

William B. Bache

Hamlet, Macbeth, and Lear Offstage: The Significance of Absence

In terms of the canon, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* seem to evolve out of the nine Shakespeare plays that deal with English history. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* may even be thought of as a natural consequence of the history plays, a poetic flowering of that dramatic achievement, a kind of neo-historical unit. For all three of these tragedies develop and extend the implications of the central lesson of the history plays: kingship, the problems of authority and responsibility, aspects of realpolitik, all that being a ruler involves and means. Denmark, Scotland, and Britain are countries torn with internal trouble and shaken by outside force. But *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* are also family plays, plays that in each instance concentrate on a family that happens to be royal. In fact, *Hamlet* is about a man who is both son and prince, heir to the throne; *Macbeth* is about a man who is both husband and king, usurper of the throne; *King Lear* is about a man who is both father and king, abdicator of the throne. In familial terms, Hamlet is only a son; Macbeth is only a husband; Lear is only a father.

Shakespeare was magnificently able to integrate the private and the public concerns of the action of each play. Specifically, the noble Hamlet, Macbeth, or Lear is of consequence to the world and of significance to himself and to his family. And the action renders the interplay of these responsibilities: to self, to the family, to the state or the world. The choices presented by the dramatic action are not simple: it is never easy to kill a king, who is like a father. Lear submerges his feelings as father to his duty as king. His decision to divide his kingdom seems politically wise. Of course the consequences of his decision are devastating; yet during the subsequent action Lear's several roles are wonderfully integrated into the single role of old man-father-king.¹ From the fire of his folly he emerges purified and, strangely, saved.

But the main point is that all three plays form a small cycle, like the two tetralogies of history plays Shakespeare had already written. As a matter of fact the three tragedies seem to compromise a set comparable to the easily recognized Roman trilogy of *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*. Thus *Hamlet* is the first in a series of what can be called an historic-tragic-family trilogy, a more sophisticated kind of cycle than either of the two history cycles or the Roman set. Hamlet is the revenger; Macbeth is the murderer; Lear is the victim. Claudius, the murderer of the king and the usurper of the throne, becomes, in a manner of speaking, the subject of *Macbeth*, as if the play *Macbeth* is the play *Hamlet* told from the point of view of Claudius. The elder Hamlet, the dispossessed king, the ghost, becomes the subject of *King Lear*, as if the play *King Lear* is the play *Hamlet* told from the point of view of the ghost, the elder Hamlet. What I mean to imply is that *Macbeth* and *King Lear* may be said to fill out or to unfold or to explore the implications of *Hamlet*. As an abstract and brief chronicle of man, *Hamlet* concentrates its dramatic attention upon the son; *Macbeth*, upon the husband; *King Lear*, upon the father. From play to play the emphasis moves, from prince to king to old king.² *Macbeth* and *King Lear* can therefore be perceived as dramatic and thematic embellishments of *Hamlet*. Or just as all three plays present a saga about kingship (a young, potential king; a usurping monarch; an old, depleted king), so all three plays document a family (son, husband, father). Simply, these three plays may be considered as a compelling trilogy about both essential kingship and the existential family.

In a Shakespeare tragedy the hero finds himself in vital conflict with the world that contains him. But as a matter of curious fact the hero of each of these three plays is not present at the beginning.³ And so these particular tragedies start—soldiers on the battlements stand watch on a bitter night, waiting for the ghost of the king to appear; witches chant, and a bloody soldier and then Ross report the recently concluded battle action; some thirty-one lines of brittle talk by Kent, Gloucester, and Edmund are given. A context is thus established for each hero. And to his particular world he comes, Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear. Moreover, as soon as he has made an initial impression, the hero leaves the action: the characters of the world with which he is or will be in conflict become the center of the dramatic interest. When, after his initial appearance, he is again absent, new concepts are established, a larger context for the major conflict is established, a representation of what will be later clarified is given. Specifically, Act

I, scene 3 of *Hamlet* is devoted to the Polonius-Laertes-Ophelia subplot; Act I, scene 2 of *King Lear* is given over to the Gloucester-Edmund-Edgar subplot. Each subplot is made up of members of a family unit.⁴ The main reasons for the establishment of context seem apparent, easily understood. For the subplot clarifies the main situation: each member of the subplot in *Hamlet* or *King Lear* will be closely implicated in the developing situation of the hero. Significantly, Hamlet is directly responsible for the death of each member of the subplot of that play: Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes; the father, the daughter, the son.

Although the protagonist appears in every act of each play, he is of course often not on stage. A usually ignored large fact about the structure of each of these tragedies is that midway through the action the protagonist disappears. He is absent for a relatively long time: Hamlet is not in the play for 502 lines; Macbeth is not present for 436 lines; Lear is not onstage for 499 lines.⁵ In each instance the protagonist is absent for approximately the same number of lines, presumably the same stage time, about a half hour. Where is the hero then? In terms of structure the absences would seem to be related. But the particular facts of each situation must first be reviewed.

After killing Polonius, Hamlet is sent to England. As he is leaving Denmark, he sees Fortinbras, who in turn is on his new way to fight in Poland. In his last soliloquy in the play Hamlet declares that from this time on, his "thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" Upon these words at the end of IV, 4, Hamlet leaves the action. When he returns, three-and-a-quarter scenes later, in V, I, the setting is a graveyard. While Hamlet is elsewhere, Ophelia goes mad; Laertes returns to Denmark determined to revenge the death of his father; Claudius takes Laertes' fury and uses it in order to make Laertes the instrument that will destroy Hamlet.

Having been shown the three apparitions and the line of kings, Macbeth comments:

From this moment
 The very firstlings of my heart shall be
 The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
 To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
 The castle of Macduff I will surprize,
 Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' the sword
 His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
 That trace him in his line.

Macbeth then disappears: he is not on stage from IV, I to V, 3, a total

of four scenes. While Macbeth is offstage, Lady Macduff and her children are murdered; Macduff, in England, is tested by Malcolm, the murdered Duncan's elder son, and then these two join together in order to return to Scotland. Dismayed at the news of the murder of his family, Macduff becomes the instrument that will destroy Macbeth. The sleepwalking Lady Macbeth relives the horror of the past. Macbeth's former subjects, now rebels, gather in order to oppose the bloody tyrant.

Having been driven and forsaken in the storm, Lear is taken to a farmhouse where he, after wildly raging, sleeps. He is then carried off. Lear is absent from III, 6 to IV, 6, for seven full scenes and a part of two others. While Lear is offstage, Gloucester's eyes are put out. Edgar leads his despairing father to Dover. Goneril and Edmund reach Albany's castle, where, after Edmund has left, Albany berates his wife and expresses sympathy for the blind Gloucester. Cordelia returns to England in order to help her distraught father. Edgar deludes Gloucester into believing that he, the father, is at a cliff and that, having fallen, is still alive. Edgar becomes the instrument that will destroy Edmund.

It used to be commonly thought and said that there is a time near the end of Shakespeare tragedy when the tension that has been building is relaxed, when our emotional engagement is not a consideration; that there is a time given over to something like comic relief, a recess, a calm before the final storm, before the catastrophe, before the ultimate end, before the final attack on our sensibilities. I think there may be something of critical value to this old, undifferentiated and largely uncritical notion. I also think that the particular notion is part of the larger matter of the absent hero and his world. Before the end is reached in any of these three plays, attention is directed for some time to events that do not seem to concern the protagonist. Or, at least, at that time dramatic attention is not given to Hamlet or Macbeth or Lear. Attention is largely given to what may be called the members of the subplot of each play.

Now perhaps Shakespeare had a practical reason for dismissing for some time his leading actor, the most important member of the acting company. Both Hamlet and Macbeth are engaged in sword play in the final act; the role of Lear is notoriously strenuous. In other words, Shakespeare may have deliberately arranged the action in such a way that his leading actor could have some time off before the arduous end. During this time Burbage may be imagined relaxing in the tiring house, waiting his cue to return. But of course the fact that the hero is

absent has significance in thematic terms, in terms of the unfolding action.

At the end of what can be called the "prosperous" stage of the action (the end of Act III or the beginning of Act IV), the hero disappears.⁶ He will reappear when the world is re-created or as it is being re-created, when order is about to be restored. Moreover, at this time the man who will take the place of the hero is presented or reappears. *He has been absent.* Fortinbras makes his first appearance in the play; Malcolm, appearing in IV, 3, has been absent since II, 3; Albany, appearing in IV, 2, has been absent since I, 4. That is to say, the future king—the successor of Hamlet, Macbeth, or Lear—comes on stage in Act IV, while the protagonist is not present.⁷ In a manner of speaking, Malcolm and Albany become examples of the Fortinbras type. It begins to look as if Shakespeare established a series of procedures in *Hamlet* that he then followed in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

It also seems significant that in each of these three tragedies the central object of the hero's love—Hamlet's sweetheart, Macbeth's wife, Lear's favorite child—is presented during the hero's long absence, before he returns. A woman symbolizes the heart. And as a kind of symbolic action, Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, or Cordelia comes back to the action onstage before Hamlet or Macbeth or Lear does. She enters the now-real world, the world produced by blood, before he does. As a matter of fact, Ophelia is absent from the play from III, 2 to IV, 4; Lady Macbeth is not present from III, 4. The last time Hamlet is with a live Ophelia is in III, 2; the last time Macbeth is with his wife is in III, 4. Both Ophelia and Lady Macbeth become mad and die. The reunion of Cordelia and Lear does not happen until a significant change has taken place in the world and in both of their lives.

Moreover, it seems remarkable that each loved one dies before the hero does.⁸ But each is changed (Ophelia and Lady Macbeth go mad; Cordelia becomes like a spirit) before she leaves. Ophelia, it seems reasonable to say, was really in love with the Hamlet she knew before the action begins; Lady Macbeth was in love with the Macbeth she knew before he became Cawdor: he returns to her changed from what he was. She knows what he wants, and she will do anything to help him. But the Macbeth of the soliloquies and the asides is not the Macbeth his wife sees and thinks she knows. Cordelia rejoins Lear *after he has been mad and has changed*; their reunion in IV, 7 is exotic and sublime. In all three tragedies, when the woman, the loved one, dies, any future for the hero as husband or father is impossible.

He is no longer a husband or a father. It is as if the heart dies before the man does and as if the man dies before the king or the public figure does. In this respect as in others, *King Lear* is more wide-ranging and more complicated than *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Still, of course, each play is extraordinary in its difficulty.

Obviously, what happens to the protagonist during the course of a Shakespeare tragedy changes him: he becomes different from the way he was. And upon the return of Hamlet, Macbeth, or Lear, after his long absence, he has unmistakably changed. Hamlet comes back to Denmark naked, so he writes in a letter; the mad or valiantly furious Macbeth is discovered to be now under siege by his enemies, not attacking but attacked; Lear re-enters the action as mad king; he will shortly sleep again and then awaken, this time as a child-changed father. While the hero is absent, the forces that will drive him to destruction are gathering strength. And the dramatic action is in part concerned with the gathering of that strength: the unenlightened world joins its power to its will. That is to say, Claudius and Laertes are found conspiring against the Prince of Denmark; Malcolm and Macduff are seen coming to an agreement about the necessary destruction of Macbeth; Edmund and Albany briefly appear (although they are in the same scene, IV, 2, they are not together) before they move to Dover, where they will join forces in order to combat the invading French, whose queen is Cordelia.

I think it is meaningful that, as a consequence of Shakespeare's design, the protagonist must be unaware of all that is happening during his absence. Hamlet, for instance, does not see Ophelia when she is mad; Macbeth does not see his broken wife; Lear does not see Gloucester's eyes being put out, and he does not see the distraught Cordelia of IV, 4. Lear is mad with the blind Gloucester and Edgar in IV, 6; he awakens to his heavenly child, Cordelia. While the hero is away, we or the audience see things that he does not. It is as if a context is being prepared for us and given to us for our critical enlightenment. By the time the hero returns, we know more than he does about major developments. It is as if by his actions the protagonist brings the play to a particular point, a kind of emotional climax, and then he disappears until a further point has been reached, until we have reached a point of enlightenment beyond that of the protagonist.

Now that the hero is away, we watch the action of each tragedy moving inevitably, inexorably toward the death of the hero and, consequently, since we know what he does not, to our judgment of that death. It seems significant that in the last scene of *Hamlet* and *King*

Lear and in the penultimate scene in *Macbeth* a sword fight occurs—between Hamlet and Laertes, between Edgar and Edmund, between Macbeth and Macduff. In *King Lear* the sword fight is in reality a trial by combat. It is as if Edgar, the godson, is the instrument of public justice, while, offstage, Lear is privately killing the slave who would hang Cordelia. At the end of each play, the public sword fight is a test between opposing but equal men, men who have, through force of circumstance, become equal or at least comparable. Laertes is another Hamlet; Macduff is like Macbeth in that he has lost everything of value; Edmund and Edgar are, at this particular place and time, fortuneless and futureless brothers. Symbolically, the public conflict is between “brothers.”

It seems strangely significant that, after the disappearance of the hero in the middle of the play, new characters are introduced. It is almost as if the play is beginning again, with a fresh set of characters. After the “prosperous” world is destroyed, the play begins again. In *Hamlet* Fortinbras has not been seen before; Ophelia is completely different from the way she was; the gravediggers are new. In *Macbeth* Lady Macduff and her son have not been seen before; two doctors are new; Lady Macbeth is completely different from the way she was. Monteith and Caithness are new. In *King Lear* Gloucester is now blind; an eighty-year-old man has not been seen before; a doctor is new; Cordelia is completely different from the way she was.

Anyone reading *Hamlet* for the first time feels, I suppose, the certitude that the prince is young; the young Hamlet, we instinctively say. And I would guess that, during that first time, we all assume his age to be eighteen or nineteen. I think that each of us has experienced that sense of disbelief upon discovering in V, 1 that Hamlet is thirty years of age for, as the gravedigger remarks, he has been at his job for thirty years, since the very day Hamlet was born.⁹ In addition, it must be a shock the first time we hear the queen refer to her son, Hamlet, during the sword play as being “fat, and scant of breath,” no matter how the lines are glossed. It is almost as if there are two Hamlets, the Hamlet up to his disappearance and the new Hamlet—one, a troubled young man; the other, a man mature, almost calm.

In V, 3 of *Macbeth* the hero speaks the famous lines:

I have liv'd long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf
And that which should accompany old age . . .

Macbeth sounds old, yet at his disappearance in IV, 1, he is only mad

for blood. Whereas the early Macbeth seems young and ambitious, the late Macbeth seems disillusioned and old. It is not until IV, 7 of *King Lear* that the father addresses his kind daughter in a new way:

Pray do not mock me.
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less . . .

Yet we hardly think of the Lear of the first three acts as being eighty, in fact, the early Lear, though obviously not young, was vigorous enough to go hunting.

Again, the truth seems to be that in each instance the returned hero seems older or is older than he was before his disappearance. Now perhaps part of the reason why the hero is offstage for that half-hour is that during that time he is being made to look different, to look older than before. Makeup and padding are being put on the actor in order to change his stage appearance. When he returns to the action, he will look different, and the audience will see the difference and respond to it. Of course the change may be meant to be only symbolic: time, if largely symbolic time, has passed, and its passing has visibly affected the hero. He enters the new world changed, visibly changed, I think. The difference is meant to be seen and understood, metaphorically and thematically.

One crucial plot function of IV, 5 of *Hamlet*, the longest scene during Hamlet's sustained absence, is to present one result of Hamlet's killing Polonius: Ophelia has been driven mad. But of immediate relevance to Hamlet's case is that, through the behavior of Laertes in this scene, a parable of the Hamlet case is presented: simply, Laertes acts as Hamlet could have acted. In other words, Laertes returns to IV, 5 (having been absent since I, 3) as someone in Hamlet's almost exact position: he has heard that his father has been murdered, and he knows that the murderer is free and unpunished. Understandably, Laertes is violent and angry: he wants swift action and justice. But, not unexpectedly, a politically acute Claudius handles such forthright behavior with skill and ease. Claudius uses Laertes's rebellion. Laertes is manipulated like a child into an effective instrument against Hamlet, the detested enemy. What if Hamlet had been as forthright and rash as Laertes is?

Clearly, then, it is during Hamlet's long absence that Shakespeare presents the ending that the play would have if Hamlet were Laertes. If that were so, then this would be the result. It is as if Shakespeare insists that Laertes's case be understood so that Hamlet's case may be

distinguished from it.¹⁰ In part, Claudius can manipulate Laertes because in this instance Claudius is innocent and Hamlet is guilty. Although Hamlet does not see the furious Laertes, the audience does. Although Hamlet does not see the masterful Claudius, the audience does. But, indeed, having been absent, Laertes has not seen the distraught Hamlet. After the identification of Laertes with Hamlet has been made, the new, "sane" Hamlet appears in V, 1.

As soon as Hamlet casts off the vestiges of madness, Ophelia re-enters the action, mad. It is as if she has picked up or donned the madness that Hamlet has finally dropped or discarded. In effect, as soon as Hamlet is determined to have only bloody thoughts, Ophelia becomes mad. But Ophelia of IV, 5 is also a kind of demonstration of another possible end for Hamlet. In other words, Ophelia is what Hamlet would be if he had been, like her, weak and vulnerable. The murder of her father has driven her mad. Hamlet would have become undeniably insane and would have destroyed himself, pulled, like her, by tears to muddy death. In IV, 5, after Fortinbras, Hamlet's successor, is first introduced, Ophelia and Laertes return to the action: all three are simplified versions of Hamlet, parable figures, alternative statements of endings that Hamlet could have or would have if he were really like any of the three.

Anyway, while the hero is offstage, at least one small, though detailed version of the action is presented, a dramatic statement with a different main character. It is as if the central action is being briefly recapitulated in other terms. And something like this general strategy is employed in the other two tragedies in what I consider a sequence. But in each of these two works the strategy of identification and distinction is not so simple as it is with Laertes or even with Ophelia. As a matter of fact, more imaginative identifications and more deliberate distinctions must be made. For instance, as soon as Macbeth decides that the "firstlings of my heart shall be/ The firstlings of my hand," Lady Macduff is introduced: Hamlet's resolve is immediately followed by the re-appearance of Ophelia, the daughter; Macbeth's resolve is followed by the appearance of Lady Macduff, a wife. Such is the nature of Shakespeare's art that as soon as the hero decides to discount feeling, the heart is presented on stage in the form of a discarded loved one, who is then destroyed. Moreover, IV, 2 and IV, 3 of *Macbeth* together function as a kind of subplot, like that of Polonius and his children in *Hamlet*.

Act IV, 2 of *Macbeth* presents one result of Macbeth's brutality, the murder of the innocents. But up until the entrance of the

murderers, the scene is also an easy statement of Macbeth's case. The particular action demonstrates that Macduff did wrong to forsake his wife and children by going to England. In a similar way, Macbeth did wrong to forsake his wife and to become a murderous tyrant. Both of them neglect the heart and put themselves or the state above the family. Both Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth have been betrayed by their husbands. If the same boy actor played both roles, the identification could be made obvious.¹¹ But more than this kind of identification, and strange as it may initially seem, Lady Macduff and her young son may be said to stand for or to represent Lady Macbeth and her husband.

The boy and his mother treat each other in a mocking, half-serious, bantering manner: of course we understand that their comments do not belie the obvious, mutual affection, no matter what they actually say. In other words, the thematic significance of the scene seems to be that it is a dramatic rendering of this assertion: if Macbeth had been, like the boy in the scene, a good child, if he had just remained simple, like a child (that is, if Macbeth had acted in a manner we may feel he ought to have acted), Macbeth would still not have been saved from being killed. As each play proves, innocence invites destruction. If he had remained "home" with his wife, both Macbeth and his wife would still be destroyed, just as they in fact are. The point is that the end would be the same, though, as the specific instance proves, Macbeth would have then remained innocent like a child, significantly guiltless. If that were the case, he would die as a victim. As IV, 2, seems meant to demonstrate, if Macbeth had remained a child, he still could not have escaped the fate of being butchered. The thought is chilling, and it gives to IV, 2, an additional horror.

As the general strategy would teach us to expect, when, in the next scene, Macduff visits Malcolm in England, a second version of the central action is presented. If, like Macduff, Macbeth had remained a loyal subject, if, for instance, Macbeth had reported to Duncan and repeated what the weird sisters had predicted, he still would not have been saved. In such a situation, the politic Duncan may be imagined as looking upon Macbeth, the newly named Cawdor, as being in fact like Cawdor, a traitor. Obviously, I, 4, the scene in which Malcolm is named Prince of Cumberland, establishes the political skill of Duncan: there Duncan deliberately closes the door on Macbeth's hopes. Macbeth is put in his place as thane. Duncan's future tactics, we may well surmise, would have been to isolate Macbeth from his family, to destroy Macbeth's home and future, and to turn Macbeth into a

dedicated, futureless butcher. As human being, Macbeth would have been nullified. What happens to Macduff in IV, 3 could have happened to Macbeth if Macbeth had been open and honest, a patriot. Thematically, the Macduff case is like the Laertes case. Both men are manipulated. Malcolm, like Claudius, is politically acute. Again, identifications are meant to be seen and distinctions are intended to be made.

It is then as if in Act IV Shakespeare presents two successive, alternative statements of the central action: if Macbeth had not listened to the voice of temptation, he would have remained like a child and would have been destroyed; if Macbeth had been a loyal subject to Duncan, he would have been dehumanized, if not destroyed. Macbeth's real end is greater and finer than those ends. After two possibilities, in different dramatic terms, have been presented, the real Macbeth, the tyrant and ironic hero, re-enters the action and is subsequently destroyed. During the hero's long absence, other expressions of his fate are revealed to the audience. In all versions his ultimate fate is unavoidable, inevitable. Parables instruct. By means of this poetic strategy the audience is taken through successive, comparable endings.

In III, 7 of *King Lear*, the famous scene in which Cornwall plucks out Gloucester's eyes, two versions of Lear's case are presented in condensed, dramatic fashion. Cornwall is like the early Lear as king; Gloucester is like the early Lear as father. If King Lear, like Cornwall, the acting king, had insisted on punishing the renegades Cordelia and Kent instead of just banishing them, Lear, like Cornwall, would have been stabbed in the back, at least metaphorically, and killed by one of his own servants. If Lear, like Gloucester, the anxious father and host, had tried to be understanding and helpful, he would have been blinded, at least metaphorically, and would have turned suicidal. What happens to Cornwall and what happens to Gloucester are approximations of Lear's case, expressions of Lear's situation, comparable dramatic statements. Cornwall dies as king; Gloucester as father; Lear as father-king.

By the logic of the established poetic strategy in all three plays, the love affair between Goneril and Edmund, revealed in IV, 2, is a version of the main action or is a possible end that the main action could have. It had been Lear's announced intention to have Cordelia marry Burgundy (she is offered to him first) and then for Lear to spend the rest of his life with them. But if Cordelia had married Burgundy and if Lear had joined them, then Albany's position as an unwanted

master in IV, 2 may be seen as a statement of what Lear's position would have been. In time Cordelia and Burgundy, the new couple, would have wanted to rid the world of this unnecessary old man. In other words, Goneril and Edmund may be said to stand for or to represent Cordelia and Burgundy. But since Cordelia so completely loves her father and since Albany is not destroyed, the scene can be better interpreted another way. Albany, the unwanted husband, would be like Burgundy, the unwanted husband. Both survive. The two lovers would be Lear and Cordelia, whom in time Burgundy would come to want to destroy. For Lear, the "child-changed father," loves Cordelia, and, as he strangely but significantly remarks upon his return in IV, 6, "I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom." Still, the main point is that Lear and Cordelia cannot escape their fate.

It seems that, in this particular large instance, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* follow the strategic, poetic line established in and by *Hamlet*. While the protagonist is absent, his foils or alter egos come forward. In a manner of speaking, Laertes and Fortinbras come to center stage in Act IV of *Hamlet*. Macduff and Malcolm come forward in Act IV of *Macbeth*. Edgar and Albany advance in Act IV of *King Lear*. Moreover, Macduff and Edgar fit the Laertes type: they become resolute; they are the instruments of justice, by means of which the world is won. Malcolm and Albany suit the Fortinbras type: they are the recipients of a world won for them by the Laertes type.

Finally, during the long absence of the hero, the central strategy of presenting versions of the action or of going through endings is employed in each of these tragedies. In *King Lear*, the most ambitious and difficult of these plays, the strategy is used in a more sophisticated way than it is in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. However, the key fact is that, by means of the strategy, each play demonstrates that the actual end as end is not to be avoided. Except for *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare's art does not proceed by means of plot surprises. In the versions of the action presented while the hero is offstage, the central character is in each instructive instance, less than is the hero. The absent hero waits offstage. After other possibilities have been stated by the action and thus accommodated by and through our imaginative understanding, the hero arrives and Shakespeare's true end is rendered. And the full, subsuming, encompassing, artistic truth is realized. Lesser ends not only point toward richer ends but also insure and clarify them.

NOTES

1. See William B. Bache, "Lear as Old Man-Father-King," *CLA Journal*, 19 (1975), 1-9.
2. Whether or not *King Lear* was written before *Macbeth* is not a significant matter.
3. Actually a Shakespeare play usually begins with a choric scene. See, for instance, the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*.
4. *Macbeth* does not have a comparable scene, one devoted to all the characters in a subplot, to the members of another family; however, the very beginning of *Macbeth*, when the hero is first absent, is more elaborate and more extensive than the beginning of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. As I will indicate, IV, 2 and IV, 3 of *Macbeth* together function as a kind of comparable scene.
5. *Hamlet* has 3,906 lines; *Macbeth*, 2,529; *King Lear*, 3,302. Hamlet is in 13 of 20 scenes; Macbeth is in 15 of 29 scenes; Lear is in 10 of 26 scenes. Of what can be called choric scenes (short scenes that do not involve the hero), there are none in *Hamlet*, six in *Macbeth*, five in *King Lear*. All references and citations are from G. Blakemore Evans' text in the New Riverside Shakespeare (Boston, 1974).
6. For the significance of the three stages of a Shakespeare play (prosperity, destruction, recreation), see E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London, 1951), particularly "The Tragic Pattern," pp. 16-55, *passim*.
7. I assume that Albany, not Edgar, will be the future king. But see F.T. Flahiff, "Edgar: Once and Future King" in *Some Facets of "King Lear": Essays in Prismatic Criticism* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 221-235.
8. This is one of the essential differences between these three tragedies and the early *Romeo and Juliet*, and between these three tragedies and the late *Antony and Cleopatra*.
9. Of course Hamlet's age is hinted at in III, 2. See the Player King's speech beginning . . . "Full thirty times hath Phoebus' cart gone round."
10. Perhaps the major commonplace of *Hamlet* criticism is that Laertes and Fortinbras are doubles or foils for Hamlet.
11. See F.E. Halliday, *A Shakespeare Companion 1564-1964* (Penguin Books, 1964), particularly the entries under *Casts*, *Chamberlain's-King's Men*, *Doubling of Parts*, and *Dramatis Personae*. For a brief, informative view of the matter, see Richard David, "Shakespeare and the Players" in *Studies in Shakespeare: British Academy Lectures* (London, 1967), pp. 33-55.