Nature in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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> Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
> My services are bound. Wherefore should I
> Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
> The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
> For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
> Lag of a brother? 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? Why brand they us
> With base? with baseness bastardy? base, base?
> Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
> More composition and fierce quality
> Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed,
> Go to th'creating a whole tribe of fops,
> Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well then,
> Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
> Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
> As to th'legitimate. Fine word, 'legitimate'!
> Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
> And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
> Shall top th'legitimate—: I grow, I prosper;
> Now, gods, stand up for bastards!
>
> (*King Lear* I ii 1–22)

The 'Nature' whom Edmund, bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester, proclaims as his 'goddess' in his first extended soliloquy in Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a deity whose qualities have been variously understood in the centuries since

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Shakespeare composed the play, and whose character was ambiguous even in the age that gave rise to it. William Elton, in his authoritative study of the play's philosophical milieu, records that on the one hand 'the goddess Nature whom Edmund worships was, in effect, increasingly reconciled with the orthodox Deity', while on the other hand 'Nature' was often equated with the principle of animal fecundity, uncomplicated by moral or social restraints.[1] The personification of 'Nature' in Shakespeare's fourth sonnet leans towards the latter view: '[Nature,] being frank, ... lends to those are free'—the context of a poem urging a young man to marry and produce offspring indicating that the senses of both 'frank' and 'free' here include sexual liberality.[2] Elton (130) cites Montaigne's phrase *nostre grande et puissante mère nature* as referring to the pagan goddess, the embodiment of sensuality in whose 'service' any natural impulse—sexual or other—may be acted upon without inhibition of any kind.

The diversity of these views of 'Nature' implies a corresponding ambivalence in attitude towards a figure who may reflect and partake of the intrinsic goodness and altruism of the Christian deity, or alternatively may represent the animal tendencies which can ultimately be expressed in bestial savagery inimical to the survival of human society. This ambivalence is well depicted in Spenser's presentation of 'great dame *Nature*' in the 'Mutability Cantos' of *The Faerie Queene* (although, since these cantos first appeared in print almost three years after the first recorded production of *King Lear* in December 1606, no specific influence on Shakespeare's text is suggested):

> Then forth issewed (great goddesse) great dame *Nature*,
> With goodly port and gracious Maiesty;
> Being far greater and more tall of stature
> Then any of the gods or Powers on hie:
> Yet certes by her face and physnomy,
> Whether she man or woman inly were,
> That could not any creature well descry:
> For, with a veile that wimpled euery where,
> Her head and face was hid, that mote to none appeare.
>
> That some doe say was so by skill deuized,
> To hide the terror of her vncouth hew,
> From mortall eyes that should be sore agrized;
> For that her face did like a Lion shew,

> That eye of wight could not indure to view:
> But others tell that it so beautious was,
> And round about such beames of splendor threw,
> That it the Sunne a thousand times did pass,
> Ne could be seene, but like an image in a glasse.
> (*Two Cantos of Mutabilitie*, Canto vii, 5–6)

Spenser emphasises the duality of the goddess's aspect. Her stature and power far exceed those of 'any of the gods or Powers on hie': despite her 'goodly port and gracious Maiesty', she may be terrible and forbidding. Spenser claims as his authority for the representation of 'Nature' Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, and follows Chaucer in explicitly transferring responsibility for the description of 'Nature's' 'array and vestiments' to Alain de Lille's 'Plaint of kindes'—the *De Planctu Naturae*.

The gathering of birds over which the 'noble emperesse Nature' presides in Chaucer's poem includes many species, as there are many kinds of men. Not only do the birds parallel the estates of Chaucer's own late fourteenth-century society, but they also show a wide variety of *moral* complexions within those broad social divisions. For example, the 'foules of ravyne'—the birds of prey—are 'hyest set' (323–24) and obviously represent the nobility. This stratum of avian society includes not only the 'royal egle' whose glance pierces the sun, and the 'gentyl faucon' which perches on the hand of the King, but also 'the goshauk, that doth pyne / To bryddes for his outrageous ravyne' (335–36), the thieving chough, the 'janglynge' magpie, the 'false lapwynge, ful of trecherye' and the 'coward' kite (345, 347, 349). No special distinction is made by Dame Nature between these birds: those who appear to be socially undesirable are not excluded from the assembly. Chaucer's 'Nature' makes no value-judgments in carrying out her stated intention of providing every bird with a mate. She merely acts in her capacity as the promoter of physical procreation, which is the only mandate given her. Obviously she is not required to make moral distinctions in such a way as to discourage the breeding and multiplication of the goshawk, for instance, while urging the 'gentyl faucon' or the 'trewe' turtle-dove to be more prolific.

Chaucer's description of 'Nature' as 'noble' and 'full of grace' follows both Alain de Lille—to whom he acknowledges his indebtedness—and the conventional description of the beauty of the goddess 'Nature' in the *Roman de la Rose*, which Chaucer does not mention (at least, not in this poem).

The *Roman de la Rose*—that compendious and immensely influential work of the twelfth century—offers a representation of 'Nature' (likewise derived from Alain) that was probably the most widely current of all. Both the earlier and the later sections of this work (by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, respectively) show 'Nature' as the undiscriminating promoter of propagation by all creatures. She is associated with a kind of love that Guillaume carefully distinguishes from Christian *caritas*, defining it as 'a natural inclination to wish to preserve one's likeness by a suitable intention, either by engendering or by caring for nourishment' (*The Romance of the Rose* 116, lines 5763 ff.). Guillaume's figure of 'Reason' explains to the protagonist, the 'Lover':

> However much good it does, this love carries neither praise nor blame nor merit; it is to be neither praised nor blamed; Nature makes creatures give themselves to it; in truth they are forced to it. Nor does this love bring any victory over vice. (lines 5763 ff.)

In the latter part of the *Roman* Jean de Meun depicts 'Nature' as a woman of surpassing beauty who is shown at work at a forge, where she devotes all her attention to the task of forging individual creatures so that the species may continue:

> She continues always to hammer and forge, and always to renew the individuals by means of new generation. When she can bring no other counsel to her work, she cuts copies in such letters that she gives them true forms in coins of diverse monies. (lines 16007 ff.)

This view of 'Nature,' taken directly from the *De Planctu Naturae*, shows her as basically an amoral force, merely carrying out God's commandment 'Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth' (Genesis 1: 28), and mechanically striking out in her forge individuals who are stamped in the likeness of their forebears like coins in a mint.[3] The form of this metaphor for heredity is apparent in Shakespeare's eleventh sonnet:

> Let those whom Nature hath not made for store,
> Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish;

> Look whom she best endow'd, she gave the more,
> Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish:
> She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby
> Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.
> (Sonnet 11)

The same metaphor (used similarly in *Measure for Measure* II iv 42–46) is relevant to the presentation of 'Nature' in *King Lear*. The figure of 'Nature' as a minter of coins is related in *King Lear* to the strand of word-play running throughout the play, in which an undertone of material appraisal is implicit in such declarations as Regan's profession of her love for her father:

> I am made of that self metal as my sister,
> And prize me at her worth.
> (I i 68–69)

The imagery of money in the form of coins, such as those metaphorically stamped out by 'Nature' in her forge, is rife in the play. When Lear exclaims to the daughter who has refused to echo the fulsome sentiments of her sisters 'So young, and so untender!' Cordelia replies 'So young, my lord, and true' (I i 105–06)—and the idea of the coin that is, or is not, legal tender of the realm, coin that is 'true' in the sense of being fit for circulation as currency, is implied. The 'Nature' whom Edmund acknowledges to be his 'goddess', playing on the conventional word-usage that denotes the bastard 'the natural son', is in an almost literal sense a coiner of money, while embodying a mindless compulsion to procreate. Edmund vigorously denies that he is 'base', perhaps partly in the sense that such so-called 'base' metals as lead were regarded as unfit for coinage. He insists rather that his 'shape' is as 'true' as the 'issue' of the married woman: and bearing in mind the concept of 'Nature' he affirms, it seems that he is making the same claim as does Cordelia when she asserts that she is 'true'. Edmund's use of the word 'issue' can also be seen to relate to his stated objective of acquiring the land of his legitimate half-brother Edgar. In legal terminology one sense of 'issue' was 'profits arising from lands'.[4] The 'honest madam's issue', then, is not only her legitimate son and heir, but also the income from her 'jointure'—the property settled upon the wife at the time of marriage, to be owned jointly by both spouses while both lived and to be inherited in full by the widow upon the death of her

husband. The legitimate son would inherit this property when his mother died. The context of Edmund's speech supports an expansion of the sense of the lines 'my shape as true / As honest madam's issue'. Edmund is saying more than that he looks just as much like his father, Gloucester, as does his legitimate half-brother. In an alternative sense of 'shape' conceivably derived from one of its verbal senses,[5] Edmund may be asserting that his true objective in life is to obtain for himself the very inheritance that Edgar legitimately claims—the 'jointure' and its rent.

The goddess invoked by the King when he curses his eldest daughter Goneril is essentially the same whom Edmund addresses in his opening soliloquy:

> Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!
> Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
> To make this creature fruitful!
> Into her womb convey sterility!
> (I iv 273–76)

This deity has charge of physical procreation and of fertility, without there being necessarily any moral or ethical overtones. The difference between Lear's invocation of 'Nature' and Edmund's is that Edmund's emphasis, as Elton perceptively points out, is on exclusion (126–27). Lear addresses 'Nature' as one member of a pantheon of gods—having already, in the play's opening scene, invoked deities of the sun, the moon and the thunder (I i 108–09, 159, 177–78). Lear seems to assume, at least when the play begins, that the 'operation of the orbs / From whom we do exist and cease to be' (I i 110–11) is upon a principle of justice, and that the 'dear Goddess' whose particular task is to give or to withhold fertility will be guided in so doing by the just deserts of the subject. Lear's starting assumption is similar to those of Chaucer, the authors of the *Roman de la Rose*, and their impeccable authority Alain de Lille, for whom 'Nature' was completely ruled by the Creator of the universe:

> [U]nder the mysterious power of God, I carried out the administration of this office [of moulding images] in such a way that the right hand of the supreme authority should direct my hand in its work, for my writing-reed would instantly go off course if it were not guided by the finger of the superintendent on high (*The Plaint of Nature* 146, Prose 4).

The temper of the deity governing this traditionally subservient 'Nature' is unquestionably benign, and the effect of his rule is universal harmony—he is 'th'almyghty Lord, / That hot, cold, hevy, light, moyst, and dreye / Hath knyt by evene noumbres of acord' (*Parliament of Fowls* 379–81).

In *King Lear* Shakespeare tumbles these eternal verities until steeples are drenched and weather-cocks drowned. It is not merely the benevolence of God that is brought into question, evoking the possible existence of a divinity who is either indifferent or outright malevolent: through Edmund, Shakespeare questions the very existence of a 'superintendent on high'. Edmund's address to 'Nature' excludes any higher or indeed any other influence at all. The 'supreme authority' of Alain's *De Planctu Naturae* becomes in *King Lear* a terrifying cosmic vacuum. What kind of stamp does 'Nature' impose upon man's clay that gives it the mark of humanity? When Lear rages impotently against the thunder, symbolic of the threat of universal chaos—the inverse of Chaucer's divine 'acord'—he invokes the image of an entire world, like a huge ball of clay, struck and flattened by the coin-maker's mallet. The whole of creation is reduced to a piece of coinage, and no more living creatures may ever again be 'minted' from 'Nature's' forge:

> And thou, all-shaking thunder,
> Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th' world!
> Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
> That makes ingrateful man!
>
> (III ii 6–9)

The image suggests that in the absence of any ruling power at all, the thunder, mindlessly aping the action of 'Nature', like some monstrous juggernaut destroys not only the source of life, but also the universal frame within which it arose.

When Lear has lost his reason, in Act IV, and appears crowned with weeds and wild flowers, raving in apparently irrational and disjointed ramblings, the metaphor of 'Nature' stamping out human coinage at her forge figures significantly:

> No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the King himself. ...
> Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press-money.
> (IV vi 83–4, 86).

The pitiful irony of Lear's insane belief that Gloucester's bastard son was 'kind' to his father—bringing back the ambiguity surrounding the figure of 'Nature' or

'Kinde'—cannot be lost upon the play's audience at this heart-wrenching moment. It is totally appropriate that Gloucester greets Lear in this scene as a 'ruin'd piece of Nature', an almost entirely defaced piece of 'Nature's' coinage whose comprehension of this goddess of fruitfulness has become grotesquely deformed, as has the whole of his world-view.

Bearing in mind the traditional presentation of 'Nature' as God's instrument and agent, labouring at her forge to strike out the images of new individuals like the minter of coins, it becomes possible to read *King Lear* as in part a drama of conflicting views both of man, and of the divinity whose minister 'Nature' is, who governs 'Nature's' labours. If no such government exists, then conceivably man is free to become, if he so desires, a highly ingenious and extremely dangerous (because rational) creature, a living counter of human stamp with no more sense of moral responsibility than the dog, the tiger or the lecherous little fly.

But man's nature comprises 'feeling' as well as rationality: when the 'eye' of Reason has been occluded, he may yet like poor blind Gloucester, 'see feelingly' (Elton, *passim*). If he wants to, a man may make use of that part of his nature that is capable of compassion, and in so doing may become a truly *humane* being.

Those personages in the play who defend this latter view, in practice and in precept, fare poorly. Cordelia is hanged, old Gloucester, who struggled through the storm bearing the flickering light of human compassion to the benighted Lear, is horribly mutilated and dies too. The servant of Cornwall dies in the act of bravely defending the concept of 'humane kindness'. Kent, banished, outlawed, disgraced, yet loyal to the death, is too demoralized to soldier on as the play draws to its conclusion.

Edgar, the embodiment of compassion throughout the play, stands alone as it ends. After all the various Protean forms in which he has had to disguise himself in order to survive in a world gone mad, Edgar at the end of the play assumes the figure stamped on the true coin of the realm: that of the King.

NOTES

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1. Elton 130, quoting Ronsard's argument: 'Qui blasme la Nature il blasme Dieu supreme, / Car la Nature & Dieu est Presque chose mesme' (*Le Tombeau de Marguerite de France*).
2. The *OED* gives as sense 2 for the adjective *frank*: 'Liberal, bounteous, generous … b. in bad sense (of a woman)'. '*Free*: 22. Acting without restriction or limitation.'
3. [God] appointed me as his substitute, his vice-regent, the mistress of his mint, to put the stamp on different classes of things so that I should mould the images of things, each on its own anvil…. I, to use a metaphor, striking various coins of things according to the mould of the exemplar and producing copies of my original by fashioning like out of like, gave to my imprints the appearance of the things imaged' (Alan of Lille 146, Prose 4).
4. *OED*: '*Issue*, sb. 6. Offspring … a descendant … Now chiefly in legal use or with ref. to legal succession. 7. Produce, proceeds; profits arising from lands…. Now only in legal use.'
5. OED: '*Shape*, v. 16. b. *refl*. To direct one's course. Also *intr*. … 1480 Caxton *Chron. Eng*. Xiii b j b, At the last he [Leir] shope him to the see and passed ouer to france.'

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