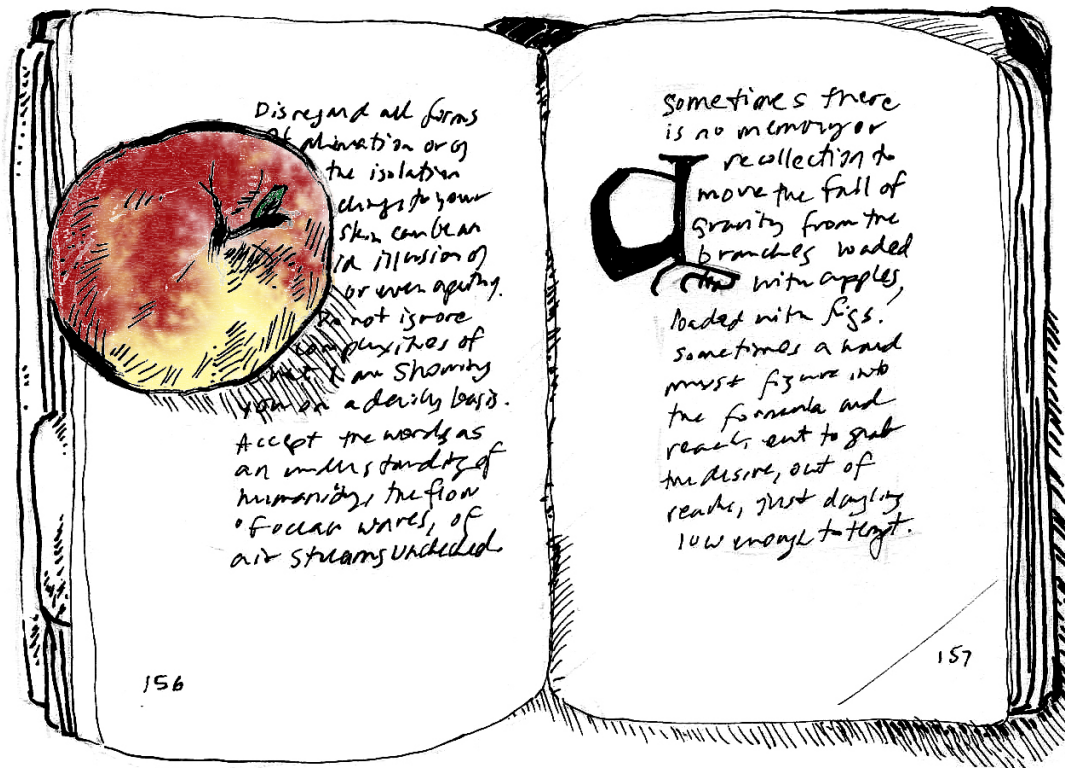# W. Shakespeare and *King Lear*

# King Lear

**More than one theme exists in the play of *King Lear.***

The top three are: *Political Order versus Anarchy*, *Corruption of Power*, and *Humanity's Placement in Nature*.

- **Political Order versus Anarchy** is based on the notion of strong, moral authority results in an harmonious society.

- Remember this is before any recognizable, governmental state of Democracy existed. For Shakespeare, the successful government was based on a monarchy-based system. The physical king represented the physical country. However, during the Renaissance, some people were beginning to question the necessity of such a hereditary ruling system.

- For the early Britain people, a weakened king represented a weakened state. As a result, the fallen, maddened King Lear becomes a symbol of political chaos after he passes authority to his eldest daughters.

# *King Lear*

- Furthermore, by using a royal family line as metaphor, the tragedy of *King Lear* establishes a realistic dysfunctional family which anyone can relate to— no matter what class or profession or political affiliations.

- Another item to keep in mind, the play was first composed around 1605, after King James I took over the throne from Queen Elizabeth I. Previously, King James had written a document declaring the "divine right of kings"— which promoted the fact that on Earth, the royalty speaks for God's voice. A kings's judgements and declarations should not be questioned by the common subjects. In a subtle, timely fashion, *King Lear* questions the value of such statements.

# King Lear

- As with the play *Macbeth* Shakespeare establishes a theme discussing the **Corruption of Power**. Aside from the two sisters Goneril and Regan, the play shows the figure of Edmund, an illegitimate son bent on obtaining as much property and title as he can. The more powerful he becomes, the more corrupt his actions, ultimately sentencing Cordelia to death.

- A final major theme: **Humanity's Placement in Nature**.
  In this pre-Christian view of the Universe, many of the characters consider whether or not if humans have any control over their environment.
  In the *Longman Anthology*, page 1369, Edmund himself binds his loyalties to the personified concept of Nature: "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law / My services are bound" (Act 1, Scene 2). In this act he openly admits he follows a chaotic, uncontrollable force within the material world. Furthermore, by aligning himself with the unpredictable powers of the Natural World, he redefines his role in the story.

# King Lear

- Edmund's statements here permits him to shift his agenda at the close of the play when he confesses his actions. He will comment near his own death: "Some good I mean to do, / Despite of my own nature" (Act 5, Scene 2, ll 242-243). Shakespeare does not want to utilize a stereotype of the typical bastard son in other words.

- At the same time, Shakespeare does not defy convention totally. Edmund uses a forged letter in order to gain the upper hand of the situation, a common plot device for the time. Likewise he is opportunistic, finding any necessary means to get back at his father and half-brother.

# *King Lear*

**Natural elements within the play are depicted as surreal or extremely violent.**

One of the first instances of irrational behavior of nature is mentioned by the Earl of Gloucester.

- He states: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects (Act 1, Scene 2; p 1371). In a sense, unknowingly, his comment predict the events to unfold. Eclipses were seen as predictors of natural disasters or deaths of kings— even though through science the motion of sun and moon can be explained.

- Later on in the midst of the thunderstorm (Act 3, Scene 2; page 1400) Lear rages out into the storm due to the reduction of his followers by his daughters and the disrespect compounded. Notice the ironic pun of his stormy anger and the violent windstorm. Here, through natural weather disturbances, Lear falls deep into a state of madness.