

solemn tragedy was essentially unfathomable. Although Bradley's emphasis on character has been rejected by recent critics, many would agree that *King Lear* remains impossible to pin down.

In 1930, G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire* was published. In *King Lear* and the Comedy of the Grotesque, Wilson Knight explored the absurd cruelty in the play. 'The tragedy is most poignant in that it is purposeless, unreasonable. It [*King Lear*] is the most fearless artistic facing of the ultimate cruelty of things in our literature. That cruelty would be less were there not this element of comedy ... Mankind is, as it were, deliberately or comically tormented by "the gods". He is not even allowed to die tragically'. This view of the play marks a departure from previous accounts of *King Lear*. Up to now, there had been very little emphasis on the (horrible) comedy of the play, even though the cruelty and absurdity had been noted before.

The question of whether or not *King Lear* can be interpreted as a 'Christian play' has troubled many critics. Some see Cordelia as a Christ-like figure, who redeems Lear (thus his sufferings have not been in vain). Cordelia and Edgar's Christian virtues are commented upon and Lear too is recognised as displaying the virtue of patience. There are obvious problems with the Christian view, which fellow critics have been keen to point out. Why do the good characters' calls for justice from the gods go unheeded? Why does the ending feel so bleak? The agnostic view has tended to dominate. W.R. Elton (1966) refutes the Christian critics' positive readings of *King Lear*. He sees Cordelia's hanging and Gloucester's blinding as proof of 'the wilful operations of an upside down providence in an apparently deranged universe'. In his *Penguin Critical Studies: King Lear* (1986), Kenneth Muir, a **humanist** critic, agrees with Elton. 'In *King Lear*', Muir says, 'he [Shakespeare] starts from the hypothesis, whatever his personal beliefs, that the gods are indifferent, or hostile, or inexplicable, or even a man-made fiction, and that there is no after-life in which the injustices of life on earth may be set right. It follows that human beings are entirely responsible for their actions, and that if these lead to disaster, the tragedy is absolute'. After these pessimistic comments, however, Muir finds a reason to be more optimistic. He notes that many characters act with Christian morals, seeking to do good, regardless of the chaos that surrounds them. Thus, Shakespeare does not present man as completely evil.

Now, scholars are interested in the political and social implications of *King Lear*. Debate is focused on class, gender, race, the family, authority, the structures of power, and the meanings and functions of literary criticism itself. Some of the most interesting work on *King Lear* has come from **feminist** and **new historicist** critics.

NEW HISTORICISM

In *Radical Tragedy* (1984), Jonathan Dollimore completely reassesses *King Lear*. For him the play is not about the heroism of human endurance, or the moral growth of a hero who comes to know himself more thoroughly. Dollimore moves away from the analysis of character and individual suffering favoured by Bradley. He suggests that Lear's identity is a social construction; 'What makes Lear the person he is – or rather was – is not kingly essence (divine right), but, among other things, his authority and his family'. Lear loses his mind when he loses his social status. As the play progresses Lear is stripped of his 'conceptions of self; he is forced to question his identity, 'Does any here know me?' ... 'who is it that can tell me who I am?'

Dollimore believes *King Lear* is really about 'power, property and inheritance'. In this play Shakespeare focuses on what happens when there is 'a catastrophic redistribution of power'. Society is 'torn apart by conflict' because of its 'faulty ideological structure'. Looking at the end of Act V Scene 3 Dollimore sees a total collapse. Edgar and Albany try vainly to 'recuperate their society in just those terms the play is subjected to sceptical interrogation'. Thus, for Dollimore, *King Lear* is a subversive, radical **tragedy** which questions the Jacobean status quo.

Leonard Tennenhouse refutes Dollimore's subversive reading. For him *King Lear* shows us the opposite: the dangers of not following the 'old ways' of the patriarchal hierarchy. He sees the play as reaffirming oppressive structures, as being conservative in impulse. Tennenhouse would also deny that Shakespeare's portrayal of the sufferings of the poor and his concern with justice in *King Lear* are proof that the playwright viewed his society with a critical eye. However, other new historicist critics point to Lear's abuses of power as being direct comment on the vagaries of James I and his monarchy. In these readings, Shakespeare emerges as a social commentator.