long been known that Shakespeare ‘borrowed’ from Harsnett the names of the foul fiends by whom Edgar, in his disguise as Poor Tom, claims to be possessed, along with some of his mad language, especially his allusions to hell. But what does this knowledge mean? Greenblatt rejects the model of *King Lear* as a free-standing work by a solitary genius, drawing almost accidentally on a range of ‘raw materials’ or ‘backgrounds’, and proposes instead a much more complex exploration of the institutions in which both *King Lear* and Harsnett’s *Declaration* are embedded.

This involves an investigation of the role of the theatre in Jacobean society: Harsnett exposes the exorcisms as frauds by claiming that they are theatrical fictions, in effect plays put on by a few professionals (the Jesuits) who cunningly teach the ‘possessed’ how to play the roles assigned to them by a process of suggestion, the asking of leading questions and so on. Of course, Edgar’s ‘possession’ in *King Lear* is equally fictitious (both at the level of the character and at that of the actor) but it is openly and explicitly so. At a deeper level, however, Greenblatt claims that Shakespeare’s theatre is engaged in appropriating and secularising religious rituals and in the process emptying them of their old significance. The use of Harsnett in *King Lear* is topical not only in that it draws on a recent and sensational item of ‘news’, but also in a larger sense as indicative of an ongoing redefinition of values in which questions such as ‘What is the sacred?’ and ‘How can society distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims to sacred authority?’ were very much on the agenda. (See also Murphy, 1984.)

**Religious and philosophical approaches**

In what sense, if any, is *King Lear* a religious play? This has been one of the most hotly debated issues in *Lear* criticism, with extreme positions adopted both by those who read it as a Christian allegory of salvation and by those who read it as a grotesque parody which mocks and denies the possibility of any religious meaning. Of the earlier critics, Samuel Johnson was famously shocked by the ending, particularly by the death of Cordelia, which he found immoral and unjust (1765;
A. C. Bradley, on the other hand, went so far as to suggest that an alternative title for the play might be ‘The Redemption of King Lear’, arguing that the business of ‘the gods’ with Lear was ‘neither to torment him, nor to teach him a “noble anger”, but to lead him to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and aim of life’ (1904; excerpted in Kermode, 1969, and Muir, 1984; p. 97-8 in Kermode).

Bradley’s view was so popular that by 1960 Barbara Everett could claim that the ‘orthodox’ approach to the play was one which stressed its Christian content and almost overlooked the tragic ending in a determination to celebrate the positive aspects of suffering and patience, the triumph of reconciliation and love (1960; reprinted in Kermode, 1969). Her attack on this orthodoxy aroused a flurry of protests, including some indignant denials from those whom she had ‘stigmatised’ as Christian interpreters, but twelve years later it was still possible for A. L. French to claim that the ‘received reading’ of King Lear was the ‘redemptive’ one and to feel isolated and embattled in his rejection of it (1972). He was not in fact alone by then, as is apparent from G. R. Hibbard’s survey of Lear criticism from 1939 to 1979 (1980).

Hibbard identifies a crucial shift taking place around 1960 ‘not only in the controversy as to whether King Lear is, or is not a Christian tragedy, but also in critical assumptions and methods’ (p. 9).

As Hibbard sees it, the shift is one away from ‘ideological considerations’ towards a greater emphasis on ‘the poignantly human experience that King Lear embodies’ (p. 10). In readings of this kind, human dignity is asserted by the courage and integrity of the individual: Lear’s sufferings are justified not because they will earn him a place in a Christian heaven but because his endurance is heroic in itself. Likewise, Cordelia’s virtue has to be its own reward: the fact that she not only ‘loses’ in this world but has no confident expectation of being compensated in the next serves if anything to heighten the heroism of her choices.

Most recently, critics have rejected this ‘humanist’ view as well as the Christian one. Dollimore, in the book previously cited (1984), argues that they are in fact alike in their preoccupation with ‘essentialist subjectivity’ – the free-