



**One Hand Clapping...**  
A Study of the Paradoxical in “Lear” and Kierkegaard

Jeffrey G. Sobosan

Volume 30, numéro 1, 1974

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020395ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020395ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Sobosan, J. G. (1974). One Hand Clapping... A Study of the Paradoxical in “Lear” and Kierkegaard. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 30(1), 47–53.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1020395ar>

# ONE HAND CLAPPING...

## A Study of the Paradoxical in "Lear" and Kierkegaard

Jeffrey G. SOBOSAN

**I**N analyzing Lear, the critic confronts a drama as puzzling as a Zen paradox such as the sound of one hand clapping. In the *Philosophical Fragments* of Soren Kierkegaard the reason through a process of encountering the paradoxical, reaches its limits in a collision with the unknown and in a flash of insight achieves a transcendence into the suprarational. Although Lear's conduct does not indicate such an awareness, he experiences a similar collision between his reason and the Unknown, and develops in Kierkegaardian terminology a paradoxical passion to know the unknowable, to "think what thought cannot think".

In Act I: Scene I he attempts to link his imagination with reality and, hence, to eradicate the dumbfounding abyss which lies between objective reality and the mind. There is a great deal of critical squabbling about the evasion of responsibility in this scene. Is Lear already senile and mad? Does he deserve to be distrusted by his daughters? This critical perspective is worthy of a soap opera and reduces the play to a moralistic malaise. Rather than being senile, he has the blind passion for security and self-respect which marks nearly all tragic Shakespearean characters. Searching for peace and order in himself and the physical reality around him, he attempts to construct a wall between himself and the responsibility of Kingship and yet retain the title. By investing his majesterial powers in his daughters and by demanding ridiculous oaths of love he believes such a wall can be built behind which a man might "... Unburthen'd crawl toward death." With child-like naivete, he allows no rational arguments to destroy his dream. Projecting this dream into reality, he manifestly links his inner world and its imagination with mutable forces beyond his control.

A man calls himself a slave, a king, a warrior, and if someone should ask him who he is, he would reply accordingly with his particular title. Hearing his own words, he is comforted by the implicit affirmation of his existence, as if he were born to be a slave or a king. Every man carves an image of himself; like a sculptor out of the flux of time and space, he takes life's rare moments of beauty and fashions them into one piece of delicately faceted crystal. Such distillations of life, however, are only illusions of permanence and perfection, yet men hold on to them with a religious fervor. It is a rare man who will appreciate them as illusions and rarer still who will hold them out to the world and affirm that any man who attempts to fuse them with reality inevitably

has his glass man shattered. Nevertheless, even men acquainted with the defiling nature of reality still like to believe that a part of their illusions is permanent or at least real.

Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and indeed, every character in the play, become a part of that crystal image within Lear, the king and the father: they become an integral part of Lear's conception of himself. The mind of Lear will become the very world he walks in; those fantastic oaths of love are necessities to a man who would be the center, the very matrix of all that moves around him. Beauty conceived in the imagination has an unmolested perfection; in reality it is never flawless and must always die. Although he would have his illusions planted in reality, Cordelia will not profess an all consuming love for Lear which moves beyond the bounds of human frailty, and he rejects the most beautiful and real part of his world. Goneril and Regan, who are not capable of loving anyone, unmercifully shatter that illusion, and the man is left without an image, with nothing. Having yoked his dream with the world, he walks through ruins of his own soul and confronts those absurdities which reduce the mind to the frantic condition of throwing itself against its walls with the desperation of a cornered rat. The tempest within Lear's mind is manifested by a physical reality of such violent dimensions that Kent cries (III, ii, 44-48):

since I was a man  
Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,  
Such groans of roaring wind and rain, I never  
Remember to have heard: man's nature cannot carry  
The affliction nor the fear.

The storm is the outcome of Lear's realization that he is no longer called a king in that world he created. From the confident ruler in Scene I, he has become a man who must inquire of others who he is and discovers that Lear, the King, in reality exists no longer. In Act I Scene IV Line 85, he addresses his first question to Oswald and is answered, "My Lady's father" (I, iv, 86).

Rather than confronting the void with its dumbfounding abyss, Lear attempted to fill it with his imagination and, simultaneously, to devour and to transform physical reality with its individual existences into that single imaginative vision. Such a union would indeed resolve the tension between the microcosm of the mind and macrocosm of the universe by combining both worlds; a man would simply be the universe and the process of becoming would end in the realization of being everything. The attempt fails, however, and initiates a process of disintegration which leads to a temporary unity and peace through the aesthetic reality of art in Act V.

This disintegration begins with the realization that he is not King Lear, but "My Lady's Father". After this realization he enters into a dialectic with his fool which culminates in the tempest. In this dialectic, he reveals that paradoxical passion of the reason to "discover something that thought cannot think." The connection between his passion and Kierkegaard's concepts of the reason, the Unknown, and the paradox has a firmer foundation than simply a critical comparison. Kierkegaard, in defending his argument that the theme of the *Philosophical Fragments* taps a "universal poem", admits to having borrowed from *King Lear*. This "poem" is recognizable to every human being although no individual claims to have been its author or to have partially

contributed to its composition. Thus, it is absurd to propose that the totality of humanity was its author since no individual will even take partial credit. This poem, however, is no poem at all but the "Miracle" and its author is obviously the God. Kierkegaard has admittedly discovered something of the "Miracle" in *King Lear*, and yet this play is a tragedy. Lear does participate in a process nearly identical to Kierkegaard's but leaves its mystic tower with dubious foundations.

In the *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard describes an ineluctable process of the mind wherein the reason collides with the Unknown, arbitrarily labelled the God. This process springs from the inherent passion of the reason to know the unknowable. But the relationship between this passion and its originator and sustainer, the reason, is a dialectical one, since the reason is ultimately forced to resist its own passion when it has reached its limit at the Unknown:

...one should not think slightly of the paradoxical; for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity. The supreme paradox of all passion is the attempt of discovering something that thought cannot think. This passion is at bottom present in all thinking, even in the thinking of the individual, in so far as in thinking he participates in something transcending himself.

There are two assumptions concerning the generation of this passion: first, that it is at bottom present in all thinking *in so far* as that thinking is a participation in transcendence; second, that participation in transcendence demands consciousness and consent so that this participation is the result of a quest.

Here Kierkegaard significantly departs from Socrates concerning the nature of the individual's recognition. In the Socratic idea of recollection, the Truth lies within the heart of all human beings, but in birth they lose the consciousness of this Truth and become ignorant of its existence. The teacher cannot give an ignorant individual the Truth but can only prod him into a self-discovery of it. Thus, he only provides an occasion for the individual's discovery. This in turn brings a consciousness of the eternal, which eradicates the historical importance of this moment, and reduces it to a temporal departure which has become lost in the infinite.

For Kierkegaard the Moment has a much greater significance since the individual can never forget it in either time or eternity. What gives this Moment such significance is the higher relationship between the Teacher and the individual. This Teacher is not merely an occasion, a midwife who may stimulate the process of labor but who has had no part in the conception of the child or in its actual birth since this is experienced only by the mother. He is not a midwife but the God who gives man both the condition for understanding the Truth and the Truth itself. If the individual were only ignorant, the decisiveness of this Moment would be lost. In Kierkegaard's theory, however, he is not ignorant but is in Error. Whereas the ignorant individual has neither guilt nor sin since his awareness does not result from a personal choice, the individual in Error is responsible for his unawareness through a failing which Kierkegaard labels as Sin. The Truth does not simply lie in his heart, for, being in Error and Sin, he is constantly departing from it and must experience the first facet of the Moment to recognize this. With this recognition of sin, he changes direction and begins to draw nearer to the Truth and the second facet of the Moment.

This recognition of sin indicates that the individual has begun a quest originating in a passion to "discover something which thought cannot think", that he successfully encountered the Absolute Paradox and found the Unknown to be the absolutely unlike, and that man has created this void through sin. The final insight, the "understanding", depends upon the manner in which the individual encounters this void or the Unknown. Kierkegaard contends that there must be a "letting go", that the holding on to a proof is analogous to holding a Cartesian doll: "As soon as I let go of the doll it stands on its head". This letting go is the "leap", and the individual hopefully discovers an insight into the "understanding" of the Absolute Paradox, an understanding which Kierkegaard labels "faith" and which only the God can bestow.

In his dialectic with the fool, Lear, rather than discovering "faith", seems to collide tragically with the Unknown. His fool functions more as a symbol than a flesh and blood character. He is the only person in the drama who neither dies nor is rewarded but simply disappears near the storm's cessation somewhere between Act III and Act IV. He is that element of Lear's mind, physically manifested before him, who, like a Zen master, articulates those paradoxes which "provoke, excite, baffle, and exhaust the mind". The Zen student, like Kierkegaard's individual, counts on "a flash of sudden insight to bridge the gap between second and first hand experience". This happens when the structures of ordinary reason collapse completely, clearing the way for sudden intuition. Paradoxes such as the "sound of one hand clapping" are used by the Zen master to confront the student with the irrational and paradoxical on a personal level in the hope for eventual transcendence. The fool perceives that Lear is neither king nor father nor fool but an "O", and unceasingly reminds the old man of his annihilated identity. How does one discover his identity if it is nothing? Is this not a greater paradox than even the "sound of one hand clapping"? Like Kent, the fool recognizes that Lear's irrational conduct will create suffering and mourns his decision to renounce Cordelia (II, iv 79); he knows that such conduct will strip Lear of his rational armor.

Ironically, and perhaps accurately, the fool seems to encompass the limits of human reason and dialectically clashes with Lear's growing passion in Acts II and III "to discover something that thought cannot think". Asking Lear, "Canst tell how an oyster makes his shell?" (I, v, 27), and hearing his negative answer, he replies, "Nor I neither; but I can tell why a snail has a house". A few lines further he states, "the reason why the seven stars are no more than seven is a pretty reason," and Lear replies, "Because they are not eight?" The fool then compliments him, "Yes, indeed; thou would'st make a good fool." Thus, through ingenious riddles the fool expresses his own limitations. The seven stars may refer to the quadrivium and the trivium, the standard Renaissance divisions of the arts and sciences. The fool understands the universe only as far as the arts and sciences will rationally take him. The stars number seven and the physical world is simply what we perceive it to be and nothing more; the fool goes no further. But it is not far enough for Lear. That rational limit where reason collides with the Unknown in Kierkegaard's words, is where the fool leaves Lear in the storm, naked, alone, "an absolute O".

Lear's confrontation with the paradox springs from the egoistic desire to discover who he is. Intimidated by his daughter's actions and his fool's truth, he begins

an interrogation to find a word or title which might define himself. In this search, he moves between the two extremes of being everything, the very matrix of his world, and being nothing. Having this dream of being everything rudely shattered, he finds himself caught in a process of disintegration which was initiated by his own attempt to devour physical reality and digest it into himself in order to eradicate the dumbfounding abyss between mind and reality through filling the void with his own image: in Acts II and III he confronts the possibility of being nothing. Stripped of the old images, the void looms before him wholly vacant. His own injunction that nothing can be made from nothing may accurately describe the futility of human endeavor: that becoming ends in nothingness. If it is to be otherwise, he must discover or create some balance, a consolation however small, between the two extremes.

In Acts I and II, Lear asked the existential question, and the void rang in his ears; in Act III, he turns his eye inward to find within himself a heaven or hell. He ceases to ask questions and asserts his own innocence in the face of a dumb universe. Rather than asking, who am I, he shouts, "I am a man more sinn'd against than sinning", and his consciousness expands into a concern for the plight of all humanity (III, iv, 28-35):

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
You loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just.

With this expansion of awareness, his questions change from the particular to the general, from his plight as an individual to the plight of mankind. From Act II: Scene III until the conclusion of the drama, his questions are directed toward the universe and are answered by no one, including his fool. Asserting his own innocence, he asks (III, iv, 105-115):

Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the  
beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! here's three on's are  
sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man is no more but  
such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! come  
unbutton here.

(Tearing off his clothes.)

At this point, Lear consciously consents to that process of disintegration which previously victimized him. Divesting himself of the remaining appendages of civilization, he wishes to be neither a king nor a fool, but a "thing itself". That hunger for peace and security in Act I has become a passion for things as they are, for the essence of man, even if it is nothing more than a "poor, bare, forked animal". From the early extreme of being everything, he moves toward the opposite extreme of nothing and chaos as he continues to turn in upon himself and to lament the fate of mankind.



The trial scene in Act III : Scene VI and his encounter with Gloucester in Act IV : Scene VI demonstrate his acquiescence to chaos. He asks, "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (II, vi, 81) He would have Regan's heart cut out to "see what breeds about it" (III, vi, 80). In accordance with his new perspective, his language abounds with bestial imagery ; things of the heart are not born but breed like germs, and Lear, himself, begins to think like a beast. In a flash of sanity, he states (IV, vi, 105-107):

Go to, they are not men o' their words; they told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof.

Yet, his recognition of his own motivation and his daughter's deceit is simply the prelude for his most bitter language. The interpolation of this one sentence amidst the insane ravings creates a mood of pathos as the audience remembers the Lear of Scene I. It clothes his early ignorance in child-like innocence ; the line itself has the tone of a disillusioned child, like the young boy staring at the night and saying, "they told me I could touch the moon from the top of this hill, but they lied." From this mood of innocence, there explodes the foul vision of a madman (IV, vi, 114-116, 186-191):

The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly  
Does lecher in my sight.  
Let copulation thrive . . .  
When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools; this' a good block ;  
It were a delicate stratagem to shoe  
A troop of horse with felt: I'll put't in proof;  
and when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,  
Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill !

A familiar metaphor with Shakespeare, the world is once again compared to a stage, and men are nothing more than actors, fools, who dance upon it. Like a stage, the block evokes an image of limitations and emptiness, a man sitting on a slab of concrete. With this nihilistic imagery, Lear finally gives vent to his desire for murder and appears to be overwhelmed by the destructive elements of his own illusions, "my flesh, my blood, my daughter ;/Or rather a disease that's in my flesh" (II, iv, 225). It is, indeed the "sulphurous pit" within Lear himself which he discloses to the audience.

Lear has looked within himself and found a hell, a labyrinthian maze of scalding stench. In the last scene of Act IV, he acquires a sense of guilt and a consciousness of sin. With the return of Cordelia, both his inner and outer worlds appear to be moving toward a restoration of order as he becomes physically calm. His "kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" of scene VI changes into a plea for forgiveness in scene VII, and he kneels before Cordelia to repent, "Pray you now forget and forgive." (IV, vi, 84) Although there is no "understanding" nor a "leap" into the darkness to attain it, Lear has discovered an insight in the storm. The bestial images of the "pitiless storm" fade into poetic insight with Cordelia. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Theseus states (V, i, 7-17):

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact ;  
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,

That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,  
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
 And as imagination bodies forth  
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
 A local habitation and a name.

Lear is not simply a lunatic and a madman, but is a lover and poet as well. His imagination, like the poet's, creates an artistic balance between "everything" and "nothing". Through art, music, and his words, he conjures up an imaginative haven, a union of illusion and reality, "giving airy nothing a local habitation and a name", and indeed creates something from nothing. This new union of reality and imagination is not the devouring relationship of Act I, but a mediation and synthesis. But it is still not the "understanding" which Kierkegaard equates with faith. Lear does not perceive a light emanating out of the void and the Unknown (the God), but through art creates his own sphere of light in which he might live. (V, iii, 8-18):

No, no, no! Come, let's away to prison  
 We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:  
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
 And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,  
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
 Talk of court news: and we'll talk with them too,  
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;  
 And take upon's the mystery of things,  
 As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,  
 In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,  
 That ebb and flow by the moon.

Like a sculptor out of the flux of time and space creating his own limited peace, Lear overlooks the stage of fools, dying on their block, in a prison of his own making whose bars are of poetry and music, the chains of higher freedom.

But Cordelia dies and the poetry about Lear crumbles. Once again he directs rantings of despair toward the universe (V, iii, 259-265):

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no, life!  
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
 And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
 Never, never, never, never, never!  
 Pray you, undo this button: thank you sir,  
 Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,  
 Look there, look there!

When a man's life and poetry are in ruins, what then is left? Or when the walls of reason and imagination collapse, does Lear in a flash of intuition pierce with a mystic certainty the limits of life's stage to find a cruel or a gentle author? Does he at last experience the second facet of the Moment in "understanding"? Those last words, that vision: they ring in our ears with the baffling emptiness of one hand clapping.