

Edgar and the Limits of Tragic Wisdom in King Lear

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KING LEAR sets out to overwhelm and succeeds brilliantly. Critics have long wrestled with the motivations of its characters and the meaning of Shakespeare's monumental vision. A. C. Bradley thought *King Lear* Shakespeare's greatest work, though not his finest play because of its unwieldy size. Harold Bloom, poring over Shakespeare's "secular scripture" with Talmudic devotion, contended that the tragedy doesn't merely overtop its theatrical banks; it actually "transcends the limits of literature." The drama has been compared to Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but G. K. Hunter may have come closest in approximating the play's awesome scope when he referred to *King Lear* as a "Stonehenge of the mind."

For all its vastness, Shakespeare's dramatic colossus has the intricate patterning associated with smaller-scale works. The more familiar one is with *King Lear*, the more one appreciates the meticulous integration of word and plot, image and action. The drama invites structural analysis, but the temptation to soar, Icarus-like, into the metaphysical horizon has been hard for Shakespeare scholars to resist. *King Lear* has a way of turning literary critics into apocalyptic preachers. Commentators eager to derive an ultimate philosophical statement from the play, or at the very least some lasting precept to redeem the extremity of suffering, are doomed to disappointment. The tragedy, mirroring life, denies certainties. "Pessimism" and "optimism," though often invoked in discussions of *King Lear*, are not categories upon which Shakespearean drama can be organized. Tragedy, Aristotle contended, is predicated on action, which is another way of saying that its medium is one of flux. Fixity runs counter to the highest reaches of the theatrical imagination. *King Lear* leaves behind a

significant body count; survivors are left “tranced,” stunned by the depravity of what they’ve had to endure. But the tale doesn’t so much conclude as consume itself. For those left standing, there is fatigue but little rest. Audiences and readers may find themselves at the end in a similar state of grief-stricken exhaustion.

The play’s modern standing hasn’t suffered for its bleakness. *King Lear*, which overtook *Hamlet* as Shakespeare’s preeminent tragedy in the middle of the twentieth century, no longer needs to apologize for its darkness. Indeed, part of the play’s appeal to contemporary audiences has to do with the uncompromising nature of a tragedy that speaks cogently to an age of anxiety. If every era sees the apocalypse in its own image, as Frank Kermode argues in *The Sense of an Ending*, postwar modernity has come to recognize the lineaments of its own self-destructiveness in *King Lear*.

The flood of twenty-first-century revivals, however, can’t be chalked up entirely to a doomsday zeitgeist. Demographics have played a part in the play’s contemporary destiny. A generation of prominent actors has entered its Lear years. Such distinguished players as Christopher Plummer, Alvin Epstein, Ian McKellen, Frank Langella, Derek Jacobi, John Lithgow, Antony Sher, and Glenda Jackson have had their crack at this most coveted of gray-haired roles. Even middle-aged luminaries, including a still-baby-faced Simon Russell Beale, have tested the geriatric waters. (Paul Scofield, one of the greatest of twentieth-century Learns, was only forty when he undertook the role in Peter Brook’s watershed 1962 production.) But *King Lear* is more than a star vehicle for the AARP set. The excitement generated by these productions—a powerful counterargument to Charles Lamb’s contention that the tragedy is unactable—has as much to do with the player as it does with the play. More precisely, it is the opportunity of experiencing McKellen or Jackson or Beale as Lear that raises the pulse. We attend their performances to discover how they will inhabit Shakespeare’s magnum opus and shed light on the suffering and savagery.

What we want from drama is not philosophy but wisdom, Eric Bentley observes in *The Life of the Drama*. “What we want,” he adds,

invoking the German term *Lebensweisheit*, is “a wisdom that bears upon our being alive (and about to be dead) as men, a thought that relates itself to our pleasure, suffering, and mortality.” How would we characterize the fearsome wisdom drawing us back like spiritual seekers to *King Lear*? If we were to convene the most preeminent Shakespeare scholars of the last one hundred years, when Shakespeare studies mushroomed into a vast academic-industrial complex, there would be little hope of reaching an interpretive consensus. Critics would likely be in as much disagreement with themselves as they would be with one another, for as Virginia Woolf observed of *Hamlet*, “As we know more of life, so Shakespeare comments upon what we know.” Of course, it is the inexhaustibility of literary masterpieces that makes them masterpieces in the first place. But *King Lear* doesn’t simply illustrate this point. The play dramatizes the quest for meaning in a way that destabilizes the very notion of an ultimate authority. Characters follow the dying light to a promised land of insight, but the destination remains as remote as a cloud-swathed mountain peak.

Shakespeare tantalizes with sententious precepts, yet no voice in this symphonic composition is allowed to lay a final claim on the truth. When disguised Edgar tells his despairing father, “Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither: / Ripeness is all,” Gloucester, once again postponing his death wish, concedes, “And that’s true too.” His response may seem negligible from a poetic standpoint, but the modesty of the reply suggests the dawning acceptance of an ineradicable ignorance. Shakespeare invests heavily in the Sophoclean binary of blindness and sight. But as the scales of solipsism are lifted, what beyond darkness is visible? Cordelia somberly inquires after seeing her father “mad as the vexed sea,” “What can man’s wisdom in the restoring his bereaved sense?” To answer a question that transcends its immediate dramatic context, it is necessary to follow the path of Edgar, the tragedy’s most consequential survivor. But before undertaking his perilous journey, it would be instructive to review the playwright’s own intrepid footsteps.



Everywhere in Shakespeare, experience is given priority over other forms of knowledge. In *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality*, A. D. Nuttall argues that literary representation concerns itself primarily with “experiential knowledge”—“connaître” rather than “savoir,” “the way you know your sister rather than the way you know DNA theory.” As Nuttall sanely points out, you don’t go to *King Lear* to discover “that abdication may be incompatible with the retention of love and allegiance.” Plays do more than add “to our stock of information.” Moralists may expect to find instruction on how to live, but the wisdom of dramatic literature isn’t readily detachable from the fiction upon which it is borne. John Holloway, in his fine contentious book *The Story of the Night: Studies in Shakespeare’s Major Tragedies*, inveighs against the idea that the “ultimate conception” of literature is “above all a fount of informativeness (in particular, moral informativeness).” For Holloway, the true mark of literary distinction is the sense that one has “passed through a great experience, one which testifies (as do great experiences of any kind) to the superb wealth and range of life, and to the splendid rather than the disastrous powers of man.” “Before it is a source of insight,” Holloway contends, “great imaginative literature is a source of power.” But to say that this power precedes enlightenment isn’t to assert that it is altogether separate from it. Shakespeare, responding to Horace’s poetic injunction, offers both delight and instruction in plays that help us to see feelingly. Shakespeare’s task as dramatic poet, in keeping with ancient precedents, is to awaken consciousness by repairing the rift between emotion and intelligence. This is the edifying pleasure he understood the theater to be uniquely capable of offering.

Aristotle was the first to elaborate a theory of catharsis to explain this salutary effect of drama. Tragedy, as he lays out in *Poetics*, structures a relationship between a watchful playgoer and an active protagonist, who hurtles through crisis to recognition. An imperfect translation of the Greek term *anagnorisis*, recognition denotes the sudden shock of awareness that retrospectively alters all that a character has hitherto understood about his or her actions. One of the constitutive elements of complex plots, the recognition scene allows

the audience to be present at a character's unblinding. This awakening amounts to a mental shattering, even when the discovery involves nothing more than the retrieval of what has been forgotten or mislaid. As Terence Cave points out in *Recognitions: A Study in Poetics*, the word *anagnorisis* "implies a recovery of something once known rather than merely a shift from ignorance to knowledge." Drama, to redeploy Nuttall's scheme, aims at a deepening apprehension (*connaître*) rather than an accumulation of new information (*savoir*). For Aristotle, the potency of the recognition is heightened when it coincides with the reversal, as in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. Both terms indicate a change of fortune, though the fundamental transformation occurring through recognition has to do with the penetrative depth, rather than the quantity, of knowledge. Plot, for Aristotle, may be the soul of tragedy, but consciousness is its ultimate stage.

While influenced by the classical tradition, Shakespeare wasn't beholden to Greek or Roman models. But in his arrival at new dramaturgical paradigms in early modern England, he extended Aristotle's thinking in ways that prefigure the integration of the idea of catharsis in the theory of psychoanalysis as developed by Sigmund Freud more than three centuries later. Shakespeare understood, perhaps even more thoroughly than Freud, that psychological transformations can be guided but not coerced. When Macbeth inquires whether Lady Macbeth's attending physician can "minister to a mind diseased, / Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow / Raze out the written troubles of the brain," the doctor responds, "Therein the patient / Must minister to himself." This insight pervades psychoanalysis, which has set itself the delicate task of bringing to light that which has been submerged in shadow. For Freud, the unwinding of repression will not be hastened by the naming of what is obstructing it. "One must allow the patient time to get to know this resistance of which he is ignorant, to 'work through' it, to overcome it, by continuing the work according to the analytic rule in defiance of it," he writes in his 1914 paper "Recollection, Repetition, and Working Through."

In his biography of Freud, Peter Gay remarks that in "the strange enterprise that is psychoanalysis," the analyst "is required to deploy a

highly specialized sort of tact." Interpretation is a tool designed "to chip away at self-deception," but its overuse can be counterproductive to the therapeutic alliance, which for psychoanalysis is the central vehicle for self-discovery. ("Much of the time, patients will experience their analyst's interpretations as precious gifts that he doles out with far too stingy a hand," Gay observes.) Built on restraint, the discipline of psychotherapy seeks to establish a context wherein feeling is given an opportunity to catch up with thought. The analyst, like a good storyteller, creates a contemplative space in which a suffering protagonist, the client, can stumble in relative safety toward enlightenment.

The situation of a character stage-managing a theatrical experience to influence another character's consciousness is a staple of Shakespearean playwriting. The manipulation isn't always benign, and indeed can be nefarious, as when Iago provides phony ocular proof to Othello of Desdemona's infidelity with a bit of legerdemain involving a fanciful handkerchief or when Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund, turns his father against his legitimate son, Edgar, with the prop of a fraudulent letter and the dramatic flourish of a self-inflicted wound. But never in doubt is Shakespeare's faith in the capacity of theater to transform minds. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, tests Orlando's readiness for romantic commitment and in the process prepares them both for their inevitable union. In *The Winter's Tale*, Paulina, conspiring to make Leontes believe the wife he unjustly accused of infidelity is dead, allows the King a necessary period of remorse before restoring Hermione to life. An even more impressive feat of stagecraft is the shipwreck Prospero arranges in *The Tempest* to prevent the sins of fathers from sabotaging the future of innocent offspring. In each of these cases, a dramatic ruse is contrived to induce a mental sea change.

Since all the world's indeed a stage in Shakespeare, a play within a play is an excellent way for characters to get to the bottom of reality. Perhaps the most famous metatheatrical maneuver along these lines occurs in *Hamlet*, a tragedy that Anne Barton has described as "unique in the density and pervasiveness of its theatrical self-reference." Hamlet, a knowledgeable playgoer, is convinced that his reworking of

The Murder of Gonzago will reveal the mind of Claudius. He trusts his scheme will confirm the intelligence he has received from the spirit of his dead father: "Hum, I have heard / That guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck to the soul, that presently / They have proclaimed their malefactions." The plan represents a more sophisticated version of Polonius's "by indirections find directions out," the rationalization for the espionage scheme he sets in motion against his son, Laertes. Hamlet's theatrical ploy doesn't go exactly as planned, but it is born from a confidence, shared by Shakespeare, in the ability of the stage to penetrate the façade of deceptive appearances.

No work of Shakespeare's, not even *Hamlet*, demonstrates more faith in the power of theatrical fiction to transform consciousness than *King Lear*, a play whose plot and subplot involve characters operating in disguise to accompany benighted patriarchs on their journeys through the indignity of error to the blasted majesty of truth. Kent and Edgar find in their role-playing the freedom, security, and intimacy to maneuver as guides. They resist prematurely ending their ruses even when the opportunity to do so naturally presents itself, choosing instead to follow intuitive paths that have more to do with the spiritual morale of a broken father figure than with their own filial needs for vindication and validation.

King Lear, however, represents not merely another example of Shakespeare's metatheatrical practice but its philosophical apotheosis. The theatrical architecture of the play, starting with an abdication ceremony that turns into a kind of premodern reality-competition show, is inseparable from the meaning of a tragedy that is composed as a series of daring masquerades and melodramatic confrontations, entr'acte jesting and Grand Guignol ceremony, mock trials and formal duels, all leading to the well-attended death scene of a royal figure who knows he's every inch a star of the public stage. Even after the pageantry has faded, life continues to be assimilated through performance. Once a metaphor for ephemeral existence, theater has become the way that characters navigate their vertiginous reality.



Edgar lies at the heart of *King Lear*'s metatheatrical design. For William R. Elton, whose *King Lear and the Gods* offers the richest discussion of the work's melded religious background, Edgar not only "defines the direction of tragedy" when he muses in Aristotelian fashion that "the lamentable change is from the best" but also serves as the play's "régisseur of human compassion." He does indeed direct a play within the play, an impromptu performance designed to bind his father's brokenness while ushering him to safety. But it's not easy to get a handle on this protean character, who is forced to negate himself ("Edgar I nothing am") simply to live. The role, a series of blurry quick changes, is not as seductive as that of Edmund, whose villainy easily upstages the earnestness of his half-brother. Edgar's less glamorous task is to suffer and to serve as a guide through suffering. Assuming the guise of a Bedlam beggar, he rants, grunts, and babbles demonically. But for many commentators his behavior becomes even more baffling in his rational asides.

One of the more confounding questions in a play with no shortage of puzzles concerns Edgar's protracted disguise. Why does he take so long to reveal himself to his father? The issue has polarized critics, who often treat the matter as just another ambiguous plot point. The extent of the scholarly division, however, suggests that something more is at stake than a rehearsal decision between actor and director. After being brutalized by the Duke of Cornwall, Gloucester loses not only his eyes but his will to live. Given the old man's physical debility and agonizing remorse, what could be preventing Edgar from identifying himself and alleviating a share of his father's pain?

W. H. Auden thought the answer was obvious: the plot. "It is improbable that Kent should keep up his disguise before Cordelia or that Edgar should keep his disguise with Gloucester," Auden asserts in his reconstituted lectures on Shakespeare. "It has to be done to keep the scene of Lear and Cordelia's reunion strong." Harry Levin, viewing the playwriting rationale from a different angle in "The Heights and the Depths: A Scene from *King Lear*," claims that Edgar "cannot disclose his identity before he has made his appearance as a nameless champion; and even this last masquerade is preceded by another

one, that of the messenger delivering the challenge.” In his recap to Edmund in the final act, Edgar attributes his “madman’s rags” to the “bloody proclamation” calling for his death, a threat that was not lifted when he encountered his father with “his bleeding rings” on the side of the road. But characters in Shakespeare are rarely passive agents of their dramatic circumstances. Edgar himself engages the subject of his protracted concealment in the mock suicide scene that has him leading his father to the edge of an imagined cliff. “Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it,” he says, as though justifying his counterintuitive behavior to a jury.

Of course a single aside doesn’t resolve all doubts. Reasons aren’t identical with motives. William Empson isn’t alone in suspecting that “darker feelings” are at play in Edgar, who like Hamlet feigns madness to the point that we can’t help questioning his mental soundness. But most commentators don’t take their suspicions to the extreme lengths of Stanley Cavell, who, in his influential essay “The Avoidance of Love,” accuses Edgar of “mutilating cruelty.” (For Cavell, the issue isn’t that Edgar delays identifying himself but that he avoids recognition.) Such a tendentious reading is forced to marginalize something Shakespeare takes pains to foreground: the character’s profound sympathy for his father. In Auden’s lyrical appraisal, “Edgar, an unloved son, disguises himself as an unloving madman in order to go on loving.”

Yet ambiguity hasn’t been banished so completely as to allow us to endorse Northrop Frye’s position that Shakespeare has departed from his standard practice and created a dramatic world where “the characters are, like chess pieces, definitely black or white: black with Edmund, Goneril, Regan, and Cornwall; white with Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester, Kent, and eventually Albany.” In *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*, Norman Rabkin analyzes the ways Shakespeare’s plays elude schematic formulations. In comparing *King Lear* to Nahum Tate’s sanitized adaptation, Rabkin discovers the “genuinely Shakespearean” dimension of Shakespeare’s tragedy in the impossibility of resolving “the conflicts between views of the cosmos as savage, benign, retributive, indifferent, rational, or bestial” and in the refusal “to understand any character according to any single principle.”

Edgar's "gratuitously wounding behavior," in Rabkin's words, is part of a dramaturgy that dares us to choose between opposed interpretations. For Rabkin, "the best productions . . . have to take account of the possibilities of both readings."

This is easier said than done in *King Lear*. The truth is that Edgar, who transforms himself into a lunatic beggar among other lowly aliases, slips out of our grasp as readily as he has slipped out of the hands of the myriad actors who have attempted to bring him to life. The character's "suffering ascent," as carefully parsed by Elton, "from madman and beggar, retrospectively servant, to rustic countryman, messenger, and armed knight," is rarely discernable in performance. The fault lies not primarily with actors that Edgar so often comes off as a theatrical underling. Consider the challenge of playing a character who, before the role's qualities have come into focus, must adopt a series of sketchy disguises and shaky accents while confiding his painful progress to an audience who hardly knows him. "How one wishes," Kenneth Tynan remarked in a review of the 1953 Stratford-on-Avon production with Michael Redgrave, "that Shakespeare had passed the manuscript to someone like [Ben] Jonson, with instructions to mend the leaks in the Gloucester subplot and provide at least some excuse for the unaccountable behavior of Edgar!" But in plugging the leaky psychology, Jonson's fix-up job would have drained the subplot of much of its peculiar fascination.

The changes Shakespeare imposed on his source material for the Gloucester story, an embedded tale in Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, are as revealing as the alterations Tate foisted on Shakespeare's drama. In "The pitiful story of the Paphlagonian unkind king," Leonatus, the good son, openly and tenderly leads his father, the rightful monarch of Paphlagonia, who was blinded and expelled by his illegitimate son, Plexirtus. There is no concealment of identity. The king, who, prior to being dethroned, gave the order to end Leonatus's life, carries the shame of his misdeeds. The story begins with two princes from other lands overhearing the old man pleading with Leonatus to leave him so that he may end his life and relieve his son of the burden of his care. "Dear Father," Leonatus gently replies, "do not take away from me

the only remnant of my happiness. While I have power to do you service, I am not wholly miserable." The father's guilt, however, is exacerbated by his son's loyalty. Leonatus's selfless sacrifice only serves to remind the king of how his actions have deprived his son of his birthright. The tale's conclusion is happy in that Leonatus is placed on the throne after the two princes aid in defeating Plexirtus in a tense battle. But the emotionally overcome king, prefiguring Gloucester's end, dies: "His heart, broken with unkindness and affliction, stretched so far beyond his limits with this excess of comfort, as it was able no longer to keep safe his royal spirits."

Just as Shakespeare had obscured Lear's motivation in dividing the kingdom among his three daughters when he adapted his main storyline from *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, not wishing his tragedy to hinge on a trivial marriage plot, so he complicates his subplot by having Edgar keep his identity hidden, a setup that allows the character to straddle multiple theatrical realms and comment on the allegory that his life and the royal lives of those around him have become. The psychology, richer and less rigid, mirrors the breathtaking dramaturgic complexity. Shakespeare's method is to bend the story toward his characters rather than the other way around. Indeterminacy is layered into scenes that are presented objectively. Edgar, who has no choice but to improvise his survival, knows only so much about his motivations. The resulting dynamism is a gift to actors who want to discover fresh meaning, but it also opens the door to a range of interpretations that can easily veer off in insupportable directions.

In *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, Harold C. Goddard commends Edgar for the "psychological wisdom" that "exorcises the demon of self-destruction" in Gloucester. This is the traditional view of Lear's godson, whose path conspicuously parallels Cordelia's, the two characters being linked as naturally as their fathers. Their filial love, despite having been doubted and rejected, strengthens into a noble bulwark. To the extent that Edgar mirrors Cordelia, he contrasts with Edmund, a cunning psychologist whose description of his brother suggests that he knows Edgar better than Edgar knows himself:

brother noble,
 Whose nature is so far from doing harms
 That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
 My practices ride easy!

The significance of Edgar's role, the second longest in the play after Lear's, is announced in the full title of the 1608 quarto, which refers to both the character's "unfortunate life" and to the "sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam." Barbara Everett has drolly noted that the sheer quantity of Edgar, a character who spends the preponderance of his stage time camouflaged as a "nonentity," can come as something of a "surprise." But his role "bears the burden of the play," as Simon Palfrey comprehensively chronicles in his book *Poor Tom: Living King Lear*. According to Palfrey, Edgar "is the spectator or reader, alone of all the characters forced to look at the play, sometimes from deep inside its wounds, sometimes as though from another space in time entirely. . . . Edgar alone truly *lives King Lear*."

A morality figure to Maynard Mack, who contends that the relation of the tragedy's two plots "remains homiletic rather than dramatic," Edgar has become something of an immorality figure to a few modern examiners who detect in Tom's ravings the debauched life Edgar may have lived prior to the play. Much of the focus on Edgar's bedlam act concerns its catalytic function in drawing out Lear's empathy. In deranged, mud-caked Tom, the king glimpses the "poor, bare, fork'd animal"—"unaccommodated man" at his bedraggled essence—that his royal foppery had long concealed from consciousness. The nub of critical contention centers on Edgar's conduct after Gloucester has been tortured. In *The Masks of King Lear*, Marvin Rosenberg rejects the logic of Edgar's rehabilitative scheme. The character, he contends, "asserts kindness, but acts cruelly; he promises a cure of despair, but withholds the obvious remedy—his acknowledged identity, and love; he reconciles the father to 'reality' with persistent deception." Rosenberg grants that "impulses to love and support move him," but argues that "they seem clouded by motives of revenge and punishment": "Edgar has brought his father closer to death and will

soon take him all the way. Edgar, the actor, indulges the bad trade of playing fool to sorrow."

Yet Edgar criticizes himself with just these words after hearing his father speak mournfully of him: "How should this be? / Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow, / ang'ring itself and others." A few lines later, his heart breaking at the sight of his pitiful father, he questions whether he can maintain the ruse. "And yet I must," he tells himself. This "must" is what has proved so confounding. Cavell argues that Edgar's real intention is to avoid being recognized: "There are no lengths to which we may not go in order to avoid being revealed, even to those we love or are loved by." As an answer to what precisely Edgar is trying to run away from, Cavell proposes "guilt" (for being as "gullible as Gloucester") and horror (at seeing his father as "incapable, impotent, maimed").

Cavell accuses Edgar of a second blinding of Gloucester, linking him to "Cornwall and the sphere of open evil." Shakespeare, however, removes any suspicion of detached coldness in Edgar by having him utter words of aching tenderness at the sight of his father's battered condition. "Bless thy sweet eyes, they bleed" is not a sentiment Cornwall would be capable of uttering. More baffling about Cavell's interpretive approach is its failure to see that Edgar's expressions of sympathy serve the same function as Cordelia's asides when she clarifies in the love-test scene that, though she's withholding from her father the adoration he demands, her loyalty and affection are not in doubt. Shakespeare narrows the range of our assumptions by sharing with us her troubled thoughts: "What shall Cordelia speak?" she asks in agitation. "Love, and be silent" is her counsel. But just in case this reticence is mistaken for pertinacity, Shakespeare has her once again reveal her anguished intentions: "Then poor Cordelia / And yet not so, since I'm sure my love's / More ponderous than my tongue." These deliberate clarifications suggest that Shakespeare was aware of the risks he was taking. The asides are preventive measures against misinterpretations of the most perverse kind, guardrails in a drama that daringly departs from formulaic fiction to approximate the mystery and messiness of life.

Edgar may be a “pious fraud,” as Harry Levin calls him, for assuming the role of the gods in his father’s spiritual rehabilitation, but he’s not a devil. His unsuspecting nature is the opposite of Edmund’s corrosive cynicism, which is a projection of his own savage resentments. Edgar’s favored life hasn’t taught him cruelty, though this hasn’t stopped critics from fishing in the darkest waters of his subconscious. Palfrey, building on the research he did with Tiffany Stern on acting cues in *Shakespeare in Parts*, speculates that the actor playing Edgar originally may have been lurking on stage during the blinding scene, forced to bear silent witness to atrocity while perhaps enthralled that his dark “parricidal” desires have come true. But staging the scene in this way would only undermine the shock when Edgar encounters his battered father at the side of the road. Edgar’s mournful words (“O gods! Who is’t can say, ‘I am at the worst’? / I am worse than e’er I was”) register his fresh horror. A less-commented-upon staging effect written into the script is the way Edgar begins to call Gloucester “father” after the contrived miracle rescue from the suicidal jump. Although the editors of the *Riverside Shakespeare* are careful to note that the word “does not betray his identity,” Edgar’s use of it has an emotional weight in performance. Edgar’s actions are of course subject to moral and psychological scrutiny, but critics and directors have to work assiduously against the grain of the text to turn him into a malevolent force.

Bradley doesn’t find Edgar as exciting a character as the others he groups in the “extreme good” category (Cordelia, Kent, and Fool), but sees him as “the one whose development is the most marked.” Edgar may fall into Edmund’s evil plot with the clockwork ease of the “catastrophe of the old comedy,” but, in Bradley’s estimation, “he learns by experience, and becomes the most capable person in the story, without losing any of his purity and nobility of mind.” Thrust by Edmund into a melodramatic thriller, Edgar recasts himself and his father in a different drama, a quest not just for survival but for redemption. The crucial point is that Edgar isn’t simply accompanying Gloucester on a spiritual journey; he is on one himself. Frye groups Edgar with Albany, another character trying to find his bearings in a

world that has spun off its moral axis: "They are not in the least ridiculous characters, but, like all virtuous people, they are fools in the sense that a fool is a victim: they utter the cries of bewildered men who can't see what's tormenting them, and their explanations, even if they are reassuring for the moment, are random guesses. In this dark, meaningless, horrible world, everyone is as spiritually blind as Gloucester is physically."

Edgar's powers as a playwright god are conspicuously limited. "Thy life's a miracle," he tells his father, affecting a newly improvised identity after Gloucester's imagined leap from the cliff. He concludes the salvation scene with a comforting proverb: "Think that the clearest gods, who make them honors / Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee." His father, stunned by the marvel of his rescued life, humbly accepts these words as truth. Edgar and the audience, however, can be excused from having doubts. Spying a connection between Prospero and Edgar, Barton articulates these doubts eloquently in a passing comment in her introduction to *The Tempest*: "There is an immense grandeur in the fact that a human being can shoulder divine responsibility of this kind in the callous and unexplained absences of the proper powers. Such an attempt cannot, however, by its very nature, be entirely successful." Still, the theology Edgar manufactures is a comfort not only to Gloucester. Edgar may be fooling himself along with his father, but his theatrical ruse creates a new reality for them both. Edgar can't be seen exclusively as "the playmaker" in this scene, as Palfrey points out, for he is "at every instant himself at the verge." The boundaries separating author, actor, and audience have dissolved in the destructive tumult: Edgar no longer has the luxury of a discrete part. The nightmare he's living through compels him to hurtle categories and juggle roles, playing father, for instance, even as his heart is breaking as a son. In propping up Gloucester's faith, he preserves his own, deriving a modicum of solace for himself in the limited succor he is able to bestow. Jan Kott and Peter Brook read *King Lear* through a Beckettian lens, and one can see how Edgar's casting of himself as a Godot who ambiguously turns up might encourage such an intertextual tango.

When the time comes for Edgar to disclose the truth of his identity, a recognition scene that Shakespeare chooses to report perhaps (as Auden contends) to avoid upstaging Lear's more momentous final reckoning, Gloucester, his "flawed heart" too weak to support the extremes of joy and grief, dies in a manner similar to his predecessor in Sidney's *Arcadia*, whose "many tears both of joy and sorrow" upon seeing the crown set upon Leonatus's head overwhelm his very life. (It's worth noting on the moral scorecard that the lack of concealment on Leonatus's part in Sidney's version has no bearing on the father's ending.)

Edgar comes to doubt the ethics of his own intervention. He tells Edmund,

Never (O Fault!) revealed myself unto him,
 Until some half hour past, when I was arm'd.
 Not sure, though hoping, of this good success
 I ask'd his blessing, and from first to last
 Told him our pilgrimage.

Substituting for the absent gods might seem like the height of moral arrogance, but humility and guilt pervade Edgar's accounting. His priggish remark to Edmund about their father ("The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us. / The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes") suggests a punitive motive. Rosenberg says these lines "are among the least charitable, the most sullen, in this angry play." (In his 1971 film adaptation, Peter Brook reassigns them to Cornwall, who speaks them on his deathbed to Edmund—a canny way of dispensing with the problem.) Mack, however, construes Edgar's point more favorably: "The blindness is not what will follow from adultery, but what is implied in it. Darkness speaks to darkness." However you interpret Edgar's words, they contrapuntally call to mind Gloucester's mournful apothegm after his eyes were brutally gouged from their sockets: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport." One can fault Edgar's stale morality and recognize, if not sympathize, with

his need to fall back on conventional sentiment after all that has been suffered. But what is perhaps harder to acknowledge is that he has no more wisdom to dispense about cosmic justice at the end of the play than his father had after losing his sight. Speculation remains the lot of humanity. Even after the violence has ceased, the characters are still stumbling in the dark.

The impatience some critics have with Edgar's moralizing may have more to do with their own expectations about the pedagogy of suffering. The character's offstage anagnorisis scene seems to have had only a limited effect. Edgar's sermonizing falls short of the occasion. But *King Lear* is a play that reduces pieties, prayers, and epiphanies to impotent wishes. Within seconds of Albany imploring the gods to defend Cordelia, Lear staggers in with her corpse. Bereft of answers, Shakespeare poses a harrowing question: after such howling anguish, what knowledge? Edgar fumbles for meaning till the bitter end, dredging up advice ("The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say") that is more palliative than penetrative. (The generic nature of these lines perhaps accounts for the way they were assigned to Albany in the 1608 Quarto.) Edgar may be the best hope for stabilizing the society, but we mustn't expect that he alone can sort out the play's meaning. Not even Lear can do that.



Dr. Johnson confessed that he was so shocked by Cordelia's death he wasn't sure he could endure reading the last scenes again until "he undertook to revise them as an editor." The happy ending substituted by Tate may be dismissed as a quaint relic, but Johnson understood the version's popularity. Poetic justice satisfies a fundamental human need: "A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life: but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded that the observation of justice makes a play worse." The radical nature of

Shakespeare's project can be inferred from Johnson's remark, written a century and a half after the play was first performed. The dominance of Tate's version, from its premiere in 1681 through the first third of the nineteenth century, marks a retreat from the formidable challenge of Shakespeare's play.

How conscious was Shakespeare of the revolutionary nature of his drama? It is always a mistake to underestimate him on this score. Language has a way of predicting action in his plays, and a sequence of lines in one of the tragedy's boldest scenes registers the extent of his dramaturgic fearlessness. The meeting between Lear and Gloucester in act 4, an allegorical encounter between a mad king and a blind and ruined nobleman, immediately declares its bracing ambition. Upon seeing Lear crowned with weeds, Edgar exclaims, "O thou side-piercing sight!" Lear follows with the words, "Nature's above art in that respect!" He's responding to his own previous remark, "No, they cannot touch me for coining, I am the King himself," but the overlap is eloquent. At this poetic convergence of plot and subplot, Shakespeare dares to dramatize a level of suffering that will give life a run for its money. Tragedy, of course, offers a catalogue of grievous disasters. Neither the ancient Greeks nor the Romans stinted on shock and horror. But Shakespeare is interested less in the single catastrophe than in the protracted fallout of a spiraling calamity.

Lear goes from agony to agony in a play that Holloway compares to the Book of Job in its "constant intensifying of disaster at the moment when disaster seems to be over." Lear's moment of peace with Cordelia after they're taken prisoner is fleeting. Edmund's death warrant doesn't allow them much time to sing like birds in the cage. In defiance of the old anonymous *King Leir* play that served as Shakespeare's model, Lear's story ends in failure, betrayal, and death. For the sufferers, mortality is all that limits the unbearable pain, even as it intensifies the anguish for survivors. Kent enjoins the others to let Lear die peacefully: "Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates / him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer." Of the ending, Holloway writes, "The ordeal has been unique in its protraction of torment, and the note is surely one of refusal to

hide that from oneself, refusal to allow the terrible potentialities of life which the action has revealed to be concealed once more behind the veil of orthodoxy and the order of Nature.”

The only relief in this unremitting tragedy is that malevolence eventually consumes itself. “If there is such an order, it is an order which accommodates seemingly limitless chaos and evil,” Holloway concludes. The reunion between Lear and his daughter represents the briefest pause in hostilities. Sorrow subdues the moment when Cordelia, standing with Kent, is hazily recognized by Lear. “Methinks I should know you, and know this man, / Yet I am doubtful,” Lear murmurs, as though coming to after unsuccessful surgery. All he can think to do is request poison from the daughter he knows has “cause” to be angry with him. Cordelia’s response distills heartrending pathos in the repetition of the meagerest phrase: “No cause, no cause.” But drums are beating in the distance and the battle “is likely to be bloody.”

In the play’s final recognition scene, Kent’s selflessness prevents him from doing more than letting Lear know that all this time he had been watching over him in disguise. Submerged in his grief, Lear has few words of gratitude. When Kent informs him that Goneril and Regan “have foredone themselves, / And desperately are dead,” all Lear can say is “Ay, so I think.” As for the Fool, Lear’s childlike truth-teller left behind in the tumult of the third act, there’s some confusion about whether he’s the “fool” who has been hanged or whether Lear is referring to Cordelia by way of an old endearment. Language can no longer keep pace with the march of fatalities. The play’s final notes seem almost perfunctory: strained pieties are all the “tranced” survivors are capable of offering.

As Anne Barton notes in “Shakespeare and the Limits of Language,” the gods remain conspicuously silent: “When they do speak at all, they do so in the form of thunder: an undistinguishable blur of sound which will not resolve itself into words, let alone in doctrine.” For G. Wilson Knight, “the ‘gods’ are vague, symbols of groping mankind” in a dramatic world, in which the good characters are on a “purgatorial pilgrimage.” Elton argues that despite its Christian allusions, *King Lear* is a “syncretically pagan tragedy,” in which “a superstitious”

protagonist progresses “toward doubt of his gods.” In this view, optimistic Christian interpretation can only distort “the direction of the tragedy: annihilation of faith in poetic justice and, within the confines of a grim, pagan universe, annihilation of faith in divine justice.”

“The entire play is more of a wound than the critical tradition has cared to acknowledge,” writes Bloom in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. In his reading, what the drama truly outrages, even more than religion, is “the universal idealization of the value of family love.” The destructive potential of paternal and filial bonds is revealed in a tragedy centered on a faltering patriarch. But Bloom acknowledges the crucial role played by Edgar: “The sullen or assumed humor of Tom O’Bedlam is the central emblem of the play: philosopher, fool, madman, nihilist dissembler—at once all of these and none of these.” Bloom’s Hazlitt-inflected, character-centered criticism, while compelling in its brooding darkness, has to switch gears to contend with the symphonic scope of the play. The tragedy, he asserts, “ultimately baffles commentary.” This may be true, but the interpretive challenge of a work that shifts from domestic drama to allegorical tableau to metatheatrical fable cannot be met with a single lens. In *King Lear in Our Time*, Mack sheds light on the reason the tragic figures cannot be deracinated from their dramatic-poetic context: “The problem is that Shakespeare’s Lear is both the spirit of man and a rancorous father, just as Edgar is simultaneously a loving son, a choral device, a complement to Edmund, a voice of dislocation and disintegration in the storm, a thrust of hope and patience in act 4, and possibly a naïf in process of learning throughout the play.” Palfrey, extending the same awareness, makes the case in *Poor Tom* that Shakespeare “pushes theater close to collapse,” not because “theater is inadequate, but because the singular event, the monovoice, the classical body, is inadequate to theatrical possibility.”

The best criticism of *King Lear*, whether it’s as exhilaratingly postmodern as Palfrey’s, as comprehensively historicist as Elton’s, or as classically balanced as Mack’s, is alert to the play’s structural rhythms. An excellent example of this can be found in G. K. Hunter’s introduction to *King Lear*, in which he finds the tragedy’s “meaning”

in its movement, the way it's organized as "a series of peripeteias, of oscillations between disappointment and relief." As the drama "seesaws between hope and disappointment any sense of values that the play is supposed to affirm must be held against this background of recurrent betrayal." Or as Kermode (quoted by Hunter) puts it in *The Sense of an Ending*, everything in the play "tends toward a conclusion that does not occur. . . . The world may, as Gloucester supposes, exhibit all the symptoms of decay and change, all the terrors of an approaching end, but when the end comes it is not an end, and both suffering and the need for patience are perpetual."

King Lear, unflinchingly read, disabuses us of the idea that art has final answers to dispense. But what then is the reward of reading and playgoing? An answer can perhaps be found in psychoanalysis, which Adam Phillips, a stylish and rigorously nondogmatic modern practitioner and essayist, describes with his customary flair for paradox as "the treatment that weans people from their compulsion to understand and be understood; it is an 'after-education' in not getting it." The neo-Freudian formula Phillips proposes—"through understanding to the limits of understanding"—is a useful way of thinking about the breakthrough in tragedy that Shakespeare achieves in *King Lear*. "Freud's work is best read as a long elegy for the intelligibility of our lives," Phillips observes. "We make sense of our lives in order to be free not to have to make sense." In *King Lear*, Shakespeare brings us to the "extreme verge" of tragedy only to liberate us from the idea that knowledge can somehow save us from the truth of our fundamental helplessness.

"Our present business is general woe" is certainly not a purgative note to end on. When, in the play's last lines, Edgar intones, "The oldest hath borne most; we that are so young / Shall never see so much nor live so long," the feeling is formal, numbed, and not in the least reassuring. *King Lear* shatters faith in the inherent morality of the universe, but Shakespeare doesn't leave us in a state of nihilistic desperation. The play takes pains to reveal the resourceful ways human beings fill the void. Edgar's stage-management of his father's recovery is a theatrical therapy that's as necessary to the physician as it is to the

patient. He too strives to bear “free and patient thoughts” in the midst of inexplicable suffering. If his rehabilitation scheme entails the adoption of a new set of illusions, this hardly invalidates the reality that’s achieved. A prison, as Lear comes to understand, can be better than a palace when your cellmate, the loved one you have betrayed, has forgiven you. Hamlet’s contention that “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” loses its cynicism in *King Lear* and becomes a source of provisional healing.

Consider, in conclusion, the controversy Lear’s death has engendered among critics. Does Lear die in a state of despair that a “dog, a horse, a rat have life” but not Cordelia? Or does he actually believe that her breath stirs before fainting to his death? Bradley’s reading has been dismissed for being falsely consoling, but his language is measured: “To us, perhaps, the knowledge that [Lear] is deceived may bring us a culmination of pain: but if it brings *only* that, I believe we are false to Shakespeare, and it seems almost beyond question that any actor is false to the text who does not attempt to express, in Lear’s last accents and gestures and look, an unbearable *joy*.” The joy may be an illusion but loving gives it material substance. The recognition through loss of emotional truth is the only consolation in the tragic enactments that are our lives. Shakespeare, at the peak of his powers as a tragedian, understood that our morale depends on something more lasting than insight. What sustains us isn’t knowledge but theatrical resilience. Imagination, proffered in fellow feeling, is all that covers our naked vulnerability. This is the collaborative fiction—let us call it wisdom—that allows us to endure the echoing silence.