

Nature and Grace in *King Lear*

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King Lear may be described as a study of man in his relation to Nature and Gods in pagan times, as *Macbeth* may be called as a study of man in his relation to the supernatural God in the Christian tradition. It treats of the relation of natural man to the law of Nature and Gods, because Shakespeare deprives the play of revealed Christianity, though his principal source-play, *The True Chronical History of King Leir and his three daughters, Gonoril, Ragan, and Cordella* (1605) was filled with Christian views. Shakespeare's play is concerned with natural law and free will with which man is by nature endowed, as Augustine states in *On Nature and Grace* (415).

Augustine (354-430) raised a universal question, "Is it enough to have free will and natural law?"¹ in one of his anti-Pelagian writings. About twelve centuries later Shakespeare puts the same question in *King Lear* (1605) and gives the same universal solution in it as Augustine did to the great problem of human nature by which we have yet been challenged to its individual solution.

Augustine destroyed the fleshly wisdom of the wise obstinately believing that "natural capacities, by help of free will, is in itself sufficient for discovering how one ought to live and also for leading a holy life"² and thus did not frustrate the grace of God (*Galatians* ii. 21). Shakespeare also annihilates not only the carnal wisdom of

1. Augustine: *On Nature and Grace*, chap. 47. [XL.] (A.D. 415)

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 47. [XL.]

Goneril, Regan and Edmund, but also the natural wisdom of Lear and Gloucester in the play by allowing their natures to be left to themselves and to go their own natural way. Regan and Goneril's animalistic reason ends in murder and suicide, and Lear's natural justice results in his loss of reason and upsets the order of nature.

In his previous plays he prepares the way to *King Lear* by giving an experimental testing to nature left to itself, that is, nature without divine grace. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, IV. iii. 24 the French Lords comment on Bertram's indulgence in sensual pleasure:

Now, God delay our rebellion! as we are ourselves, what things are we! Merely our traitors.

His mother, countess, is well aware that it is not her son's will that cures his sickly soul, but Helena's prayer for the love of God on his behalf.

he can not thrive

Unless her prayers, when heaven delights to hear,

And loves to grant, reprieve him from the wrath

Of greatest justice.

(*All's Well That Ends Well*, III. iv. 26-29)

The same thought of nature and grace is to be found in Augustine.

When man lives according to man, not according to God, he is like the devil.¹

1. Augustine, *The City of God* (413-426), Bk. XIV, 4.

If man lives after the flesh, he is prone to lust and yields to vices of the soul.

Nothing but God's grace alone delivers men from evil.¹

a man is not liberated from carnal offences except by the grace of the Saviour.²

Commenting on John i. 12, "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God", Augustine emphasizes that "they were not by nature the sons of God nor could at all become, unless by receiving Him they also received power through grace",³ because "human nature is corrupted". No man is so aware of the depravity of Nature as Shakespeare except for Augustine.

Shakespeare embodies this idea of nature without grace in Brutus, Richard III, Claudio, Iago, Angelo and Macbeth (an angel in course of his fall).

Shakespeare brings up the same question again in *King Lear*. "If nature is left to itself, what thing is it?" Shakespeare deliberately places the play in a pagan setting and pre-Christian times and deprives it of the divine grace of Providence with which alone we can "have our naked frailties hid" and forces them to discover the Biblical and Universal truth of nature and grace hidden in the heathen world and to invent Christian love and grace out of their own bitter and tormenting need. Man's nature cannot be freed from sin except by the holy spirit of God, because it is desperately wicked, or in Calvin's words, "the whole man is flesh". Shakespeare delib-

1. Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, chap. 62.

2. *Ibid.*, chap. 62.

3. *Ibid.*, chap. 77.

erately makes man rely on his own flesh alone, that is, on natural law with the help of free will to lead him to his folly and suffering or to his boundless intemperance and resulting ruin. Shakespeare allows Lear and Gloucester to walk this way of "a natural fool" and Edmund, Goneril and Regan to precipitate down that headlong path of intemperance and tyranny.

Lear violates the law of nature and commits a folly against the justice of Gods by dividing his kingdom among his daughters and relinquishing his kingly responsibility bestowed on him by the sacred nature. Besides this foolish act, he adds to his damnation a fatal sin committed against the law of nature by rejecting the precious love and truth of Cordelia. He swears by nature—by the sun, the night and all the orbs—to disclaim all his paternal care to Cordelia and never hesitates to declare her to be "a wretch whom nature is asham'd Almost to acknowledge" (I. i. 215-216). Lear banishes Cordelia. When she is gone, the wisdom and grace of Lear is gone. It is not Cordelia that wanders about in a subdued state, but Lear himself. Lear's elder daughters begins to treat him unnaturally and cruelly out of their ingratitude. Goneril and Regan also violate natural law by failing to perform filial duty and putting the poor old man at their disposal. Lear loses his wit in the excess of indignation and is driven out into a storm on the bleak heath. A raging storm is a natural reflection of his sins and a measure of justice taken against him by Gods.

The unnatural folly of Lear has a parallel in that of Gloucester. Gloucester transgresses natural law by doing the act of darkness—indulging in a sexual vice and begetting his bastard son, Edmund. He commits another worse sin by welcoming the pretended good of Edmund and casting off the true love of Edgar. As in the case of

Lear Gloucester is deprived of grace in rejecting the innocent Edgar. "Gods are just" in taking revenge on Gloucester, as they punish Lear for his folly. Regan and her husband Cornwall do "a monstrous" act in punishing Gloucester on the charge of treason owing to having befriended Lear. He has his eyes plucked out by them. When he is blinded, he learns the truth—that Edmund has betrayed him by telling Cornwall that he has dealings with the French army in order to restore Lear to his throne.

As Lear learns that he has done her wrong, when he is driven by his elder daughters' ingratitude to lose his wits, so does Gloucester know his irreparable folly when he has had his eyes put out through his bastard Edmund's betrayal.

The unnaturalness of Regan and Goneril upsets the order of nature. In their unfilial treatment of their "gracious aged" father they cut off themselves from the source of grace. With fatherly grace renounced, Regan and Goneril are left defenceless against their own sensual desires. In Gloucester's terms Regan would pluck out her poor old father's eyes and her sister, Goneril, would stick her boarish fangs in his "anointed flesh" (III. vi. 56-58). Natural grace is banished and then supernatural divine grace is withdrawn from them. They have to follow their own damned way, driven by fear and lewd passion. As a result they violate their bond of holy wedlock by lusting for Edmund. Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) depicts the punishments caused by rejected grace.

When men are deprived of the help of Divine grace, they are overcome by their passion.¹

1. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica* (London, 1915), Vol. VII, pt. II, 462, Q. 87. Art. 2.

1 Their vying lust for Edmund, a symbol of natural instinct, ends
in terrible jealousy, poisoning and suicide. Lust reduces men to ani-
malistic desire. Lust is a revolt of man's sinful nature against God.
Their minds are possessed by fear more horrible than lust owing to
their casting off their father. They are vexed with strange fears
like Saul or Macbeth as they are deprived of the spirit of God.
They fear not only Lear with one hundred knights, but also that
their wandering father would "pluck the common bosom on his side
and turn our impress'd lances in our eyes which do command them"
(V. iii. 50-52).

2 Their excessive fear drives them to make "a plot of death upon
him" (III. vi. 98).

3 Edgar's remark on his own identity applies to the degeneration
of Goneril and Regan.

4 The foul fiend follows me. ... poor Tom, whom the foul fiend
hath led through fire and through flame, through ford and
whirlpool, o'er bog and quagmire. ... poor Tom, whom the foul
fiend vexes. ... The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice of
a nightingale. ... Take heed 'o the foul fiend. Obey thy parents.
... commit not with man's sworn spouse; ... A serving man, proud
in heart and mind, served the lust of my mistress's heart,
and did the act of darkness with her; ... one that slept in the
contriving of lust, and waked to do it. (III. iv. & vi.)

Their process of deterioration is similar in many points to that of
Macbeth. Macbeth murders the gracious Duncan, a Christ-figure.
Duncan resembles his father, for they are brothers. When the most
sainted King is killed, "grace is dead" and a breach in nature lies

like a gash'd stabs "for ruin's wasteful entrance". The foul fiend of strange fears and inverted lust, or bottomless avarice begins to haunt and follow the disgraced and "black Macbeth". His fear leads to another violence. He makes an attempt on Banquo and Macduff, though the latter flees to England safely.

Albany comments on his wife, Goneril's haunting fear of "the harms" Lear will do her with his "hundred knights:"

Well, you may fear too far. (I. iv. 353)

Later he gives a warning to her, who has done wrong to Lear, "a father, and a gracious aged man" (IV. ii. 41):

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. (IV. ii. 31-36)

Anyone who is familiar with the Bible can easily associate this commentary of Albany's with Christ's parable of the true vine in *John* 15:5-6.

I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit; for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

When Albany casts his bitter criticism of the "most barbarous,

most degenerate Goneril" to her, "See thyself, devil" whose nature is possessed by lust and murder, it is made clear that she has become "more horrid" than "a fiend" (IV. ii. 60-61), just like the "devilish Macbeth".

Macbeth follows the pattern of nature withdrawn from God's grace, which Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have invented and expounded. Lear's "dog-hearted" daughters follow the same way to damnation as Macbeth walks to his recorded time. Shakespeare explicitly embodies in Macbeth this negative truth of graceless nature based on the Scripture and the Christian tradition, but implicitly renders this negative truth of the Christian view into these "unnatural hags" in the pagan world. As Macbeth is destroyed by the instrument of heavens, that is, the supernaturally holy Macduff who has achieved his self-knowledge and allowed himself to be led by the spirit of God, not by his will, so is Goneril destroyed by one of "the visible spirits" sent by "heavens", that is, Edgar, who has become "a man new born" by his recognition of himself as he is through sufference in his nakedness. Out of fear and jealousy Goneril poisons Regan, but later when her secret evil is made known by Edgar, she takes off her life "by self and violent hands". Albany's prophecy comes true when Edmund, Goneril and Regan are destroyed:

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits,
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (IV. ii. 46-50)

But Shakespeare's treatment of Edgar and Cordelia stands out in contrast of that of Regan and Goneril. In treating of the innocent victim he is concerned with implying the positive truth of nature justified by the divine Grace. In his depiction of Edgar and Cordelia he makes an allusive use of the Biblical language, which he has refrained from doing with Goneril, Regan and Edmund because of their pagan characters.

This positive truth of the salvation of nature by God's grace applies not only to Edgar and Goneril, but also to the repentant Lear and Gloucester.

As I have described, Lear and Gloucester suffer the bitter consequences of their rejection of Cordelia and Edgar. Lear falls through spiritual pride and Gloucester meets his tragedy through his bodily lust. Their natures can not be redeemed from the sorrows which they have incurred through their sins, unless their innocent children have been sacrificed on their behalf. They have to be identified with Edgar and Cordelia's grace in Christian terms in order to achieve their salvation. In this sense they also indirectly contribute to the thematic undercurrent of deep Biblical implications beneath the pagan frame of the play.

In order to symbolize God's grace Edgar and Cordelia must undergo their spiritual transformation into a new-born nature. But before salvation must suffering come owing to their own virtues. Edgar is, first of all, cast off out of door by his father and made to wander in disguise. To escape detection Edgar is forced to deprive his nature of what "nature needs", that is, to expose his "nakedness" to "the winds and persecutions of the sky" and to mortify his bare arms with "pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary" (II. iii.). Persecution and penury has brought down his nature to

no more than a beast, in contempt of man. In his feigned madness he evokes Biblical and homiletic parallels and implies his spiritual pilgrimage to his self-knowledge and finally God's grace.

As if he were scared out of his wits, he earnestly and humorously recommends to the strange company in the hovel commands from both the Old and the New Testament. Through these mad exhortation he hints at his sinful identity which he has recognized in himself by his repeated depiction of himself as vexed by the foul fiend. At the same time he condemns Lear's elder daughters' covetousness and degeneracy and associates their hypocritical atrocity with that of the Puritans and the Protestants under Queen Elizabeth who are compared to the Pharisees in the Scripture:

Edgar: Obey thy parents. (III. iv. 79-80)

Ephesians, 6:1: "Children, obey your parents."

Edgar: Keep thy word justly. (*Ibid.*, 80)

Deuteronomy, 23:23: "That which is once gone out of thy lips, thou must keep and do."

Edgar: Swear not. (*Ibid.*, 80)

Matthew, 5:34: "Swear not at all."

Edgar: Commit not with man's sworn spouse. (*Ibid.*, 80-81)

Exodus, 20:14: "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Edgar: Set not thy sweet heart on proud array. (*Ibid.*, 81-82)

I. Timothy, 2:9: "Likewise also the women, that they array themselves in comely apparel, with shamefastness and discreet behaviour, not in braided hair, either gold or pearls or costly apparel."

Edgar: Take heed o' the foul fiend. (*Ibid.*, 79)

Beware my follower. (*Ibid.*, 145)

Matthew, 16:6 & 12: "Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisee and of the Sadduces. ... he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." (cf. *Mark* 8:15, *Luke* 12:1 and 15.)

Shakespeare makes Edgar utter the language of Scripture when he disguises himself as one of the Bedlam beggars. Shakespeare seems feel no further need of refraining from allusion to Scripture in the words of a madman. Edgar is intended to represent the persecuted Catholic missionary priests and Jesuits under Queen Elizabeth. Edgar is followed, haunted and vexed by the foul fiend of the English Pharisees.

His "nature", "subdu'd to such a lowness" as beast has many parallels in Shakespeare's contemporary writings of the persecuted Catholics. Sir William Cecil in his apology, *The Execution of Justice in England* (1583) describes the Catholic martyrs as wandering "up and down in corners, in disguised sort, changing their titles, names and manner of apparel ... vagrant, disguised, unarmed spies".¹ Edgar succeeds in inheriting the kingdom of grace through his self-knowledge by his severe persecution, as the mission priests attained a glimpse of eternal love through their martyrdom while living on earth.

Edgar's spiritual development applies to Cordelia's becoming a "queen over her passion". She has no clarity in the process of her

1. *Harleian Miscellany*, Vol. II, p. 139.

spiritual transformation.

But the development in plot implies that as Edgar attains humility and patience in his flight, so does Cordelia achieve spiritual charity in her exile in France.

Her noble nature is prepared for her paradigm of the passion. When she has been banished by her father, the King of France speaks to her the words allusive to Christ on the cross and the suffering servant.

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despis'd. (I. i.)

His words has parallels in Paul's description of Christ in *2 Corinthians* 8:9 and of the Christians in *Ibid.*, 6:10 and of the sorrowful Servant in *Isaiah* 53:3:

He, being rich, for your sakes poor, that ye through his poverty might be made rich. *2 Corinthians* 8:9

As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;
as poor, and yet making many rich. *Ibid.*, 6:10

He is despised and rejected of men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. *Isaiah* 53:3

When she is ordered by her father to declare her love of her father in material and words, she replies, "nothing". Her situation is closely associated with that of Christ before his judges, when he "held peace and answered nothing" (*Mark* 14:61).

The play is abundantly charged with Biblical echoes in the description of her to signalize her likeness to Christ¹ as I later points

out in detail in the next article.

It is not implications of Cordelia as a figure of Christ that matters, but her self-sacrificing love and atoning death. Shakespeare intentionally emphasizes a Biblical parallel between Christ's death and that of Cordelia. On her return to England, she makes it clear that it is for the purpose of rescuing her father from his plight: "O dear father! it is thy business that I go about" (IV. iv). Her words echo Christ's reply to his parents in the temple: "Knew ye not that I must go about my father's business? (*Luke* 2:49). When she and her father are taken prisoners by the enemy, she laments over their worst lot incurred by her love of him: "For thee, oppressed King, am I cast down:" (V. iii. 5). Her grief recalls Christ's words on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (*Matthew* 27:46)

The foregoing echoes and allusions indicate Cordelia's way to Christ-like death. As Christ suffered persecution for his love and truth, and died on the cross for the redemption of all flesh, so is Cordelia cast off by her father for her truth and love, and put to death by hanging for the redemption of her father's nature from the curse which the two sisters have brought her to. As by having taken upon himself all the sins of his father who has wrongly afflicted him, Edgar's "oppressed nature" delivers him from despair and suicide,

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1. M.D.H. Parker, *The Slave of Life* (London, 1955), pp. 141-2, Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York, 1957), p. 186, S.L. Bethel, *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition* (London, 1944), pp. 59-61, I. Ribner, *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1960), p. 135, Peter Milward, "The Religious Dimension of *King Lear*" in *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. VIII (1969-1970) (Tokyo, 1971), pp. 62-64, Peter Milward, *Biblical Themes in Shakespeare* (Tokyo, 1976), pp. 143-153. Susan Snyder, "*King Lear* and the Prodigal Son" in *Shakespeare Quarterly* XVII (1966), pp. 367-368, Paul A. Jorgensen, *Lear's Self-discovery* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967), p. 10, 17 and 32, Oscar James Campbell, "The Salvation of Lear" in *A Journal of English Literary History*, XV (1948), p. 107.

so does Cordelia's "abused nature" redeem a great breach in Lear's "anointed flesh" from all the sorrows that he has felt at the hands of his two daughters.

Her identification with Christ in suffering and death is predicted in the words addressed to Lear by the Gentleman, as the advent and death of Christ was foretold by the prophets:

Thou hast one daughter,

Who redeems nature from the general curse

Which twain have brought her to. (IV. vi. 210-212)

In the immediate context "twain" are Goneril and Regan, the "nature" is that of Lear, and the "curse" is the great vexation or evil to which he has been brought by their unnatural treatment of him. But in the wider or divine context it is clear that in these words there is profounder implications of Christian theology or Biblical Weltanschauung. "One daughter" is a redeemer who is Mary as the Second Eve or Christ as the Second Adam, and "the general curse" is the original sin which Adam and Eve have committed and bequeathed to us. "Twain" are the first parents of mankind and "nature" is human nature. Cordelia has been intended for "sacrifices" to be offered on which "the Gods themselves throw incense" (V. iii. 20-21).

To Shakespeare it does not matter whether one is a Christian or a heathen.

A Christian or a pagan, the whole man is nothing but flesh. To him a Christian is a mere name, and so is a pagan. Human nature does not "become free from sin except by the grace of the Savior".¹ Without God's grace, nature is free of righteousness to be enslaved

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, 1975), Bk II. chap. II. 8.

to sin. But in Shakespeare's thought, persecution is the only key to God's grace. Heroic self-sacrifice is the offspring of persecution. Without suffering and persecution, corrupted nature can not "see salvation" or God's grace, as Portia pointed out.

In the light of this interpretation, Edgar and Cordelia are intended to signalize the Catholic martyrs in Elizabethan England. Beneath the pagan surface of the play there are many hidden references to Shakespeare's contemporary England.

The Protestants protected by Queen Elizabeth persecuted the Catholic missionary priests. Among many saintly martyrs were Edmund Campion, the first victim of the Jesuit mission and Robert Person. They lived up to their faith and words. They were looked up to as a hope by their followers, when they became martyrs.

Edmund Campion was "merry in his misery". When he was tortured and had his limbs torn by the rack, he joked over them. Campion's sense of humour recalls that of Edgar in his lowest state, who has learnt to make heavenly comfort of despair: "Nothing sees miracles But misery".

Arnold Oskar Meyer wrote about the Catholic martyrs under Queen Elizabeth who showed great eagerness in the pursuit of the glory of martyrdom.

More intimate knowledge of the mission priests teaches us to regard them as men of strong manly character, steadfast in their belief, and unruffled in their obedience — men whose self-control seldom failed them, and whose cheerfulness was seldom disturbed, who were tranfigured by their victory over the world, and filled with love for all men without distinction — men, finally, who amidst the most terrible torments and ill-treatment

remained free and unconquered, because to them martyrdom was the crown of life.¹

The best-known English catholic poet of this period is Robert Southwell. He was a jesuit and martyr. He was tortured ten times by a cruel tormentor whose name was Topcliffe. Southwell is said to have not uttered a bitter word, but a soft word: "Thou art a bad man."

The martyrs showed yearning for eternal life through death. Torture never daunted their spirits.

When Lear is taken captive with Cordelia, they are glad that they two alone will "sing like birds i' th' cage" (V. iii.) and take upon them "the mystery of things as if they were God's spies" (*Ibid.*). They are not afraid of their death, but are happy in that they are put in "a wall'd prison", if they are together and don't "see these daughters and these sisters" (*Ibid.*). They glory in that they are commissioned by Gods as their angels to survey the doings of all mankind. Lear does not refer to a "better life, past fearing death". But by speaking of themselves as "God's spies" and "such sacrifices" upon which "Gods themselves throw incense" (*Ibid.*), they show the greatest eagerness in yearning after "another comfort than their world".

Many evidences in the play indicate that Lear's soul has passed through nature into eternity or the spiritual world beyond this physical life, while there remains some life in his worn-out body. "He but usurp'd his life", says Kent rightly. This pattern of Lear is true of Cordelia, who has been more spiritualized through her suffering than he. This is the reason why Lear perceives a movement

1. Arnold Oskar Meyer, *England and The Catholic Church Under Queen Elizabeth* (German edition, Rome, 1911; English Edition, New York, 1967), p. 189.

of spiritual breath on Cordelia's lips, though her nature is dead. She has held her eternal spirit, against her will, in the vile prison of her afflicted nature.

It cannot be doubted that Cordelia is intended to be closely associated with Edmund Campion, Robert Person, other sacrificed saints in Shakespear's age and finally Christ himself. Cordelia must suffer and die for her father's sake, for when she is deprived of "life" which a "dog, a horse, a rat should have" (V. iii.), she can have "breath" or eternal life and become "a soul in bliss". On her death, she has fulfilled "the rest of the afflictions of Christ for his bodies sake" (*Colosians* I:24). This is the reason why Lear says of her dying breath, "Look on her! look! look! her lips! Look there, look there!" Lear's words of joy show that Cordelia has revived, breathing eternal life on her lips on which kissing Lear's dying nature has also come to life in "an house not made by hands, eternal in heaven" (*2 Corinthians* V. i.).

These words of Lear calling attention to her lips strangely recall those of Romeo, as he is going to be identified with Juliet in death.

I dreamt my lady come and found me dead: —
Strange dream, that gives a dead man leave to think, —
And breath'd such life with kisses in my lips,
That I reviv'd, and was an emperor.

(*Romeo and Juliet*, V. i. 6-9)

The nature of Cordelia and Edgar are associated with a figure of Christ in allegorical terms or the Catholic martyrs in contemporary terms, whereas Edmund, Goneril and Regan have many features of the Puritans in Elizabethan age. What about Lear and Gloucester in the play? Have they any parallels in contemporary terms? Why

does Shakespeare insist on Lear's calling upon Nature and Gods in his wrath and distress? Lear's character is closely related to his worship of Nature. By examining his relation to Nature we can determine his character and contemporary parallel. This method of study may apply to Gloucester's superstitious religion. Our next theme is to be concerned with Lear's attitude to Nature and Gods.

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(Catharine V. i. 34)

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I dreamt my lady came and found me dead: —

— Staring, when that vile, dead turn leave to think: —

Had breath'd such life with kisses in my lips.

That I might, and was an emperor.

(Romeo and Juliet, II. 6)

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