

STILL THROUGH THE HAWTHORNE BLOWS THE COLD WIND
Edgar in *King Lear*: The Travels and Travails of the Once and Future King

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*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

(W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming")

*"When a man is prey to anger,
he is moved by outside things; when he holds
his ground in patience patience
patience, that is action or
beauty," the soldier's defence
and hardest armor for*

the fight.

(Marianne Moore, "In Distrust of Merits")

ABSTRACT and INTRODUCTION

The figure of King Lear looms large in the pantheon of Shakespearean protagonists. For some readers, like myself, Lear is the “towering dead,” the *sine qua non*. If so, when writing about the play, why focus on anyone else? Are all the major figures but aspects of the King? One could argue that the Fool expresses Lear’s subconscious or repressed rationality, but please do so gently. Other characters, like Lear’s two evil daughters, give us insights into Lear’s past behavior. And Gloucester certainly represents a mirror image of the King. There are only two foolish fathers in the story, and he is one of them. Gloucester’s blinding is a clear reflection of Lear’s blindness toward the love or lack thereof of his daughters and of Kent.

Then why write about Edgar? For one thing, at the end Edgar succeeds Lear as King. Both present and future Kings meet in the muck and slime of the primal ooze when both are literally homeless wanderers, enduring horrendous storms within and without and are as near to being naked as stage conventions allow. Both are “unaccommodated man.” In that hovel scene, Lear adopts Edgar both as his philosopher and as the son he never had. As for scholarly rationale, we turn to Janet Adelman: “Our understanding [of Edgar] will consequently be an index to our understanding both of the play as a whole and of the possibilities inherent in Shakespeare’s mode of characterization, here and elsewhere.”

What happens to Edgar pushes him to hide, to disguise himself, over and over. He assumes fourteen *personas* in his journey from an escapee, a “wanted” person, to the throne, and we are entitled to ask what these many permutations, unmatched anywhere in Shakespeare, tell us about him, about Lear, and about Lear’s England. What happens to Edgar is integral to the meaning of this play and lies deep in its heart of hearts.

Near the centre (which sometimes holds and sometimes doesn’t) of *King Lear* is the principle of familial love, bound hand and foot to the concept of knowledge, or wisdom, especially self-knowledge, or identity, and even more so of progeny-knowledge. In Shakespearean drama, knowledgeable familial love is the basis of order, happiness, and beauty and is a reflection, in microcosm, of the covenantal compact of the body politic. When familial love is removed or perverted, chaos ensues. If no attempt is made to reverse or ameliorate this vacuum in nature, life goes from bad to worse to death – epitomized by Goneril and Regan. On the other hand, familial love, so important a part of the moral order, cannot be regained without great suffering, even unto madness – as with Lear and Edgar -- and especially so for fathers who don’t know their children – such as Lear and Gloucester.

Although from time to time I will touch on Lear’s journey, my focus will be on Edgar’s much longer journey “home,” to the inheritance and destiny he was born to realize. What happens when Edgar’s love for his father – and his father’s for him -- is ruptured, and what must Edgar undertake to repair the breach? In the course of his regenerative journey, Edgar assumes many disguises, all of which he must abandon or kill off to regain his true identity. The astute Janet Adelman tells us why we must fathom this chameleon-like man: “Our understanding [of Edgar] will consequently be an index to our understanding both of the play as a whole and of the possibilities inherent in Shakespeare’s mode of characterization, here and elsewhere.”¹ What happens to Edgar is integral to the meaning of this play and, in fact, lies deep within its heart of hearts.

This emphasis on Edgar is reflected in the title page of the first Quarto which gives Edgar top billing but for Lear himself and also refers to Edgar’s journey as a parallel chronicle:

*M. William Shak-speare: His True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three Daughters. With the unfortunate life of Edgar, sonne and heir to the Earl of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam ...*²

THE MAD KING ADOPTS HIS SULLEN SON

There are many parallels between Lear and Edgar, the once and future kings. Both, for example, enter the drama revealing gross naiveté about familial love. Both have little self-knowledge and less progeny- or sibling-knowledge. And then both embark on their journeys, through *sturm und drang*, during which they virtually converge, to the point of being almost identical, before each attains his singular destiny.

Lear and Edgar, present and future kings, do not meet until halfway through the play, in III.iv. When they do, they are not Lear and Edgar but mad King and, as the Quarto title page describes him, "sullen" Tom of Bedlam – "sullen" as in melancholic, with a kind of madness.³ They converge as they brave convergent storms, the howling one outside and the turbulent inward one in their storm-tossed souls. What an extraordinary meeting of present and successor kings, rampant in wildness and extravagance! I know of no such meeting anywhere in all of Shakespeare.

Bedlam Tom materializes from within the hovel at Kent's incantation: "What art thou that dost grumble⁴ there I' th' straw?/ Come forth" (III.iv.44-5).⁵ The spirit that comes forth is no longer the legitimate heir of the Gloucester family but an escapee from his family, from his "old self," and from the family of man. In his transformation speech, which occupies all of II.iii, Edgar tells us that he must bring himself "in contempt of man,/ Brought near to beast" (II. 8-9). The result, "Poor Turlygod, Poor Tom," means that "Edgar I nothing am" (II. 20-21). Ms. Adelman ties Edgar's disguise to an emotional reality that surpasses his need to escape. Poor Tom, she says, embodies "his reaction to his father's apparently inexplicable desire to kill him," [allowing him to] "express his sense of helpless victimization, of utter vulnerability and confusion.... Poor Tom [is] pursued by fiends as Edgar is pursued by his father, homeless as Edgar is newly homeless."⁶

At the sight of this half-naked spirit, slithering out of the grime and muck and straw, the awestruck Lear integrates mad Tom's outer semblance with his own inner psyche.⁷ In the hovel scene (III.iv) the two become as one. "Hast thou," asks Lear, "given all to thy two daughters? And art thou come to this" (II. 49-50)? And, "What, has his daughters brought him to this pass?/ Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all" (II. 61-62)? And, "nothing could have subdued nature/ To such a lowness but his unkind daughters" (II.67-68). Clothes disguise men as much as Edgar's nakedness disguises him, a "revelatory disguise."⁸ In Lear's retinue, nothing is what it seems, starting with the king and embracing not just Edgar but also Kent, Gloucester and Lear's three daughters. Only Lear's Fool stays true to his outward semblance in his quest to push his master to see the truth of what the old king has engendered.

The scene begins with Kent asking Edgar, "What art thou," *Hamlet's* defining question. Edgar does not respond, but Lear, Edgar's other self, does. Gesturing toward Bedlam Tom, the mad King tells Kent and his Fool, "Is man no more than this? Consider him well." And then to Tom, "Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (II. 95-96, 98-100). Paradoxically, Lear's madness prompts an expansion of his moral sensitivity, and he is now psychologically ready to see and understand this "bare, forked animal" as bedrock humanity itself.⁹ The storm blew away so much of Lear's kingly trappings that "out of affection for his Fool, [he can] think of others first"¹⁰ and recognizes that as king, "I have ta'en/ Too little care" of the "poor naked wretches" (II. 33-34, 29) of his kingdom. Because Bedlam Tom is, in fact, one of the "poor naked wretches" and embodies utter baseness, incongruity and the absurd, Lear adopts Tom as his "philosopher."¹¹ At some deep, inner level, he both perceives that Poor Tom can help him learn what it means to be "unaccommodated man" and recognizes Edgar's future kingship. And so the present king insists that Tom accompany the rag-tag, storm-tossed survivors into the farmhouse: "Noble philosopher, your company" (III.iv.160).

In so doing, Lear adopts the son whom Gloucester banished. Is Edgar the son Lear always yearned for but never had?¹² If so, in view of how we can infer Lear must have raised Goneril and Regan, not to mention how he treats Cordelia before our eyes, how appropriate that he meets his new son in the primal ooze that gives birth to all creatures, when each is half mad, when Edgar is half naked, and when Lear is about to disrobe to cover his son's naked body. To cement the tie to his only son, and perhaps with some deep-seated prescience, Lear bestows knighthood on the future king: "You, sir, I entertain for one of my hundred...." (III.vi.72) – "my hundred" when Lear was fully king.¹³ In fact, Edgar *must* be knighted,

christened by the old king, if he is to recover his identity and become, at the play's close, the new king. It's an important prerequisite that allows Edgar to respond to the call of heraldry, to challenge Edmund to mortal combat and assert his knighthood: "Behold, it is the privilege of mine honors,/ My oath, and my profession" (V.iii.128-129).¹⁴

Edgar's knighting signals that he and Lear must now part to seek their separate destinies. The storms of nature have subsided. Gloucester, Kent and the Fool put Lear in a litter to bring him to Dover, where Cordelia, the symbol of constancy in familial love, awaits her father. Alone with his true self, Edgar muses on how Lear's woes make his seem bearable: "How light and portable my pain seems now,/ When that which makes me bend makes the king bow;/ He childed as I fathered" (III.vi.101-103)! "He childed as I fathered," the entire play in five words.¹⁵

In a very real sense, Edgar in the hovel, windswept by nature's howling storm, is emotionally, and certainly physically, better off than Lear. How better off? S.L. Goldberg reminds us that Edgar always "shows an instinctive skill in the arts of psychic self-preservation." Like everyone in this mythic play, there is a visceral contradiction within Edgar. He hid in "the happy hollow of a tree" (II.iii.2), embraced by nature, on his way to stripping and sliding into the mud and slime, another kind of embrace by nature. Continuing Mr. Goldberg's incisive comment, "To get to the bottom, where one has absolutely nothing to lose, is to be consciously secure, invulnerable in one's visibly total vulnerability...Presented nakedness will 'outface' the worst nature can do..."¹⁶ Together with his "godfather," Edgar has endured the wild storm of the psyche gone awry, and survived -- come out, if you will, on the other side of the storm. This very real, self-inflicted blow to Edgar's psyche is mirrored in the self-inflicted wound that Edmund gave himself to convince his gullible father that the two brothers have fought. The brothers will, indeed, fight, and Edmund will not recover from that wounding.

Edgar never stands still. To get where he is going, whether he understands that "where" or no, he must always be on the move, like Mark Strand's man/child in his poem "Keeping Things Whole":

We all have reasons
For moving.
I move
To keep things whole.

It is now time for Edgar to move, to leave Bedlam Tom forever, reveal his true self, and reconcile with his father "to keep things whole": "Tom, away./ Mark the high noises, and thyself bewray..." (III.vi.103-104).

EDGAR AS OSWALD

Before Edgar can "bewray" and assume his real identity, he must shuck off another *persona* he arrogated in the hovel. After Kent asks him who he is, Lear repeats the question, but with a subtle difference: "What hast thou been" (III.iv.79)? Note the tense of Lear's question, which is, indeed, probing of this man of many identities. Bedlam Tom responds with a prolix description, full of animal images, calling himself a "serving-man, proud in heart and mind; that ... served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey ..." (II. 80-87). He is, of course, describing Goneril's servingman, Oswald,¹⁷ who chances upon father and son on their journey to Dover and views Gloucester as "a proclaimed prize ... [who will] raise my fortunes" (IV.vi.222-224).

Tracing mirror images of Edgar, Phyllis Rackin correctly labels Oswald a "creature of the social and political hierarchy, unaware of any values beyond worldly status...." Early in the play, after labeling Oswald with a litany of denunciations, Kent says, "A tailor made thee" (II.ii.48), alluding again to the clothes-as-disguise theme. In IV.vi., the confrontation between Oswald and Edgar is telling. Ms. Rackin reminds us that Oswald sees the blinded Gloucester merely as a "prize, an economic advantage, pure and simple."¹⁸ When Edgar intervenes, Oswald orders him to "let go his [Gloucester's] arm." But it is too late; too many times Edgar has proffered his hand to his father's arm, as in line 229 of this scene: "Give me your hand,"¹⁹ and he will not let go now.

Oswald labels Edgar “a bold peasant,” a “slave” (twice), and a “dunghill,” all quite accurate of the Edgar who was Bedlam Tom, but -- to Oswald’s discomfiture -- one of his many mis-identities. Moving on, Edgar assumes a new disguise, that of a country bumpkin speaking in dialect. Edgar does so both to postpone revealing himself to his father and to give him the advantage of seeming to be the underdog, identifying himself with a class lower than Oswald, in the battle with Oswald that Edgar, though not Oswald, knows must occur. Edgar must kill Oswald in order to shuck off one of the *personas* he used to disguise his true self.

Looking at this scene from a macro viewpoint, the always astute Ms. Adelman observes that country bumpkin Edgar’s brief battle with Oswald is also “an important emblem of a social world that is beginning to find its strength at the bottom,”²⁰ perhaps one step up from Lear’s “looped and windowed raggedness” (III.iv.32). In addition, the battle serves as a kind of apprenticeship, a rehearsal, for the real battle of his life and career in Act V. Oswald’s boast that “the sword is out/ That must destroy thee” [meaning Gloucester] (IV.vi.225-226) foreshadows Edgar’s boast to Edmund that his “sword, this arm and my best spirits are bent/ To prove upon thy heart” (V.iii.138-139). Edgar fights both battles in disguise, not yet ready fully to “bewray” himself.

How ironic that the dying Oswald tells Edgar, thinking he is just a country bumpkin, “if ever thou wilt thrive,” Edgar should take the letter Oswald is carrying and deliver it to his brother, whom Oswald calls “Edmund Earl of Gloucester” (IV.vi.244), two mis-identifications in one fell swoop. The letter implicates Goneril and Edgar’s double-dealing brother in a plot to kill her husband. And thus the letter propels Edgar one further step in his renewal process, his ability to “thrive,” his journey “home.”

To Oswald’s corpse, Edgar muses, “I know thee well. A serviceable villain” (l. 247). “Know thee well” indeed! Allegorically, Edgar briefly *was* Oswald who was, indeed, a villain “serviceable” in assisting Edgar on his journey, via one more disguise. Bedlam Tom, who was beset by the foul fiend and who took on the *persona* of a servingman, has now been left behind, and, just as Oswald asked Edgar to do, buried by the side of the road to Dover, itself symbolic of Edgar’s wandering journey to claim his knighthood and his kingship. In killing Oswald, Edgar completes the humiliation of Oswald (who humiliated Lear) begun in I.iv by Lear, who slaps him, and continued by Kent, who trips him and then, in II.ii, tries to kill him, all on behalf of Kent’s master, Lear, who not only does not recognize Kent but who does not acknowledge the totality of Kent’s loyalty. What present king couldn’t accomplish, future king does.

It’s important for rising Edgar to kill declining Oswald because of who Oswald is and who Edgar is – i.e., because of each of their identities. In the courtyard of Gloucester’s castle, when Kent and Oswald meet for the second time, Kent tells Cornwall²¹ that Oswald is one of those sleazeballs who would sunder familial love: “Such smiling rogues as these,/ Like rats, oft bite the holy cords atwain/ Which are too intrince t’ unloose...” (II.ii.65-67). We know that this is a true characterization of Oswald because Kent speaks only truth. As he says to Cornwall in the same scene, “Sir, ‘tis my occupation to be plain...” (l. 84).²² In this play, Kent is the soothsayer who can see. Oswald, then, is another Edmund, though on a lower social level. Having killed one enemy of familial love, Edgar must now kill the other.

“THE ABYSS ... IS EVERYWHERE.”

Early in the play, through a poisonous ruse, gullible father disowns gullible son. Love is withdrawn in the small court of Gloucester, just as it was in the play’s initial scene in the large court of Lear’s kingdom. The price for Gloucester is physical blindness, matching the blindness with which he responded to Edmund’s dark accusations. The price Edgar pays is a loss of identity. One of the questions the play asks is: Is it better to lose one’s sight or to lose one’s sense of self? Or are they the same – not being able to see oneself, not having insight? Not having insight applies to both paternal pairings, to Gloucester-Edmund-Edgar as well as to Lear-Edgar.

How extraordinary that Edgar does not meet his birth-father, Gloucester, until half way through the play, in the prison-hovel in III.iv. As it was for his godfather, so is it for his father. How can father and son know each other when they do not see each other until midway through the play, and only then in a nightmarish setting, so far removed from the familiar sights of their ancestral home? Amidst the great,

howling storm, Gloucester enters the hovel, carrying a torch to light his way. Very soon, he will have only his true son to light his way.

Seeing his father enter, Poor Tom identifies Gloucester to his cellmates: "This is the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet ... [who] squinies the eye ..." and corrupts nature. "Who squinies the eye," what a cruel foreshadowing of his father's fate! Afraid of being recognized, Edgar utters an apotropaic incantation, trying to drive the intruder out of Poor Tom's hovel-home and back into the storm that his father drove him into: "Aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!" (ll. 106, 108, 109, 114). Upon entering the hovel, Gloucester, like Kent, demands identification, not recognizing his son: "What are you there? Your names?" (l. 118). Poor Tom responds with accurate gibberish, saying he "is whipped from tithing to tithing [i.e., is homeless], and stocked, punished, and imprisoned..." (ll. 123-124). Edgar's disguise as Poor Tom pursued by fiends is perfectly accurate. His bewitched father has loosed the fiends, his guards, to pursue, find and kill him as punishment for what Gloucester believed to be a rupture of familial love. Although Edgar (as Poor Tom) recognized his father, Gloucester, true to form, is as blind to his son's new appearance as he is to the cause of the rupture. Gloucester will not recognize his son until he is past all seeing and must do so "feelingly."

Throughout the next several scenes, Edgar conducts his father to safety with exquisite love and patience. "Give me your hand," says Edgar, "you are now within a foot/ Of th' extreme verge." But Gloucester is not yet willing to be guided, just as Edgar is not yet ready to disclose himself - to allow his real identity to be seen by his blind father.²³ Two lines later, Gloucester replies, "Let go my hand" (IV.vi.25-26, 27). The madman and the blind man stumble along together, and the madman convinces the blind man they are climbing a mountain. Are there any other paternal love scenes in all of Shakespeare as beautiful as Edgar's leading his father to the edge of Dover cliff and then helping him to his feet after his "miraculous fall?" As Edgar tells his father, "Thy life's a miracle" (IV.vi.55), the miracle that Edgar arranged for his father at Dover cliffs, and the stage miracle, in the discerning Jan Kott's words, of a "landscape which is only a blind man's illusion...[where] the sea cannot be heard, but there is mention of its roar... [where] the lark cannot be heard, but there is mention of its song ... [where] sounds are present by their very absence: the silence is filled with them, just as the empty stage is filled with the mountain."²⁴

The scene that Shakespeare paints, the scene that doesn't really exist, is so realistic because while it is beautiful, it is also terrifying, what Jan Kott calls "the abyss, waiting all the time. The abyss, into which one can jump, is everywhere.... Gloucester, falling over on flat, even boards, plays a scene from a great morality play.... Gloucester is Everyman, and the stage becomes the medieval *Theatrum Mundi*. A Biblical parable is now enacted; the one about the rich man who became a beggar, and the blind man who recovered his inner sight when he lost his eyes."²⁵

Amid the terror, there is great stage beauty. Among the loveliest lines are blind Gloucester's, spoken to an ancient who is his and was his father's tenant and within earshot of Edgar: "Oh, dear son Edgar,/ The food of thy abused father's wrath!/ Might I but live to see thee in my touch,/ I'd say I had eyes again!" (IV.i.22-23). The emotional power of Gloucester's wish to be reunited is matched very soon by Cordelia's apostrophe when speaking with the doctor she has brought from France to care for Lear: "O dear father/ It is thy business that I go about..." (IV.iv.24-25). And so the son rescues his father, just as the daughter will soon rescue her father by tendering him what, for how many good reasons, she couldn't offer in the opening scene - unconditional love.

Twice during what Edgar calls "my pilgrimage" does Gloucester have an intimation that Bedlam Tom is not who he seems: "Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speak'st/ In better phrase and matter than thou didst." And, "Methinks y'are better spoken" (IV.vi.7-8, 10). To which Edgar replies, with utter simplicity, "in nothing am I changed/ But in my garments" (ll. 8-9), that is, in my outer coverings, which, of course, Gloucester cannot see and Edgar has changed many times. During their pilgrimage, Edgar is simply his father's guide and nurse,²⁶ in love and patience. He is not yet ready to reveal himself²⁷ and will not do so until after he has delivered to Albany the incriminating letter Oswald had carried.

How fitting that the three recognition scenes (Lear-Gloucester; Gloucester-Edgar; and Lear-Cordelia) occur virtually back-to-back in Acts IV and V. Their proximity binds the characters to each other and beautifully emphasizes the importance of family love.²⁸ Edgar's response to his father's reunion with the king is part of the pain he must endure on his journey: "O thou side-piercing sight" (IV.vi.85).²⁹

For Edgar, as for Gloucester and Lear, the pieces are beginning to fall inexorably into place, and his long day's journey is near its ending. As Edgar tells his father just before their (off stage) recognition scene, "Ripeness is all. Come on" (V.ii.11). "Ripeness" is Edgar's endgame.

The last step is to face his false brother in heraldic and mortal combat. The scene (in V.iii.110ff.) is a veritable cornucopia of identities. In posing the challenge, Albany's herald calls Edmund "supposed Earl of Gloucester." The herald's demand of Edgar, "What are you?/ Your name, your quality, and why you answer/ This present summons?" echoes Kent's "What art thou?" and his father's "What are you there?" as well as Lear's "What hast thou been?" Everyone tries to pierce below Edgar's "seeming" to determine who he really is. The language of his response -- "my name is lost;/ By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit" -- knits Edmund tightly to that other enemy of family love, Oswald, whom Kent described as a smiling rogue who "like rats, oft bite the holy cords atwain."

Edgar's ringing response, "Know, my name is lost," is the counterpoint to the "Edgar I nothing am" of II.iii.21. The "Edgar" of his gullible youth is, indeed, gone; in fact, that Edgar, Bedlam Tom Edgar, *is* lost. He left it behind in the muck of the hovel. His current name was stolen by treason, and now he will challenge the traitor, face to face. At this point his real name is Gloucester, but there is a pretender who must be eliminated. If he loses this battle, the name of Gloucester will be lost forever.

Edgar comes to the battle wearing a new "disguise," knight's armor, but his real armor is his selfless, patient, unremitting love for his father. Paternal love has been re-established in his family³⁰ as it will soon be in the royal family. He has apprenticed with the king in the worst of storms, was anointed into knighthood by his king, tested his courage and his battle skills against Oswald, and received his father's dying blessing. There is no way he can lose!

In his challenging speech, Edgar testifies to Edmund's grievous faults. He is "False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father,/ Conspirant 'gainst this high illustrious prince [i.e., Albany]." (II. 136-137) Edgar denounces Edmund as a "toad-spotted traitor," from head to toe, and thus vilifies Edmund by feminizing him via an echo of Lear's "Let copulation thrive" speech, Lear's top to bottom indictment of women (to blind Gloucester and Edgar in the fields near Dover): "Down from the waist they are Centaurs,/ Though women all above:/ But to the girdle do the gods inherit,/ Beneath is all the fiend's" (IV.vi.121-124). Like father, like son.

To Edgar's "Draw thy sword" speech, Edmund, the false knight, replies that "by rule of knighthood"³¹ he could delay the battle and insist on knowing the stranger's name, but he will fight anyway because "thy outside looks so fair and warlike," a long, long way from Bedlam Tom's "outside" and an echo of Edmund's attraction to appearances. (Were Goneril and Regan beauty queens?) When Edmund falls, Goneril, the false wife and daughter, tries to deny both reality and appearances: "thou art not vanquished,/ But cozened and beguiled." Edmund, the master cozenor, learns that the stranger's outside matches his inside and that the stranger is, in fact, the brother he has wronged, now the Knight of Strict Vengeance. Ms. Rackin once again asks us to notice the moral twinning of Edmund and Oswald who are "finally destroyed by a representative of all the values [they have] defiled and ignored throughout the play."³²

The play almost ends in political disaster, which is where it began. Were it not for Kent's demurrer, the kingdom was about to be divided again, first in thirds, then in half, but finally trusted only to Edgar.³³ Once again, Kent, ever loyal to his king, comes to the rescue. But his "rescue," like everything in this play, will bring him down a dark path. What, then, does Kent know that no one else does? With Beowulf, he knows that

Death is not easily
escaped from by anyone:
all of us with souls, earth-dwellers
and children of men, must make our way
to a destination already ordained
where the body, after the banqueting,
sleeps on its deathbed.³⁴

Kent, ready for that sleep, decides to tread a Roman path,³⁵ and tells us so with these two beautiful lines: "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;/ My master calls me, I must not say no" (V.iii.320-321).

THE FAR SIDE OF PURGATORY

Every reader and playgoer must wonder why Edgar had to endure so many permutations, adopt so many *personae* to become king and to complete his journey home. Was it to assure us – certainly not Lear – that the old king had not died in vain, that England fell neither to France nor to Edmund? Or is his total abasement a kind of self-punishment for being so easily duped by his brother?³⁶ Is there any other king-in-waiting in all of Shakespeare who plays so many roles?³⁷ Or does it reflect the necessity of Lear's harsh England that once the bonds of love are severed, each of the actors, whether guilty or innocent, must descend into a kind of Purgatory whose only outcome is either death or dearly won redemption?

In another sense, Edgar, though of royal birth, epitomizes the "houseless poverty," the compassion for the poor that Lear recognizes he ignored when, in what seems a long time ago, he was in charge. Edgar's "lesson," like Prince Hal's in the Henry plays, is that a true and worthy king must encompass the very top as well as the very bottom of society.³⁸ We can see, then, the mirroring in Edgar of an important part of Lear's learning to become a man. Ms. Adelman notes that many (unnamed) critics consider Edgar not a "real" character but a succession of "minor characters, choric in function."³⁹ This notion hardly seems appropriate for a play in which so many characters change so profoundly, either because of the raging fires of their inward passions, the misfires of their devilish plots, fortune's erratic blows, or even because the gods are trying to kill them for sport. The estimable Jan Kott wrote of *King Lear* that everyone is on a journey "from the cradle to the grave. The theme of *King Lear* is an enquiry into the meaning of this journey, into the existence or non-existence of Heaven and Hell Everybody has died or been murdered. Gloucester was right when he said: 'This great world/ Shall so wear out to naught.' Those who have survived – Edgar, Albany and Kent – are, as Lear has been, just 'ruin'd piece[s] of nature.'"⁴⁰

And is there a moral to this story? The critic Nicholas Brooke parses that question to its end: "The final sense is that all moral structures, whether of natural order or Christian redemption, are invalidated by the naked fact of experience. The dramatic force of this rests on the human impulse to discover a pattern, a significance, by investigating nature. But nature itself finally frustrates that impulse; when Lear dies, the moral voices are silenced. We are left with unaccommodated man indeed; naked, unsheltered by any consolation whatsoever."⁴¹

We conclude with a small patch from Alexander Leggatt's clear-sighted program notes for the Stratford (Ontario) Festival's 2002 presentation: "The word *nothing*, which Lear and Cordelia throw back and forth in the first scene, seems at times like the final truth about the universe.... As we watch a parent carrying a child, the beginning and the end of life run together. So do the beginning and the end of the play: once again Lear asks Cordelia to speak, and once again she is silent."⁴²

Yes, Edgar attains kingship, and this time, at the end, it is not another disguise. There is no one left to run from, but there is also no "after the banqueting," no coronation celebration. Whom can Edgar invite? One has to wonder what kind of realm the new king will inherit. Will there be any cruel daughters, any kind ones, any Fool to mock and chide, any noblemen who scheme while others ride loyally? *King Lear* indeed is a dark play, and none of its characters can say, with Cleopatra, "Com'st thou smiling from/ The world's great snare uncaught?" (IV.viii.12).

"Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind..." (III.iv.91).

NOTES

¹ Janet Adelman, ed., from her Introduction to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of King Lear* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1978), p. 1.

² Quoted in Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 480.

³ Harold Bloom, p. 480.

⁴ "Grumble" in the sense of growl or grunt or mutter, like a lowly dog, diseased and near to death.

⁵ This and all line references are to the conflated text of *King Lear* in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Shakespeare Tragedies* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

⁶ Janet Adelman, p. 14.

⁷ Some critics comment that the sight of Bedlam Tom pushes Lear over the edge, from partial to total madness. I'm not sure it matters, and I'm not sure whether this Lear or the Lear of the first act is the truly mad Lear.

⁸ Professor David Venturo's happy phrase. His editorial contributions to this paper have been many, varied and always substantive, for which I am most grateful.

⁹ Is this a cruel foreshadowing of how, in the Twentieth Century, dictators pulverized millions of separate individuals into base humans?

¹⁰ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1937), p. 285.

¹¹ Cf. G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen, 1949), p. 190.

¹² It was Dr. Aileen Forbes of Princeton University who reminded me that Lear had only daughters.

¹³ In the opening scene, Goneril and Regan loved their father 100 knights "worth." As they diminished his train, his anger rose. As Lear recognized their fading love, his madness increased. A kind of three-dimensional chiasma!

¹⁴ "My privilege," not duty – a nice Shakespearean distinction.

¹⁵ Sagaciously described by Harold Bloom, p. 485.

¹⁶ S.L. Goldberg, from his "An Essay on *King Lear*," in Janet Adelman, p. 115.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Dartmouth Professor Peter Saccio for pointing out this semblance. *The Teaching Company* DVD, William Shakespeare, Lectures 31-33.

¹⁸ Phyllis Rackin, "On Edgar, Delusion as Resolution," in Janet Adelman, pp. 124-125.

¹⁹ Cf. III.iv.42, IV.i.79, IV.vi.25, and IV.vi.64.

²⁰ Janet Adelman, footnote 8 on p. 11.

²¹ Aptly described by Yeats as one of "the worst" who is "full of passionate intensity."

²² In the same and following speeches, looking at Cornwall, Regan and Oswald (and, yes, Gloucester), plain speaking Kent calls them all fools and rogues, for which Cornwall constrains Kent in the stocks, clearly demonstrating that Cornwall and Regan would suppress "plain speaking."

²³ Perhaps he feels guilty of his father's maiming. They were both responsible for not confronting Edmund, for not seeing through his patent land-grab ruse. Cf. John F. Danby, "Edmund and The Two Natures," in Janet Adelman, p. 80.

²⁴ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), p. 144.

²⁵ Jan Kott, p. 146.

²⁶ "Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ Is done to cure it." (IV.vi.33-34)

²⁷ Edgar's reunion scene with his father takes place off stage, I presume so that Lear's and Cordelia's can take center stage, without comparison. I prefer to believe that both old fathers die happily. Gloucester certainly does; the text says so. Lear's death is much more complicated, agonized by the body of Cordelia in his lap, a reverse *pieta*. In the Peter Brook film, as Lear is saying his two final lines, the image of Cordelia twice appears fleetingly in the background, ghostlike. So my thought is that Peter Brook thought Lear sees a resurrected Cordelia. His "Look on her. Look, her lips. Look there, look there" is akin to Hamlet's use of the word "look" when the ghost appears in Gertrude's bedroom: "Why, look you there! Look how it steals away! ... Look where he goes" (III.iv.135-37)

²⁸ Political love and loyalty in Lear's kingdom, severed by his angry and short-sighted actions, has been lost forever and can be regained only by the next king.

²⁹ Ms. Adelman reminds us how in this scene Edgar shows compassion for the men he is watching, just as Christ showed compassion "for the sorrows of mankind." *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁰ Edgar also re-establishes familial love, embracing even Edmund. To his dying brother he says, "Let's exchange charity" (V.iii.168), to which Edmund replies, "Th' hast spoken right, 'tis true;/ The wheel is come full circle; I am here" (ll. 175-176).

³¹ A "rule" he cavalierly ignores by ordering Cordelia's death.

³² Phyllis Rackin, p. 125.

³³ For this point I am also indebted to Dr. Aileen Forbes of Princeton University.

³⁴ *Beowulf*, translated by Seamus Heaney (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), ll. 1001-1007.

³⁵ At this point, I remind the reader that Kent's name in disguise was the Roman *Caius*.

³⁶ See this discussion in Harold Bloom, p. 480.

³⁷ I count fourteen: 1) Heir to the Earl of Gloucester. 2) The gullible older brother. 3) The fugitive from injustice who hides in "the happy hollow of a tree." 4) Tom O' Bedlam. 5) The servingman, a/k/a Oswald. 6) Lear's philosopher. 7) The Justice in Lear's trial of his daughters. 8) The guide who leads Gloucester to Dover. 9) The

“poor unfortunate beggar,” as Gloucester calls him. 10) The nurse who ministers unto Gloucester’s despair. 11) The illiterate country yokel who kills Oswald with a staff. 12) The son to Gloucester, off stage. 13) The Grim Reaper to Edmund. 14) The inheritor of Lear’s kingship, the next King of England.

³⁸ Like Prospero’s returning to power but only after he publicly says of Caliban, “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine.”

³⁹ Janet Adelman, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Jan Kott, pp. 146-147, 152. In his Preface to Mr. Kott’s book, the great film director Peter Brook wrote, “Kott is undoubtedly the only writer on Elizabethan matters who assumes without question that every one of his readers will at some point or other been woken by the police in the middle of the night” (p. viii). Martin Esslin wrote in the Introduction, “To an intellectual of the erudition and sensibility of Jan Kott with the living experience of war-ravaged Poland, the violence and passion, the blood and tears of this Shakespearean universe are a familiar environment” (p. xix).

⁴¹ Nicholas Brooke, “On Moral Structure vs. Experience,” in Janet Adelman, p. 127.

⁴² Alexander Leggatt, from the Program Notes to the Stratford Festival of Canada’s 2002 production of *King Lear*. He is a professor of English at University College, University of Toronto. Lear was played magnificently by Christopher Plummer.

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