause of the fall of Man and the entry of sin into the world; but it also explicitly uses the oneness/ duality juxtaposition to point the evil effect of twoness or duality on life and the healing effect of oneness or unity. That this is not some idealised state, but has to operate within the imperfections of life is manifested throughout, but none so clearly as when, for example, Cordelia is hanged, or equally when Lear is at his maddest (and yet at his most wise) when on the beach he specifically represents himself in terms of "not twoness": he has "No seconds"; he is "All myself" (IV.vi.195). *Twoness* is rejected right up until the end: when Albany tries to set things to rights, he offers Kent and Edgar dual rulership of the kingdom: "Friends of my soul, you *twain* / Rule in this realm and the gor'd state sustain" (V.iii.319-

20; my emphasis). But Kent rejects such duality; he must rejoin his master; by implication one alone will remain. Kent's earlier statement to Lear follows the same pattern: "If fortune brag of *two* she lov'd and hated / *One* of them we behold" (V.iii.281-2, my emphasis). Kent took on a 'second' identity because of the workings of evil; now that evil has destroyed itself, 'two' returns once more to 'one'.

With Cordelia's death, the most powerful statement of her ultimate significance comes from Lear when he says "I know when *one* is dead and when *one* lives; / She's dead as earth" (V.iii.260-1, my emphasis). Here there is presented the possibility that the 'one' which in all mystical writings is an all-embracing term for existence itself, might be capable of dying (an absurd notion in itself, yet Lear is making a point about the extremity of his feelings, and of the literally infinite value that Cordelia signifies to him); in other words, she signifies life itself, and everything that makes life worth living. The image "she's dead as earth" reinforces this statement. If the earth dies, then life ceases completely to exist; in other words, it suggests destruction at a most fundamental level, when all chance of revival no longer exists, and so implies the fundamental nature of the meaning Cordelia bears in the play.

The only occasion in which *twoness* is seen as positive is in Lear's words as he and Cordelia are led away to prison. When Cordelia asks if they are not going to see "these daughters and these sisters" Lear replies:

> No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage
> (V.iii.8-9).

However, within the context of what I have been saying, it is illuminating to see that the *O.E.D.* points out that 'alone' has its origins in the phrase *all one*. This is how they are described in the rest of his speech – being so closely at one with each other ("When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness") that in effect this speech becomes a statement of how 'twoness' need not necessarily be destructive; but only because in this case the 'two' individuals are completely at one. So completely at one are they that they can "take upon [themselves] the mystery of things / As if [they] were God's spies" (the only time that the word *God* is used in the play; the rest of the time only 'the gods' are referred to) and see to the heart of life itself, viewing the world with the eyes of God, the ultimate 'One'.

All this evidence seems overwhelming: *King Lear* functions clearly in terms of concepts, attitudes and ideas that coincide precisely with those that are central to the mystical paradigm, leading one to conclude that Shakespeare was in some way thinking specifically within the terms of the mystical paradigm when he

wrote *King Lear*. The extent and nature of the misconceptions about mysticism, some of which were briefly outlined at the beginning of this paper, make it necessary to defend this statement at a rather basic level, instead of proceeding with a more advanced investigation of its significance, although some indication of this larger significance will become apparent as the discussion proceeds.

## 9. Mysticism in dramatic form

Before we go on to examine the significance of the presence of the material presented above in the play, we need first to deal with Spurgeon's assertion in the passage quoted at the very beginning of this article that "the dramatic form does not lend itself to the expression of mystical feeling". This can be true only if one has a simplistic or distorted perception of mysticism; more precisely, if one confuses the outward form of mysticism with its inner reality. For mysticism has little if anything to do with outward form, and almost everything to do with inner reality. It is primarily an *attitude to life* (cf. Russell, 1918:11) or a *state of consciousness* that we are dealing with here – one that conceives of the world and the human relationship to the world in terms of nonduality. There is no other criterion for assessing its presence – least of all any criterion of outward behaviour – other than the manifestation, in one's every thought and action, of complete acceptance of the principle of the oneness of all creation. Misconceptions, as we have seen, abound, and so extreme are they that their outward manifestations largely take on the form of caricature. So if one conceives of a mystic in terms of such caricatures – as necessarily an individual who lives in a cave or a monastery, wears robes, and spends his day rapt in vague, otherworldly thoughts, or 'contemplating his navel,' then the matching of *King Lear* and mysticism is certainly impossible. Spurgeon probably makes a mistake along much these lines: presumably she conceives of mysticism as manifesting itself exclusively in the contemplative life. This may well often be the form which the mystic life takes, but not exclusively so, there being adequate evidence to support such an assertion. For example, one of the greatest and most enduring expressions of the mystical attitude to life is the *Bhagavad Ghita*, which outwardly concerns the advice given by the Lord Shri Krishna to Prince Arjuna to fight in battle even although this will entail killing members of his own family (Arjuna, Hamlet-like, has moral scruples about the nature of the action he finds imposed upon him). The advice the Lord Krishna gives is that so long as the Prince focuses on the 'One indivisible' and does not seek after the fruits of his action, then he has nothing to fear; in other words, Arjuna is advised to see the task before him as a mystic would, in terms of unity. Furthermore, in the Hindu tradition, there are different types of yoga, each demanding a different way to achieve the same end (the term *yoga* means 'union'; i.e. yoga is a search for oneness, and a rejection of duality, difference and division). In this tradition, "*Hatha* yoga [is] the path of bodily strength and control" while "*Karma* yoga [is] the path of right action" (Phelan, 1978:13; see also

Saher, 1969:232), i.e. both are ways of attaining union with the One through action, not through contemplation. And since drama and action are in a very basic way synonymous, there seems to be no fundamental contradiction here between mysticism and the dramatic form. The dramatic form, like any other form of literature, has the capacity to explore or express the mystical view of life, and it will do so if the principle of nonduality is explored in whole or in part. There is no other criterion for assessment.

*King Lear*, it has been shown, fulfils this criterion. In the play Shakespeare is dramatising the process and consequences of seeing the world in divisive terms (Goneril Regan, Edmund, Burgundy) and in terms of union or oneness (France, Cordelia, Edgar, Kent). Lear's consciousness has to move agonisingly between the two, starting by conceiving of life in divisive terms ("... we have divided in three our kingdom ..."; "Which one shall we say does love us most?") and moving to a perception in terms of unity ("We two alone ... "; "I'll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness"). In the process, the kinds of attitudes and experience associated with the mystical paradigm become apparent. These are too detailed to go into here, other than for one or two examples to indicate the potential validity of my argument, and to indicate areas of possible further study, for their presence in the play is literally massive, informing all aspects of the action and the poetry, suggesting still further that Shakespeare was thinking specifically within the mystical paradigm when he wrote *King Lear*.

## 10. Mysticism and the interpretation of *King Lear*

### 10.1 Cordelia

The first such example is the role of Cordelia, particularly in the opening scene when she has been accused of coldness or impracticality. In response to Goneril's fulsome profusion of hypocritical love, Cordelia says in an aside: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent" (I.i.61). When we compare this statement to the assertion of the 16th century Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross that "That which we most require for our spiritual growth is the silence of desire and of the tongue before God, Who is so high: the language He most listens to is that of silent love" (Grant, 1983:47) we realise that Cordelia is here taking up a standard position within the mystical view of life. In the same light, the wordiness of Regan and Goneril's protestations of love become clearly questioned within the same paradigm. Cordelia's role, then, can be much more precisely defined, and the violently subjective responses which have largely characterised critics' responses to her can be disposed of. She is made to act according to a specific perception, and is the embodiment of one aspect of Shakespeare's exploration of the significance of mystical perceptions of life.

## 10.2 Kent

Kent acts out another aspect. If we are tempted, as critics have been, to describe Kent in such terms as "the average man" (Long, 1976:263) (which is, I would suggest, as vague and meaningless a statement as one can make), then a consideration of Paul Saher's statement that "The very idea of service is a characteristic of the enlightened mind" (1969:66) provides greater precision for the placing of Kent's role within the play. Kent's desire for service (see I.iii.23) reflects another 'way' to the 'truth,' linked to the 'better way' that Cordelia represents. His instruction to Lear in the opening scene to 'See better' then becomes an instruction to achieve a new vision, which, as I have attempted to show, can only be achieved by seeing the world in terms of the mystical paradigm, the paradigm of nonduality, in opposition to those self-destructive characters who see life in terms of division.

## 10.3 Human vulnerability

Or, if we wish to follow the same line of argument, but examine aspects of the play in detail, take Lear's line given on the beach at Dover in the scene between himself and the blinded Gloucester: "They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie – I am not ague-proof" (IV.vi.103-5). What Lear is acknowledging is his fundamental vulnerability as a human being making up a part of a larger whole over which he does not have absolute power. Compare this to Bertrand Russell's statement in his essay "Mysticism and Logic" (in it Russell virtually equates religion and mysticism, which one can do with certain qualifications):

> In religion, and in every deeply serious view of the world and of human destiny, there is an element of submission, a realisation of the limits of human power, which is somewhat lacking in the modern world, with its quick material successes and its insolent belief in the boundless possibilities of progress (Russell, 1918:32).

## 10.4 The collapse of relationships

If we go to the other extreme and examine larger patterns, then in the light of Alan Watts's statement that mystical experience is "the experience of relationship" (Watts, 1986:56) it can be noted that Lear's experience in the play is defined entirely in terms of either the collapse or establishment of relationships. In the early part of the play, when he perceives the world in divisive terms, his experience is that of the *collapse of relationships*. Of the four basic relationships that humankind lives out, three collapse for Lear in the scenes before those on the heath: his relationship with his fellow human beings (Cordelia, Kent, Regan,

Goneril), his relationship with the supernatural ("Now, by Apollo, King, / Thou swear'st thy gods in vain"), and with himself ("Who is it that can tell me who I am?"). All that he has left is physical life ("... unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal ..."), expressed in his relationship with the earth (symbolised by the bare heath), from which his physical being is made.[3] As the play progresses, he has painstakingly to re-establish all three lost relationships, defining them in terms of the perceptions of the mystical paradigm. So, for example, his sense of himself is re-established in terms of the vulnerability that we have already seen as intrinsically a part of the mystical paradigm ("Would I were assured of my condition") rather than the arrogance and self-will of the earlier Lear ("Nothing. I have sworn. I am firm"). Compare here a statement from another mystical tract, the *Theologica Germanica*, that "there is of nothing so much in hell as of self-will" (Grant, 1983:95), self-will being the quality that Lear displays supremely in those early scenes. Similarly, Lear's experience can be seen fully in terms of the mortification of the ego so necessary to all mystical experience: cf. the previous reference to the *Theologica Germanica*, or Patrick Grant's: "Thus poet and mystic ... beckon to each other, calling for ... the ego mortified as a prior condition of illumination" (Grant, 1983:84; cf. also Huxley, 1969, chap. VI). And so on – the examples can be multiplied infinitely.

## 10.5 Further significance

The mystical paradigm, then, opens up a whole range of possibilities for exploring this play with fresh eyes.[4] Once having established, as I hope this article has done, that the mystical paradigm informs the play on a massive scale, then its well-established and widely accepted core of principles and ideas can be used to provide a method of anchoring one's critique of the play in a solid ground beyond mere critical opinion (which is what much criticism, unfortunately, entails). At the same time, the range, the all-embracing depth, breadth and subtlety of the mystical vision allows scope for the full range of possibilities inherent in the plays to be fully developed. I am aware of the vagueness of this previous statement, and of the type of claims it makes, so perhaps a central example from the play will illustrate the point I am trying to make.

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3 This relationship adds greater impact to Lear's lines in the final scene, mentioned earlier, that Cordelia is "as dead as earth". In other words, without her – or without what she signifies that gives meaning to life, then even that last, most basic relationship will collapse, and life will be fully and completely fragmented, to the point of non-existence.

4 It also opens up possibilities for re-interpreting Shakespeare's other tragedies, but I have no space to go into this aspect here.

One of the most interesting patterns present in the mystical paradigm, which is a logical consequence of its perception of the world as a whole or unity, is its rejection of the conventional duality between good and evil which is the pillar of Western morality, and the cause of many problems – one thinks immediately of Jung's concept of the 'shadow', the darker side of human nature which one ignores at one's peril, but which conventional morality *compels* one to attempt to reject or ignore (see Jung, 1959: "The Shadow"). Such a polarisation of good and evil is fundamental to most critical interpretations of the play. The use by conventionally 'evil' characters like Regan, Goneril and Edmund of ideas more suited, apparently, to conventionally 'virtuous' characters like Cordelia (Regan asks of Lear "How in one house / Should many people under two commands / Hold amity?") suggests the underlying oneness of life which the mystical refusal to see the world in terms of polarised opposites most strongly reflects. The fact that Regan, Goneril and Cordelia are offspring of the same marriage partners, and Edgar and Edmund children of the same father, presents a physical manifestation of the same insight, encapsulated in Kent's speech at IV.iii.32-5 which expresses the problem (referred to above). This is not merely a reflection of the 'complexity' of life as it is explored in the play (a favourite, but, ultimately, vague, critical concept), but, more a precise recognition of a very particular attitude to life which has very particular consequences for one's perception of the human situation – in particular the human relationship to good and evil. The precise nature of these consequences can be explored by a reading of pertinent literature on the subject (for example, Huxley's chapter on "Good and Evil" (1969:202-11)). One of the most interesting consequences is a rejection by much mystical writing of conventional morality, which, instead of being seen as the pillar of a healthy society, as it conventionally is, is rather perceived as a symptom of its disease: cf. Lao Tsu: "It was when the Great Way declined that human kindness and morality arose" (Huxley, 1969:194; the 'Great Way' is the intuitive experience of the world as One). This in turn has great pertinence to another phenomenon present in the play – the extent to which *King Lear* systematically breaks down any conventional pattern of justice or morality, and illuminates more clearly the final statement in the play that we should "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say", the word *ought* suggesting some kind of conventional, expected interpretation of the events of the play, while the instruction to "Speak what we feel" pointing towards the mystical emphasis on intuitive feeling rather than rational or intellectual understanding as a means to correct insight into the nature of reality (i.e. the experience of reality as 'one').

## 11. Conclusion

Once one's eyes are open to them, the possibilities for re-examination of the play presented by the mystical paradigm are very great. The final point I would like to

make in this regard is perhaps the most interesting: why, in a central play written at a key point in the development of world civilisation (the moment when the Western world was moving from the Medieval to the 'modern' view of life) did one of the keenest minds ever to look into human affairs choose to re-examine and ultimately reaffirm the value of the mystical vision? The answer, to my mind, queries the very heart of the relativist perceptions that have coloured (perhaps 'clouded' is a better term) all aspects of modern thinking, and posits a renewed need for the kind of moral clarity Kent's displays in his outright condemnation of what Lear does in the opening scene: "thou dost evil". It is this kind of moral clarity that the mystical paradigm, in direct contrast to its reputation for obfuscation and obscurity, brings to an understanding of the human situation in the modern world. It is, I feel, for that reason alone, worth a good deal of further consideration.

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