

Albany's "milky gentleness"

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In an article published in 1960, Leo Kirschbaum attempted to justify Shakespeare's occasionally patchy characterization of Albany in *King Lear*. In sketching the Duke's transformation from a weakling dominated by an evil wife in the early scenes, to the pious statesman in the closing act, Kirschbaum wondered whether "Albany's growth from nonentity to greatness in *King Lear* [was] not worth Gloucester's eyes," suggesting the earlier atrocity was the necessary prelude to the Duke's later coming of age and "apotheosis."¹ Kirschbaum himself was quick to deny that he would attempt to answer this question. Rather, he argued simply that "Albany was meant by Shakespeare to be observed carefully."²

This paper will take up Kirschbaum's suggestion – but with a different approach. Kirschbaum and other critics in his wake have seemed to excuse Albany's meekness with the benefit of hindsight, as if what occurred in acts II and III was a necessary stage for the character to realize where his moral duty lay. This reading rests on the assumption that there is such a thing as a character's 'development' and 'coherence', two notions that are now moot, given that Albany is but a literary construct which does not *need* to be developed or coherent to serve a dramatic purpose (*pace* Aristotle). More importantly, I believe Kirschbaum's study

1. Leo Kirschbaum, "Albany," *Shakespeare Survey: King Lear*, edited by Allardyce Nicoll, vol. 13, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960, p. 20.

2. *Ibid.*

only provides a partial analysis to the manner in which Albany is presented to us in the play. As a consequence, his reflection on the possible function(s) of this seemingly insignificant character fails to go beyond the traditional understanding of Albany as a ‘good’ character who provides a sense of moral closure to an otherwise bleak tragedy.

In what follows, I would like to attempt to answer a number of fairly simple questions: Who is Albany? What do we know about him? And... is it important? I wish to tease out the potential links between Shakespeare’s Albany, a semi-fictional, semi-historical character taken from the annals of British mythical history, and the dukes of Albany of the early modern era. Given the play’s topicality, notably with its probable reference to the new king’s wish to unite his two kingdoms,³ one may wonder whether there is more to Albany than meets the eye – *historically speaking*. After all, Albany has been given relatively scant attention for a character who, in the end, apparently inherits Lear’s kingdom⁴ – or does he?

Before going into further detail, it is important to note that an immediate difficulty in trying to examine these issues derives from the numerous differences between the Quarto (1608) and the Folio (1623) versions of *King Lear*, notably with regards to Albany’s part and characterization. One could go as far as to wonder, like Stephen Urkowitz, whether the differences between both texts are not intimately linked with *Albany*, rather than with Edgar, a more obviously prominent character in the play.⁵ Critics generally agree that the cuts in F increase Edgar’s role at Albany’s

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3. See, for instance, Philippa Berry, “Cordelia’s bond and Britannia’s missing middle: *King Lear* (c. 1606),” *Shakespeare’s Feminine Endings: Disfiguring death in the tragedies*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 135-166.
 4. In the words of one critic, “Although criticism of *King Lear* is second in abundance only to that of *Hamlet*, the most conspicuous thing about criticism devoted to Albany is that it remains almost non-existent,” Peter Mortenson, “The Role of Albany,” *Shakespeare Studies*, vol. 16, n°2, 1965, p. 217.
 5. Steven Urkowitz, *Shakespeare’s Revision of King Lear*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1980, chapter 5, in particular. Others believe, however, that Urkowitz’s arguments are unconvincing and that he “consistently exaggerates the significance of these differences for the characterization of Albany and the meaning of the play as a whole,” Sidney Thomas, “Shakespeare’s Supposed Revision of *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 35, n. 4, 1984, p. 509.