

Ben Ross Schneider, Jr
Professor Emeritus
Department of English
Lawrence University
Appleton, WI 54912
Ben.R.Schneider@Lawrence.edu

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Work in Progress

Chapter 3 of Shakespeare's Morals: _King Lear_ and the Culture of Justice

It is often said that we live in a culture of victims. But Shakespeare's was not a culture of victims. A young Elizabethan who lost his job would call it a mis-fortune and look for another, becoming a thief or a Lord Mayor depending on his luck. The virtue of compassion (which may be defined as the performance of sympathy for _classes_ of people, animals, or vegetables) was not yet popular (pity is not the same thing), and the virtue of justice was in fashion. In a society just barely ahead of chaos, people dreamed of an order to be achieved through justice, some of which was up to the king but most of which was up to every member of society, one person at a time.

Succinctly, what Shakespeare has to say about justice in _King Lear_ has been totally rejected in our 20th century need to use the "more sinned against than sinning" king as an object of compassion, a helpless victim of forces out of control. The victimological exegesis goes back to Samuel Johnson; it received special emphasis during the sixties in an influential essay by Nicholas Brooke on "The Ending of King Lear;" and it is now taken for granted in Lear criticism. Brooke was glad not to be like other men:

When a character is so bold as to say in the face of cumulative misery

The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us -

Brooke finds it

appalling: the measured affirmation of justice in these terms shocks everyone - its effect must be a rejection of these gods. [If this is true] divine order, if it exists, may be a horrible thing.

What dates Brooke's response to _Lear_ is it's distaste for moralizing in the face of human misery. Help is in order, not philosophy. For Lear to be a satisfactory victim, he must be seen to struggle hopelessly against the same sort of absurd and cruel--"obscene" is the word--establishment that right thinking liberals deplore today. _King Lear_ offers no hope. So it has become appalling to speak of justice in criticism of King Lear.

It is also appalling to speak of God in such a context, so Brooke and his countercultural friends have had to overturn a lot of previous scholarship that emphasized Christian redemption and hope as the message of the play. Brooke cannot abide any

optimism:

Johnson was surely right to find [the ending] unbearable - I would rather think myself capable of his pained repudiation than of Lamb's stoical acceptance. We are driven to see, not only the very human pain of Lear's end with Cordelia dead in his arms, but also the absolute negation of all forms of hope. Everything is here for tears.

The conviction that *Lear* takes place in a world where "the system" is not only dysfunctional but conspiring against the people certainly strikes a nerve in these postmodern times, in which the very definition of "post modern" assumes the dysfunctionality of "modern" society. Little wonder that David Margolies, in his recent *Monsters of the deep: social dissolution in Shakespeare's tragedies*, after painting the following picture of Shakespeare's England, perceives Lear to be an innocent victim of circumstances. (19-21)

There was shock at things horrifying and incomprehensible, from personal suffering to social conditions that seemed beyond anyone's control. . . . The standard of English diet declined. Vagabondage became an increasing problem. Yet display of luxury increased. . . . expectations of self-improvement were frustrated. It was a world that was less and less working the way it was supposed to. Greed and corruption, crime, usury, self-serving, social disregard . . . became more frequently the material of popular culture. The widening gulf between rich and poor is much commented upon. (10)

This sounds a bit like the typical British lament over Thatcherism. At any rate, Margolies transfers this postmodern social criticism to Shakespeare's England with the typical Marxist confidence that all societies are always and everywhere in the throes of class struggle.

Because they lack a moral basis for the action of the play, modern scholars find *King Lear* highly problematic, deeply puzzling, pluralistic, polylogical, and closureless, all of which adjectives jibe with the general sense of cultural dysfunctionality so necessary to critical style since the sixties. We have all sorts of explanations, almost as many as there are explainers, of why, in the opening action in which Lear divides his kingdom, Cordelia refuses to say how much she loves him, and he in a fit of rage disinherits her. Such uncertainty about meaning is nowadays generally greeted with applause as the achievement of a great poet. (I always thought it was the mark of a novice.) The eminent Shakespearean Maynard Mack has given up on this frustrating opening scene, deciding that Shakespeare intentionally elides any motivational background for the scene in order to dramatize the way in which a choice which seems innocent may set off a chain of unexpected and utterly devastating consequences.¹¹ The scene certainly does set off a chain reaction, but in the context of Stoic discourse, Lear's division of the Kingdom is not innocent, and Cordelia's motivation is quite clear.

At the very end of the third and last volume of Seneca's essays, in his book length essay *On Benefits*, readily available

to Shakespeare in translation if a bit out of the way for us, Seneca gives us a veritable plot of *King Lear*. As is his wont, he begins with a rhetorical question: what can we give to a person who has everything?

I will show you what the highest in the land stand in need of, what the man who possesses everything lacks: *someone*, assuredly who will tell him the truth, who will deliver him from the constant cant and falsehood that so bewilder him with lies that the very habit of listening to flatteries instead of facts has brought him to the point of not knowing what truth really is. Do you not see how such persons are driven to destruction by the absence of frankness and the substitution of cringing obsequiousness for loyalty? No one is sincere in expressing approval or disapproval, but *one* person vies with another in flattery, and, while all the man's friends have only one object, a common aim to see who can deceive him most charmingly, he himself remains ignorant of his own powers, and, *believing* himself to be as great as he hears he is, he brings on wars that are useless and will imperil the world, breaks up a useful and necessary peace, and, *led on by a madness* that no one checks, sheds the blood of numerous persons, destined at last to spill his own. While without investigation such men claim the undetermined as assured and think that it is *as disgraceful* to be diverted from their purpose as to be defeated and believe that what has already reached its highest development and is even then tottering, will last for ever, *they* cause vast kingdoms to come crashing down upon themselves and their followers. And, living in that *gorgeous show* of unreal and swiftly passing blessings, they failed to grasp that from the moment when it was impossible for them to hear a word of truth, they ought to have expected nothing but misfortune.¹²

If we didn't know better, we would think that Seneca had read *King Lear*; but it's the other way around: It looks as if *King Lear* has read Seneca.

The power of flatterers to obstruct even the best-intentioned monarch was recognized as a major problem in absolute systems. There is continual railing against flattery in ancient and early modern texts. In Castiglione's *Courtier*, Federico Fregoso in no uncertain terms urges that a courtier must tell his Lord the truth "without fear or peril to displease him" lest he fall prey to the flatterers that surround him.¹³ Machiavelli's formula for "How [a prince may] Avoid Flatterers" is to "let . . . it be understood that you will not be offended by plain speaking."¹⁴ According to the popular English moralist Sir Thomas, disaster is sure to strike rulers who

either do refuse counsaile, or prohibite libertie of speche; [since] that in libertie (as it hath bene proved) is mooste perfecte suertie, according as it is remembred by Plutarche of Theopompus, kyng of Lacedemone, who beinge demaunded, howe a realme might be best and mooste surely kepte; If (saide he) the prince [give] to his frendes libertie to speake to hym thinges that be just."¹⁵

Montaigne declares "I deadly hate to heare a flatterer": "admon-

itions and corrections . . . are the chiefest offices of friendship."¹⁶ According to Bishop Hall (1608)

Flattery is nothing but false friendship, fawning hypocrisy, dishonest civility, base merchandise of words, a plausible discord of the heart and lips. . . . [The flatterer's] art is nothing but delightful cozenage; whose rules are smoothing and guarded with perjury; whose scope is, to make men fools in teaching them to overvalue themselves, and to tickle [their] friends to death.¹⁷

King James concurs, advising his son Prince Henry, when he becomes king, to

choose . . . men of known wisdom, honestie and good conscience. . . and free of all factions and partialities; but specially free of that filthy vice of Flatterie, the pest of all Princes, and wracke of Republicks.¹⁸

In antiquity the outcry against flattery was loud and clear: Cicero, sounding as if he, too, had read *King Lear*, warns

The greater our prosperity . . . the more should we seek the counsel of friends, and the greater the heed that should be given to their advice. Under such circumstances also we must beware of lending an ear to sycophants or allowing them to impose upon us with their flattery. For it is easy in this way to deceive ourselves, since we thus come to think ourselves duly entitled to praise; and to this frame of mind a thousand delusions may be traced, when men are puffed up with conceit and expose themselves to ignominy and ridicule by committing the most egregious blunders. So much for this subject.¹⁹

The most egregious blunder in history, [[to judge from the number of times it is marveled at in conduct literature,]] was that of Alexander the Great, who, having been seduced by flatterers to believe he was a God, becoming displeased during a drinking bout because his best friend Cleitus didn't think he was, stabbed him to death on the spot, an act that he bitterly repented for the rest of his life.²⁰ The "poison of flattery" (*Gov.* 161) is universally deplored.²¹

This evidence strongly suggests that Kent diagnoses Lear's case correctly as an example of "power" seduced by "flattery." (1.1.148) But, perhaps because we are victim-oriented instead of virtue-oriented, we seem nowadays to feel a need to blame someone else than Lear for his ensuing agony, which seems to us cruel and unusual punishment for someone who simply, as we so often say, "made a mistake." The finger of course points at Cordelia who, we think, could have humored the old man by playing her sisters' game, instead of unloosing his blind fury by telling the truth.²² But pragmatism is a modern virtue. According to the ancients, Cordelia had no choice but to say, most respectfully, in answer to her father's question--"What can you say to draw/A third [of my kingdom] more opulent than your sisters'?"--that hollow-sounding doom-filled word: "Nothing, my lord." If she had lied to him as her sisters had done, she would not only have done great damage to what Cassio called his "the immortal part," but that very same consideration also obliged her to give him

good counsel, whatever the cost. As Kent later says, "When power to flattery bows / To plainness honor's bound" (1.1.148). As if to reinforce the importance of good counsel, Shakespeare repeats the pattern with Kent and again with Cornwall's 1st Servant, who counsels his master, "Better service have I never done than now to bid you hold [your assault on Gloucester]" (3.7.74), and kills him and gets killed by his wife.

Cordelia's subsequent rebuttal of her sisters' claims to "love their father all" (1.1.104) seems self-righteous and flimsy to us simply because we don't know what the word "love" means in her lexicon. She argues that a married woman cannot honestly give all her love to her father, because she has also promised to love her husband. I think it is safe to say, given our steadily-rising divorce rate, that a sense of binding obligation is no longer a strong component of the word "love" as we use it today.²³ But throughout the Shakespeare canon, when the word "love" does not refer to sexual passion, it means "mutual obligation." Thus when in *The Merchant of Venice* Antonio asks his friend Bassanio to give "Balthasar" his ring for "my love" he is talking about Bassanio's obligation, not his fondness.²⁴ Similarly, when Kent trips up Oswald, Lear takes it as a favor to him and promises to "love" him in return. (1.4.86-88) He is simply acknowledging an obligation. If Cordelia took the word "love" as lightly as we do, it would indeed be no big deal for her to share some of her infinite store of it with her father, but this is not the case. Her love for her father can be quite precisely specified:

You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you. (1.1.96-98)

She limits her duties to such "as are right fit," recognizing that obligations to others may have priority. Since marriage vows would also require her to love, honor, and obey, they would of course limit the ways in which she could love, honor and obey her father. Ergo, her sisters are liars. She couldn't have made a better case, but Lear is too far gone in egotism to pay it the regard it deserves.

When she apologizes for this plainness with the words "I cannot heave/ My heart into my mouth" (1.1.91-2), it may appear that she is an uncaring person, as many recent critics have decided, who, far from being a pure and innocent victim of a tragic disaster is the veritable cause of it. But it's not lack of compassion that propels her, as she points out later, explaining why her father found fault with her:

I want that glib and oily art
To speak and purpose not, since what I [well] intend,
I'll do't before I speak. (1.1.224-6)

Here she clearly states the moral basis of her action. We still recognize it when we say "Talk is cheap," "Actions speak louder than words," or "Put up or shut up." When she says she "cannot heave her heart into her mouth" Cordelia simply means that it is not her wont to "unpack her heart with words" like Hamlet; she simply does the deed. The moralists give her full support:

Bishop Hall's Honest Man "loves actions above words," and his Valiant Man "talks little and loves rather the silent language of the hand" (93, 96). In his *_Characters_* (1665), Richard Flecknoe notes much the same phenomenon. The "Valiant Man," he says, "has but one defect; he cannot talk much, to recompense which he does the more." The ancients made the same distinction. Seneca said, for example, "Philosophy teaches us to act not to speak," (*_Epis_*. 1.133), and he reiterated the idea in various other contexts.²⁵ One's virtues must be shown, not told. Therefore bragging is taboo. Cicero ordains that "it is bad taste to talk about one's self . . . , to play the Braggart Captain," (*_Off_*. 141; see also *_Ess_*. 3.509). For the same reason pedantic, precious, and florid speech are condemned,²⁶ as well as foppish dress and manners.²⁷ Summing up, Montaigne recommends a plain, informal, style that is "not Pedantical, nor Frierlike, nor Lawyer-like, but rather down-right, Souldier-like."²⁸ The language of soldiers well suits a culture in which daily life is a battlefield.²⁹

When Cordelia says the one word "Nothing," in contrast to her sisters' verbose flattery, she identifies herself as a female version of an archetypal persona that is first recorded in classical times, that flourished in the Renaissance and still persists. He has many names: the "good man," the "manly man," the "man of honor," the "honest man," the "true gentleman." In Shakespeare's time he was often called the "plain dealer," and that is what I shall call him.

This persona pervades Western Civilization (and perhaps Eastern, too: witness the Samurai) from Socrates to George Smiley, and crops up randomly throughout arts and letters, in bitter and in sweet versions: in Durer's weatherbeaten knight who rides deliberately straight ahead past death and the devil; in Chaucer's Knight "as meke as is a mayde;" in Jonathan Swift, who wrote "Honesty [is] a pair of shoes worn out in the dirt" (*_Tale of a Tub_*, II); in Wycherley's *_Plain Dealer_*, whose hero was Manly; in almost every Restoration comedy, under names like Blunt, Careless, Wildair, Easy, Truman, Worthy, Hardy, and Constant;³⁰ in Conrad's Axel Heyst, for whom death was the *_Victory_* foretold in the title; in Yeats's "Friend whose work has come to nothing" who is "Bred to a harder thing than triumph;" in Hemingway's Lady Brett, who gave up the first man she ever loved because she wasn't good enough for him; in Hemingway himself who blew out his brains rather than become a vegetable; in the unpressed George Smiley, who, wondering "Why do we do this dangerous work?" answers, "I rather think it's because it gives us a chance to pay" (*_Honorable Schoolboy_*); in Faulkner's upright judge; in Faulkner himself, who wrote to an admirer

I have been writing all the time about honor, truth, pity, consideration, the capacity to endure well grief and misfortune and injustice and then endure again, in terms of individuals who observed and adhered to them not merely for reward but for virtue's own sake, not even merely because they are admirable in themselves, but in order to live with oneself and die peacefully when the time comes. (Letter to my colleague Warren Beck)

Except when Don John of *_Much Ado_* calls himself a "Plain

Dealing Villain," which he is (and so is Edmund of *King Lear*), Shakespeare did not use the term to designate a character type, though he frequently uses the word "plain" in the context of honesty (eleven times in *Lear*), and Lear "deal[s] plainly" (4.7.61) with Cordelia during their reconciliation. But the type is recognizable throughout the canon. Sir Walter Blunt of *Henry IV*, whose "grinning honor" Falstaff "like[d] not," is one of many dead plain dealers in history and literature, and Enobarbus is another. Hal, Hotspur, Timon of Athens, Othello, Brutus, Cleopatra's Antony, and Antonio of *The Merchant of Venice* are other Shakespearean varieties. When Cornwall calls down Kent for imitating the type in order to gain credit, he recognizes the esteem in which it is held: "He cannot flatter, he, / An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth." (2.2.98)

His virtues also have many names, and there are many ways to array them. The emphases in Stoic literature suggest the following outline.

CONSTANCY, comprehending integrity, responsibility, loyalty, keeping promises.

GENEROSITY, comprehending graciousness (cf. *gratias ago*, Latin for "I thank you") the capacity to "love" and feel gratitude, to be mindful of obligations, to have a good memory for favors received and no hesitation in reciprocating them.

PLAINNESS, comprehending honesty, frankness, reticence, diffidence, modesty, lack of pretence, amateurism, easiness in manners, --eschewing formality and precision as attributes of a fop.

COURAGE, comprehending patience, endurance, fortitude--a willingness to undergo any amount of suffering or loss, including death, rather than fail in any of the above.

Kent

Kent is little regarded in *Lear* criticism, and yet the play starts with an invitation for us to compare Kent and Gloucester, and the comparison is indeed instructive; in fact, on close inspection, we find that Kent is a useful touchstone against which to test all the characters. He also conditions our opinion of *Lear*, being a constant witness to his great worth. Actually, without his obvious affection to guide us, we might have trouble sympathizing with *Lear*. For Kent to be a credible witness he must be an exemplary role model. And that's why, I suppose, he is the archetypal plain dealer. Although he could be cut from the play with no damage to the main action, he carries a heavy burden of meaning. Though causally expendable, is thematically indispensable.

When he steps "between the dragon and his wrath," and dares to interfere with *Lear*'s disinheritance of Cordelia, he rivets our attention:

"Good my liege--

Peace, Kent!" (1.1.120-2).

Lear sends her off with curses ringing in her ears. Kent tries again, beginning

Royal Lear,
Whom I have ever honor'd as my king,
Lov'd as my father, as my master follow'd,
As my great patron thought on in my prayers --
(1.1.139-42)

To understand Kent's function fully we must learn how to love servitude. We must, in order to appreciate *King Lear* in these egalitarian times, suppress our tendency look upon hierarchy as a form of oppression. We have seen how reciprocal giving holds together the Belmontese in *The Merchant of Venice* "like a stone arch." According to Keith Wrightson in his book, *English Society 1580-1680*, this mutuality of benefits works vertically as well as horizontally in a hierarchical society, up and down as well as right and left. Although Barish and Waingrow, in their ground-breaking essay on "Service in *King Lear*" (1958), establish that the master/servant bond is reciprocal, they assume this to mean that the servant "has rights as well as duties," and go on to say that Lear violates Kent's rights.³³ This supposition of "rights" smacks of the language of contracts, and it implies that the master is quit of all obligation so long as he recognizes servants' rights. This is not Cicero's "bond of fellowship"; it is the cash nexus between an employer and his employee. What masters owe servants is "love," of the sort Lear declares for Kent/Caius when he trips up Oswald. When Lear banishes his friend Kent, he violates something much greater than a right; he violates a trust.

Richard Strier, in an essay called "Faithful Servants: Shakespeare's Praise of Disobedience" (1988), similarly misreads the bond as a contract. Positing that servants are legally bound to obey masters, he imagines that Cordelia and Kent are disobedient on principle, in the manner of William Penn refusing to take off his hat in the presence of the king (though he doesn't give that example). Kenneth Graham goes even farther afield, labeling Cordelia's recalcitrance an individualistic reaction against formality fostered by the Renaissance.³⁴ The thought that love might be the motive thus escapes both scholars.

Having fully recognized his enormous debt to his king-father-master, Kent leaps at the chance to save Lear from his folly: his gratitude overwhelms him, and he hopes that his expression of love will remind his master of past services requiring reciprocal consideration. Perhaps this passage from Seneca on his debt of gratitude to his emperor Nero will help us to understand Kent's eagerness to help Lear at any cost:

Who would not wish to shield him if he could, even from the chance of ill - him beneath whose sway justice, peace, chastity, security, and honour flourish, under whom the state abounds in wealth and a store of all good things? Nor does it gaze upon its ruler with other emotion than, did they vouchsafe him the power of beholding them, we should gaze upon the immortal gods - with veneration and with worship. (1.1.13-15)

Granted that Seneca has something to gain from flattering Nero, we perhaps should recognize that the more power the chief executive has, the more every good thing in life must appear to be his gift. According to Linda Levy Peck, in her recent book, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Stuart England*, the king was conceived of as the "guarantor of justice and giver of favor" (12) in the land, almost a surrogate for God, and apparently his subjects did think of him as the psalmist thinks of the Lord his shepherd. Having fully recognized his enormous debt to his king-father-master, Kent leaps at the chance to save Lear from his folly: his gratitude overwhelms him.

Lear's inability to respond to Kent's burst of loyalty may derive from the fact that *King Lear* is another *Merchant of Venice*, in which Shakespeare envisions the stone arch of English society collapsing in the face of the onslaught of the cash nexus.³⁵ He was a witness to the increasing numbers of noble houses that fell into the hands of money lenders and to the controversies through which the Catholic sin of usury inevitably transformed into the Protestant virtue of banking. When Lear proposes to divide his kingdom into portions equal to the amount of love his daughters express for him, he shows that he is already a free marketeer. He is bargaining still at Gloucester's castle when he proposes to stay with the daughter who lets him keep the greatest number of knights, saying "Thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty, / And thou art twice her love" (2.4.259-60). As Cordelia and Kent have shown, love doesn't come in measurable amounts: it entails a whole lot more than how many knights one is willing to house. Cordelia's counsel costs her her dower, and when he steps between "the dragon and his wrath" Kent stakes his life.

Check

This hideous rashness. Answer *my life* my judgment,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least.

Kent, *on thy life*, no more.

My life I never held but as [a] pawn
To wage against thine enemies,
ne'er [fear'd] to lose it,
Thy safety being motive.

Then Lear certainly would have hacked him to pieces as Alexander did Cleitus, had not Cornwall and Albany interposed.

In order to fully understand Kent we must also learn to love death. The trivialization of death has a long history. According to Plato, courage is an adjunct of wisdom: it consists in knowing what to be afraid of; and in the list of true dreads, dishonour is worse than death.³⁶ Once more the priorities that govern us today are reversed: how a man dies is more important than how he lives. We are given only one death, and so we had better not waste it. (cf. *Mont*. 2.124) Thus Seneca says,

The mere contemplation of a [brave] deed that is to be done is a delight, and the brave and upright man, picturing to himself the guerdons of his death, - guerdons such as the freedom of his country and the deliverance of all those for whom he is paying out his life, - partakes of the greatest pleasure and enjoys the fruit of his own peril. But [even]

that man . . . who is deprived of this joy . . . will leap to his death without a moment's hesitation, content to act rightly and dutifully.³⁷

"Of all the benefits of vertue, [says Montaigne] the contempt of death is the chiefest."³⁸ As Hotspur said, leading his troops into battle, "Die all, die all merrily." (_1 Henry IV_ 4.1.134). The horror is that they probably did.

Kent is ready to die merrily and faces Lear without flinching. But his courage avails not, and the king banishes him, we would think thus absolving him from further duty. [But his love is not conditional. He now shows us his constancy] and turns up disguised as Caius, to serve his master, whom he "loves," in any way he can. (1.4.21-26) His job interview functions as a catalogue of his virtues.

How now, what art thou? A man, Sir.

This answer is typical of a plain dealer. It is stripped of decoration. It is deferential; the "Sir," indicates his eagerness to serve. It contains nothing but a fact. However it also announces a major focus of the play, that the common humanity of all people, also a major focus of Stoicism. One of Seneca's favorite *sententiae* is

I am a man; and nothing in man's lot
Do I deem foreign to me.³⁹

His master, King Lear, is not a man; he still thinks that kings are members of a different species. On this point King Henry V (in disguise as an ordinary soldier) said, "A King is a but a man as I am." But Lear, as he says himself, is "every inch a king," having, one supposes, a kingly arm, a kingly liver, a kingly big toe, kingly fingernails, and so forth.

No human being can assume inherent superiority:⁴⁰ our merit, such as it is, lies in our deeds. So Kent refuses to state any qualifications. As the job interview proceeds, his laconic answers, which for the sake of efficiency, I shall gloss in footnotes, contain further commentary on the archetype he represents.

What dost thou profess? What wouldst thou with us?
I do profess to be no less than I seem,^a to serve
him truly that will put me in trust,^b to love him that is
honest^c, to converse with him that is wise and says
little.^d

What art thou?

A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the
King.^e

If thou be'st as poor for a subject as he's for a
king, [th'] art poor enough.

What wouldst thou?

Service.^f

Who wouldst thou serve?

You.

Dost thou know me, fellow?

No, sir, but you have that in your countenance which
I would fain call master.

What's that?
 Authority.^g
 What services canst do?
 I can keep honest counsel,^h ride, run, mar a
 curious tale in telling it,ⁱ and deliver a plain message
 bluntly. That which ordinary men are fit
 for, I am
 qualified in, and the best of me is diligence.
 How old art thou?
 Not so young, sir, to love a woman for singing, nor
 so old to dote on her for any thing. (1.4.9-39)^j

- a. I don't boast.
- b. I will reciprocate the honor done me by your trust. "Trusting obligeth trustiness" (Mont. 1.139).
- c. Since gain is no object, I serve only people I respect.
- d. Plain dealers don't run off at the mouth (e.g., like Polonius).
- e. Having nothing to gain, I have no ulterior motives. Honesty.
- f. The joy of serving is compensation enough. "In la sua voluntade e nostra pace." Generosity.
- g. I serve because you command. "[Kent] did him service improper for a slave." (5.3.221-2). Generosity.
- h. I won't blab. Constancy.
- i. I have no art. Plainness.
- j. I'm old enough to withstand sexual attraction, but not so old as to be led by the nose. Fortitude.
 When Kent/Caius first encounters the fool, the fool offers him his fool's cap. "Why," says Kent?

Why? for taking one's part that's out of favor.
 Nay, and thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou'lt
 catch cold shortly. There, take my coxcomb. (1.4.99-101)

By ridiculing Kent/Caius's lack of self-interest, the fool calls attention to his constancy, the virtue that really entails all the rest. One must be the same inside and out, which is integrity, and the same today and tomorrow, which is constancy, or else one is a liar, not a plain dealer. Whatever befalls, the constant man never changes his course; he pays no attention to wind shifts. Therefore, as Montaigne says,

Constancie is valour, not of armes and legs but of minde and courage; it consisteth not of the spirit and courage of our horse, nor of our armes 'If hee slip or fall he fights upon his knee.' He that in danger of imminent death is no whit da[u]nted in his assurednesse; he that in yeelding up his ghost beholding his enemie with a scornfull and fierce looke, he is vanquished, not by us, but by fortune: he is slaine, but not conquered.^41

After proposing his fool's cap to Lear, the Fool sings the following song, now recommending Kent/Caius's virtues and contradicting earlier gibes about his folly:

Have more than thou showest,
Speak less than thou knowest,
Lend less than thou owest,
Ride more than thou goest,
Learn more than thou trowest,
Set less than thou throwest;
Leave thy drink and thy whore,
And keep in a' door,
And thou shalt have more
Than two tens to a score.

Except for the last two precepts, these all say the same thing: let your deeds speak, not your words. Be more than you profess, not less. As Cordelia has said, "what I [well] intend, / I'll do't before I speak" (1.1.226) If you profess less, what you give away will return with interest. Nothing is something, after all.

Kent's confrontation with Oswald that lands him in the stocks,--especially _because_ it lands him in the stocks--further demonstrates his virtues. It reinforces his character by contrasting it with its exact opposite (2.2.87-8), and it epitomizes the forces that drive the whole play. Kent moves straight ahead, Oswald veers as the wind sits; Kent serves his master; Oswald serves himself; Kent is plain, Oswald lies; and to sum it all up, Kent is brave and Oswald is a coward. Oswald had already proved a coward when Caius, in his first scene, tripped him up, and he allowed himself to be shamefully shoved out of the room. Now Kent calls him every bad name in the book, including "son and heir of a mongrel bitch" (2.2.22-3), again trying to get him to fight. But rather than risk getting killed, Oswald submits to a beating, which is the worst disgrace a gentleman can undergo. When Cornwall and Gloucester interrupt this shaming procedure, Cornwall asks Kent why he is so angry: "That such a slave as this should wear a sword, / Who wears no honesty." (2.2.72-3) To wear a sword and be afraid to use it, is of course the worst way of having less "than thou showest." Oswald compounds his pusillanimity when he tells Cornwall that the reason he took the beating was to "spare [Kent's] grey beard" (2.2.67), which is a lie. Oswald is pretentious, duplicitous, and cowardly, reinforcing the fact that Kent is modest, plain-dealing, and brave. These qualities earn him a night in the stocks.

There Kent reaches his apotheosis, perfectly exemplifying his constancy, his generosity, his plainness, and his courage. At the end of a long day, having accomplished less than nothing, he philosophizes:

All weary and o'erwatch'd
Take vantage, heavy eyes, not to behold
This shameful lodging.
Fortune, good night; smile once more, turn thy wheel.
(2.2.171-3)

And so ends the scene. It is no accident that the archetypal gentleman should call upon Fortune at this low point, because it is against just such a backdrop of arbitrary and meaningless events that his characteristic constancy stands out. In Stoic language, the word "Fortune," I take it, differed from "chance" in nothing but being chance personified. Actually she is as arbitrary as a set of dice. Her favors are as undeserved as her slings and arrows. There is no way of telling what she will do next. in *King Lear* cites "fortune" almost as often as *The Merchant of Venice*: twenty-five times in *King Lear*, fifteen times in the sense of wealth and status, as in "he made his fortune in hog bellies;" five times in the sense of "luck;" and five times as the name of a goddess. The Stoics and their Renaissance descendants almost always call one's money and position one's "fortune", whether it is inherited or won. The idea of having *earned* one's property or position appears to be a modern one.

Those critics who maintain that *Lear* takes place in a godless, cruel, meaningless, random universe⁴² are probably right. One advantage of Stoicism over Christianity is that it rewards virtue in the real world, whether or not there is a God, whether or not there is a heaven, whether or not the universe is just. Stoicism provides a means of dealing with a godless, random universe, even if, or especially if, it kills you. Facing this fact Seneca advises us to emulate

that perfect man, who has attained virtue, never cursed his luck, and never received the results of chance with dejection; he believed that he was citizen and soldier of the universe, accepting his tasks as if they were his orders. Whatever happened, he did not spurn it, as if it were evil and borne in upon him by hazard; he accepted it as if it were assigned to be his duty. "Whatever this may be," he says, "it is my lot; it is rough and it is hard, but I must work diligently at the task."⁴⁴

These words may serve to describe Kent in the stocks at the end of Act 2, Scene 3, deserted by Fortune, mindful of duty, undismayed, undeluded, and unafraid. And here we will leave him, for he is complete. He has become the pattern of a Stoic hero, a perfect gentleman, "a pair of shoes worn out in the dirt."

* * * * *

The fullest characterization I have seen of the archetypal persona of which Kent is an instance may be found in Bishop Hall's *Characters of the Virtues and Vices*. The following passage is a digest of Hall's the archetype of the Plain Dealer or gentleman, who Kent exemplifies. It consists of excerpts from his characters of the Honest Man, the Humble Man, the Valiant Man, and the Patient Man

Of the honest man: He looks not to what he might do, but what he should. Justice is his first guide: the second law of his actions is expedience [a bow to Cicero; covers cases where justice is not clear; *cf.* the case of the Bassanio's ring in *The Merchant of Venice*]. . . . His

simple uprightness works in him that confidence which oftentimes wrongs him, and gives advantage to the subtle. . . . He hath but one heart, and that lies open to sight. . . . His word is his parchment, and his yea his oath; which he will not violate for fear or for loss. . . . All his dealings are square and above the board: he bewrays the fault of what he sells, and restores the overseen gain of a false reckoning. . . . His fair conditions are without dissembling: and he loves actions+ above words. Finally, he hates falsehood worse than death: . . . And if there were no heaven, yet he would be virtuous.

Of the humble man: He is a friendly enemy to himself: for, though he be not out of his own favour, no man sets so low a value of his worth as himself. . . . He loves rather to give than take honour; not in a fashion of complimentary courtesy, but in simplicity of his judgment. . . . When he hath but his due, he magnifieth courtesy, and disclaims his deserts. . . . There is no better object of beneficence: for what he receives he ascribes merely to the bounty of the giver, nothing to merit. . . . a rich stone, set in lead: and, lastly, a true temple of God, built with a low roof.

Of the valiant man: . . . He is the master of himself, and subdues his passions to reason; and by this inward victory works his own peace. . . . He had rather have his blood seen than his back, and disdains life upon base conditions. No man is more mild to a relenting or vanquished adversary He talks little, and brags+ less; and loves rather the silent language of the hand; to be seen than heard. He holds it the noblest revenge, that he might hurt and doth not. . . . And if ever he be overcome, his heart yields last.

The patient man: . . . He trieth the sea after many shipwrecks, and beats still at that door which he never saw opened. Contrariety of events doth but exercise, not dismay him; and when crosses afflict him, he sees a divine band invisibly striking with these sensible scourges, against which he dares not rebel or murmur. . . . This man only can turn necessity into virtue, and put evil to good use. He is the surest friend, the latest and easiest enemy, the greatest conqueror; and so much more happy than others, by how much he could abide to be more miserable.

Lear is essentially a man of Hall's description, but having been seduced by flatterers, he has lost his way. "They told me I was every thing. 'Tis a lie. I am not ague-proof." (4.6.104-5) Because he is essentially good, he profits from his sufferings as he wanders in the wilderness, and finds his true self. Stoic theory appears to inform both his fall and his rise.

Anger [says Seneca] is temporary madness. For it is equally devoid of self-control, forgetful of decency, unmindful of ties, persistent and diligent in whatever it begins, closed to reason and counsel, excited by trifling causes, unfit to discern the right and true.

If you let it get a grip on you,

Rage will sweep you hither and yon, this way and that, and your madness will be prolonged by new provocations that constantly arise. . . . How much better would it be at this present moment to be gaining friends, reconciling enemies, serving the state, devoting effort to private affairs, than to be casting about to see what evil you can do to some man, what wound you may deal to his position, his estate, or his person.

When his second daughter turned out to be even less accommodating to a king in name only than his first, Lear threatened crazily, "I will do such things--What they are yet I know not, but they shall be The terrors of the earth." Gordon Braden, in his book *Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition: Anger's Privilege*, places *King Lear* firmly in the genre created by Seneca's raging, railing tragedies, the best way to describe which is to liken them to those modern rampages in which a father murders his wife and children, shoots up a MacDonald's for good measure, and isn't contrite, told from the point of view of the father. In his change of heart Lear differs from such Senecan tragic heroes and heroines as Medea, Hercules Furens, and Thyestes, but his "Blow winds, crack your cheeks" speech, in which he calls upon the most awesome powers of nature to become his allies, fits the Senecan paradigm exactly.

On his way back to his senses, he passes through Stoic states. In the hovel during the storm he discovers that he is no more and no less than a man. Recognizing one's common humanity is Stoic's the recommended cure for anger.

No man of sense will hate the erring [says Seneca]; otherwise he will hate himself. Let him reflect how many times he offends against morality, how many of his acts stand in need of pardon; then he will be angry with himself also.

Sir Thomas Elyot declares

Of no better claye (as I mought frankely saye) is a gentelman made than a carter, and of libertie of wille as muche is given of god to the poore herdeman, as to the great and mighty emperour. (gov202)

This hierarchy-collapsing notion pervades the literature of conduct. Seneca is obsessed with it, broadcasting such unpleasant truths as "'Every king springs from a race of slaves, and every slave has had kings among his ancestors.'" (1epis-289) He imagines that a truly wise man like Socrates would counsel himself as follows:

Make me victor over the nations of the world, let the voluptuous car of Bacchus convey me in triumph . . . , let the kings of the nations seek laws from me. When from every side I shall be greeted as a god, I shall then most of all remember that I am a man. (2ess167)

This is precisely the sort of humility that King Lear did not have at the beginning of the play, but he will come down to the point where he can gladly adopt Seneca's motto:

I am a man; and nothing in man's lot
Do I deem foreign to me.

Weathering the storm in the hovel with "poor naked wretches," Mad Tom and the Fool, Lear knew at last that nothing in man's lot was foreign to him indeed. "I have taken too little care of this," he said, plainly and simply.

Having become a taker of whatever justice there is instead of a giver, it is logical that Lear should be obsessed with justice during his mad period. In the hovel scene he subjects his audience of the fool, Kent??, and Mad Tom to a hallucinatory mock trial of Goneril and Regan. "Is there any cause in nature that breeds these hard hearts?" he wants to know. Finally, wandering the heath his madness reaches its nadir in a rant about the problem of justice in a society composed of Yahoos.⁴⁵ Look at that beadle lashing the whore. He "hotly lusts to use her in that kind For which [he] whip[s] her." Or consider the justice sentencing the thief: "Change places and handy-dandy, which is the justice, which the thief?"

With a pessimism as bitter as Swift's, Seneca contemplates mankind's yahooism:

For what difference does it make that [a man's] other qualities are unlike those of dumb animals if he resembles them in the one quality that excuses dumb animals for every misdeed - a mind that is all darkness?

(Essays 1.323)

That "darkness that fills the mind" dismays Seneca, because it seems we are not by necessity the slaves of base instincts but actually enjoy indulging them of our own free will. The terrifying thing isn't "the necessity of going astray, [but] the love of straying." (Essays 1.185)

Despite appearances, Lear has made progress in his quest for justice; for who makes the better judge, the man who thinks the man in the dock is another species, or the one who can say, "There but for the grace of God go I."

A plain dealer deals plainly with himself. In the world according to Kent (and eventually Lear), low self-esteem is *de rigueur*. Thus the Stoic version of our pop psychology platitude is, "You have to hate yourself before you can love another." In his mad ravings on the devastation of lust, Lear's self-examination leads to another discovery, long overdue, that a King is but a man. Early in the play, when his daughters decided to reduce the size of his entourage, arguing that he no longer needed it, cried, almost in tears, "O, reason not the need! our basest beggars Are in the poorest thing superfluous," and went on to argue that extra trappings dignify human life. Indeed the daughters were to blame thus to treat a father who "gave them all." But it is a fatal mistake to reify the extra trappings as signs of extra merit. After learning to "feel what wretches feel" he knows the vanity of outward trappings.

Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar? . . . And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obey'd in office.
(4.6.154-159)

And so is a king, but what about a king _out_ of office? Not much better off than a stray dog.

* * * * *

At this point in his madness Lear fixates on lust, which he contemplates with extreme disgust. Because (he thinks) his legitimate daughters have treated him worse than Gloucester's illegitimate son, what's the point of chastity anymore?

To't, [lechery], pell-mell, for I lack soldiers.
Behold yond simp'ring dame, . . .
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't
With a more riotous appetite. (4.6.117-123)

Along with this meeting of blind Gloucester and mad Lear comes a meeting of the themes of the two plots, anger and lust. For Seneca anger is only one of the most destructive passions that plague mankind. The other is lust. As if to fulfill a Senecan diagram of human self-destruction, Shakespeare provides two plots, the Lear plot and the Gloucester plot, one about the destructive power of anger, and the other about the destructive power of lust. The play opens on the topic of lust and here at the final meeting of Lear and Gloucester, Lear, as if Gloucester's very presence suggests it, dwells on its devastations.

Gloucester

The Gloucester plot parallels the Lear plot in presenting an action in which an undutiful child subverts a dutiful child, casts his father out of the house and usurps his dukedom. At Act 1, scene 1, line 8, the following conversation takes place:

Is not this [Edmund] your son, my lord?
His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge.

I have so often blush'd to acknowledge him, that now
I am braz'd to't.

I cannot conceive you.

Sir, this young fellow's mother could;
whereupon she grew round-womb'd, and had indeed,
sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her
bed. Do you smell a fault?

I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it
being so proper. (1:8-18)

Kent's refusal to play along with Gloucester's "nudge, nudge" approach and the fact that the child of the "nudge, nudge" union has to stand there and take it, probably for the umpteenth time, makes Gloucester's callous insensitivity hard to miss, as well as Kent's true gentility. The play invites us to compare not only Lear and Gloucester as fathers and lords, but Kent and Gloucester as vassals. Gloucester and Lear are pretty much the same in their insensitivity as fathers and lords, but by Stoic measurements, Gloucester is as far from Kent as it is possible to be without being a downright villain like Edmund, who, come to

think of it, may be a better man than his father simply because he is downright. His father, by passively letting evil happen, does almost as much damage as his downright evil son.

In a country in which keeping estates intact from generation to generation is of prime importance, bastards are a real problem. Shakespeare's patron, James I, in his advice to Crown Prince Henry, *Basilikon Doron*, published in 1603, the year in which *King Lear* opened, had this to say about bastards:

I trust I need not . . . dissuade you from the filthy vice of adulterie. . . . Since it is onely by the force of [the marriage] promise that your children succeed to you, equitie and reason [require that] ye should keepe your part thereof Haue the King my grand-fathers example before your eyes, who by his adulterie, bred the wracke of his lawfull daughter and heire [Mary, Queen of Scots], in begetting that bastard [Earl of Murray], who unnaturally rebelled, and procured the ruine of his owne Soverane and sister. And what good her posteritie hath gotten since of some of that vnlawfull generation, [the] treacherous attempts [of] Bothwell can beare witness.

Perhaps it's no coincidence that Edmund and the Earl of Murray have such similar *curricula vitae*. In his paradigm-shattering recent book, *The King's Playwright*, Alvin Kernan has shown how closely Shakespeare's plays cater to the king's special interests.

There can be no doubt that the Gloucester plot is the lust plot. When he goes underground under sentence of banishment upon pain of death, he assumes the disguise of Tom a' Bedlam, whose insanity, he keeps reminding us, was brought on by lechery, on which theme he harps incessantly. He had been "one that slept in the contriving of lust, and wak'd to do it." (3.4.89-90) Just after Lear takes off all his clothes (they *don't* make the man), Shakespeare identifies Gloucester with lust in a sight gag. The fool thinks it would be nice to have "a little fire" on such a "naughty night," commenting that "a little fire in a wild field were like an old lecher's heart." The next line is "GLOUCESTER " Thus Shakespeare himself identifies Gloucester as "an old lecher." (3.4.111-113) In return for sympathizing with the deposed monarch in the ensuing scene, the Duke of Cornwall pulls out his eyes. Blindness, we are told in a learned article, was thought to be an effect of lechery.

Another effect of lechery is "effeminacy," meaning a diminution of manliness, that is virtue, and Gloucester's most ruinous trait is certainly moral weakness. The classics are full of the demoralizing effects of lechery. Dido almost prevented the founding of Rome; Calliope delayed Odysseus's return home for 9 years; Paris languished in Helen's arms while all the other Trojan men fought to keep her from being recaptured by the Greeks; Antony was so besotted with Cleopatra that he fled the battle of Actium with her and gave the world to Octavius. In Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, *Armida* kept *Rinaldo* out of combat, causing as much damage to the crusader cause as a paynim victory. (Tasso was a near contemporary of Shakespeare's; his epic was translated into English by Fairfax in 1600.) It should be pointed out that although classical literature does its share

of harpies, furies, sirens and other witches, in these examples and in Stoic thought the men are blamed for failure to control their passion, rather than the women for entrapment, and this is true also in the case of Gloucester and Edmund's mother. The unstoic Gloucester, with typical self-exoneration, blamed his paramour for Edmund's bastardy in the opening scene just quoted: she had "a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed."

Seneca thought that animals are more fortunate than people because they are not weakened by sexual intercourse. Maecenas had great promise, but the effeminizing effects of his debauchery spoiled him. (epis1.130) Hannibal did well in the mountains but he was defeated by a single winter of vice in the plains of Campania "relaxed his fibre." (Epis 1.339) Montaigne agreed with Socrates that resisting the charms of beauty was not enough, one must run from them as from a violent poison. (Mont. 3.303) Elyot records that Sardanapulus was so preoccupied with his harem that he ultimately dressed in skirts and wielded a distaff.

One form of Gloucester's weakness was his inability to make up his mind whether to collaborate with Goneril and Regan or help Lear, until it was too late. His trimming of sails to the prevailing wind compares dramatically with Kent's instant action. His passive response to every setback labels him effeminate. He consults astrology while Kent consults his conscience: No one knows him better than Edmund, who, judging how well this speech encompasses the major concerns of the whole play must be Shakespeare's own mouthpiece:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune -- often the surfeits of our own behavior -- we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star! (1.2.118-133)

Beside all his other defects, Gloucester is a self-dramatizing victim.

Edmund is the evil consequence of his father's evil lust. He becomes the general of Lear's daughters' army, orders his father's banishment, defeats Cordelia's rescue operation, wrecks Lear's well-earned chances of ultimate happiness by ordering Cordelia's execution. If, as the nihilist critics say, King Lear pictures a world without justice or hope, the reasons for this state of affairs are, despite their objections to his moralizing in the face of suffering, exactly as Edgar says, that our "pleasant vices" can become "instruments to plague us." Actions do have consequences, whether or not there is a God, whether or not moralizing is distasteful, and bad actions generally do have bad consequences. It is not the system that victimizes Lear and Gloucester; it is their own base passions that bring on the dual catastrophes. And, if we take the Stoic position that passions can and ought to be controlled, then this holocaust could have been avoided. After the legitimate Edgar

defeats illegitimate usurping Edmund in trial by combat and Edmund lies dying at his feet, Edgar states the much-disputed moral of the Gloucester plot:

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.

Edmund answers:

Th' hast spoken right, 'tis true.
The wheel [of fortune] is come full circle, I am here.
(5.3.17-175)

Edmund means that his wrongful seizure of the house of Gloucester was ill-fated from the start, that he rose and fell on the turning wheel of fortune; those who live by fortune die by fortune. He is a plain dealing villain who deals plainly with himself. He could have said, it was my father's goading me about my bastardy that brought me here, but unlike his father, he assumes responsibility for his deeds. When he says that the "gods" are just, Edgar did not say "God is just." He means something like what Einstein meant when he said "God does not play dice with nature." Nature's laws are unchanging; whether we know them or not, the laws of physics don't change from day to day. If you jump out a twenty story window, nature guarantees that you will drop twenty stories. If you get an illegitimate child you have jumped out a twenty-story window. I think it is this natural kind of justice that Edgar speaks of. It is a kind of justice that underlies Stoic thought on the nature of things, and also Shakespeare's. Of course, since chance rules all things, Gloucester might have prospered in spite of his potentially disastrous act. That's why Edgar says "the Gods are just." But don't miss the irony: he probably means that this time probability ruled. The wheel did come full circle. We say "I made a mistake; anybody can make a mistake. Nobody's perfect." Shakespeare and the Stoics say, "Yes, you made a mistake and whatever happened as a result is your fault." Responsibility is the key word. Responsibility is the difference between a mistake and an immoral act.

The Ending

Now let us turn back to King Lear. Realizing by means of the soul-searching during his siege of madness what he has been and what he has done, and devastated by the knowledge, he throws himself at the feet of Cordelia, who of course forgives him. Nihilistic critics⁴⁶ think that this great step forward is somehow canceled by Cordelia's subsequent murder, but although the murder cancels a happy father-daughter life ensuing, it does not take away the fact that before she died she knew he asked and he knew she gave forgiveness. The world of Lear, like the real world, is subject to chance, and Cordelia's death, which was almost prevented, is clearly bad luck. Since there is no defense against bad luck, it is only what we can achieve during the time allotted to us that counts in the eternal ledger. After the fat lady sings it's too late. If one imagines the play without the reconciliation one can see immediately that it saves the ending from total negation.

In fact Stoicism, looking at disaster in a way perfectly opposite from ours, discovers a positive element in misfortune. In the first place disaster strengthens the virtuous to meet bigger challenges; and in the second it highlights their virtues, so that they become beacons of virtue to the rest of the world. Therefore the Gods reserve the worst ills for their finest human specimens. This is the burden of Seneca's "Essay on Providence" (_Ess_. 1.). In this light Cordelia becomes a beacon of virtue, and Lear is tempered in a crucible of misery. And since her death is the worst thing that can possibly happen to him ("the oldest has borne most"), it enables us to see his full greatness and majesty: his eagerness to learn the truth, his acceptance of his common humanity, his perception of its baseness and of his participation therein, his capacity to reciprocate love, and his courage against all odds. "He who has struggled constantly with his ills becomes hardened through suffering; and yields to no misfortune; nay, even if he falls, he still fights upon his knees" (_Ess_. 1.11). "He is slaine, but not conquered" (_Mont_. 1.252). Seen Stoically, the universe of *King Lear* is something like Keats's "vale of Soul-making." (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 21, 1819). One is reminded of Arnold's "Dover Beach":

The world . . .
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Facing such a world, the play counsels as Arnold does: "Love, let us be true / To one another!" In the absence of a grand design, our only solace lies in personal relationships.

We have all sorts of explanations, almost as many as there are explainers, of "the ending of *King Lear*." Does he die happy or unhappy? redeemed or unredeemed? Does the play finally express a meaningless and cruel universe or a providential one? Is it about something wrong with the state, or something wrong with its chief executive? Or does it end at all; does it leave all questions open, is it without "closure?" Critics have increasingly, since the sixties, leaned toward the view that Lear dies unhappy, a victim "more sinned against than sinning." (3.2.60)⁴⁷ And anyone who presumes to blame the victim is demonstrably lacking in compassion, in our time the only unforgivable sin. Everyone makes "mistakes."

This is not the picture I see with my Stoic lens. I see a meaningless and cruel universe, sure enough, and I see a Lear who dies unhappy, but I do not see a victimized Lear, or an evil system, or a failure of closure. All the negativism of modern criticism is directed against providential, just-universe interpretations; the Stoic approach rules these out, too.⁴⁸ Now let us go back to the real world of arbitrary cause and effect and take another look at *King Lear*. It was inevitable that by empowering his bad daughters and banishing his good one Lear invited trouble; nobody but Lear committed this error and he therefore should not be considered a victim. This "victim" blames himself.

Despite speculation to the contrary, it seems unlikely, in the light of the accumulated wisdom in 1605, that Lear was wise to divide his kingdom, especially in order to ease the burden of rule. A king does not belong to himself, any more than a president does. In Cicero's opinion, "The citizen who is patriotic, brave, and worthy of a leading place in the state . . . will dedicate himself unreservedly to his country" (*_Off_*. 89). In fact, Seneca says, "ruling [is] a service, not an exercise of royalty" (*_Epis_*. 2.399). Sir Thomas Elyot echoes these sentiments, saying "that auctorite, being well and diligently used, is but a token of superioritie, but in very dede it is a burden and losse of libertie."⁴⁹ King James warned his son that "being borne to be a king, ye are rather borne to onus, than honos."⁵⁰ Lear's first abdication of responsibility was to consider his own comfort.

On the question of dividing a kingdom, the authorities are unanimously opposed. In his final section of the *_Republic_* on the dissolution of the state Plato deplores plural administration. (See also James 37) Thomas Elyot ransacks history for examples divided kingdoms that fail: the successors of Moses, the 2 kingdoms of Israel, the two bishoprics of Judea, the tetrarchs, democracy in Athens, the tribunes in Rome, Florence, Genoa, Ferrara, and England before King Edgar. Such considerations as these also prompted King James's strong desire to unify England, Scotland, and Ireland.⁵¹

The Stoic perspective also illuminates a strand of discourse that appears to lead us directly to closure. It was the great Greek lawgiver Solon who said "No man can truly be counted happy before his death." (*_Mont_*. 1.16). Montaigne devotes a whole essay to this ultimate truth (XVIII), beginning with the story of how Croesus, once the richest man in the world but now on the point of being put to death, cried out "Oh Solon, Solon." This thought may inform Edgar's curious wonderment about whether the most recent disaster is "The worst," (4.1.1-9, 4.1.24-9, 4.6.137), and the play repeatedly dashes any hopes it may temporarily raise.⁵² When Lear comes on the scene bearing the corpse of Cordelia we know the answer to Edgar's question. *_This_* is the worst. Trying to fend it off Lear stubbornly refuses to believe she is dead. He imagines that her lips move as if she is saying something, and his final words are

Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips,
Look there, look there! (5.3.311-12)

As long as he can postpone the certainty that she is dead, he can postpone the recognition that he himself set in motion the chain of events that killed her--on that fateful day when she said "Nothing, My Lord." Now, what does Cordelia's corpse say to him? Does it not say again, "Nothing"? Does he not arrive now, after searching the whole play long for an answer, at the full knowledge of his own complicity in the disaster that constitutes the play? Is it better to die ignorant?

This is the very worst beyond the worst. At the same time, it is borne in upon us that Lear has, through intense suffering, undergone a spectacular improvement in character. The hard heart of the man who sent away the only daughter that loved him is now

so generous as to break over her loss. The worst is the worst because Lear has changed for the better.

* * * * *

At death, says Montaigne, "Whatever the pot containeth must be shown." In a death-oriented Stoical view, what does King Lear's pot contain? More, I think, than we pragmatists are able see in it. To the Stoic it shows Montaigne's "constancie [which] is valour, not of armes and legs but of minde and courage." It shows us a man who is "slain, but not vanquished" (1.71, 252). Lear's "immortal part" stands forth now, because one's virtue is one's only possession that is not subject to fortune. (_Ess_. 1.63, 65) The Stoic has no problem with the much discussed ending of *King Lear*, because death is the end of the story; death itself is closure.

NOTES

11. 94-5; see also Calderwood, p. 10.
12. *Ess.* 3.427-8 [[(my italics).]]
13. Translated by Thomas Hoby 1561, pp. 542, 543.
14. *The Prince*, translated 1602, p. 60.
15. *The Boke Named the Governour*, p. 136, hereafter abbreviated as "*Gov.*" On good counsel see also *Gov.* 292.
16. 1.302-32, 217.
17. 115.
18. 32.
- 19.
20. The story is mentioned in *Ess.* 1.299; *Epis.* 2.271; *Mont.* 2.8; *Gov.* 137).
21. See *Off.* 47, 237, 345; *Ess.* 1.213, 291-3, 433; 2.211, 337; *Ess.* 3.309, 423, 435; *Epis.* 1.417-19; 2.171; 3.337, 429; *Gov.* 20, 55, 104, 109, 132, 185, 190-3, 241; *Mont.* 1.302, 339, 397; 2.66, Hall 98, 114, 122; James 32, 301.
22. Of course if Lear's decision to divide the kingdom was an astute one, then Cordelia is even more to blame. Strier surveys arguments for this view in his footnote 31, pp. 128-9.
23. See the section on marriage in Bella, et. al. John Updike's lovers in his recent novel *Brazil* perfectly demonstrate the sense of "love" as dedication to which I refer, but that is in another country.
24. Alan Bray, in an essay called "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship," comes to the conclusion that no physical

relationship is implied when the word "love" is used to denote male friendship.

25. *_Epis_*. 1.349, 2.137, 3. 253, 279, 359.

26. *_Ess_*. 2.209; 3.477; *_Epis_*. 1.313, 319; *Mont.* 1.175, 196; 2.109.

27. *_Off_*. 133; *_Ess_*. 2. 247; *Mont.* 1.124, 348-9, 402; *James* 45.

28. *Mont.* 1.199; see also *_Ess_*. 1.433 *_Epis_*. 1.265; *_Off_*. 137; *Hall* 99; *James* 3, 28, 39, 46, 47, 48, 51.

29. Or a football field: Responding to the Dallas coach's boast that his team would win the Super Bowl, a San Francisco player told the press, "You don't win a game by talking, you win a game on the field. The only thing that's certain is that someday you're going to die." And a Dallas player said "Now let's just shut up and play." (*_San Francisco Chronicle_*, 22 January 1994)

30. See Schneider, *_Ethos_*, ch. 5.

31. See *Knights*, esp. 123-5.

32. *_Epis_*. 3.91. See also *_Off_*. 55, 223; *_Ess_*. 3.165, 423, 435; *_Epis_*. 3.83, 317; *Mont.* 1.12, 13, 36, 63, 345; *_Gov_*. xxxi, 18, 29, 129, 132, 136, 164, 137, 140, 292, 294.

33. *Barish and Waingrow* 349.

34. *Strier* 107-113; *Graham* 442-5. *Bradley* (255-6), *Brooke* (81-2), *Cavell*, *_Disowning_* (62-68), and *Leggatt* (64, 73) also question *Cordelia's* response.

35. This is the conventional Marxist reading of the play. See for example *Cohen*, especially 114.

36. *Cornford* edn. 76, 119, 122-3; see also *_Epis_*. 2.303; *_Off_*. 61, 83, 89).

37. *_Epis_*. 2.165; see also *_Off_*. 83, 207, 399; *_Ess_*. 1.45, 73; 2.151, 463; 3.173; *_Epis_*. 1.173; 2.41, 69, 165, 185, 251.

38. *Mont.* 1.75, 150. See also 1.140, 306, 323, 2.25, 2. 12; *_Gov_*. 29, 39, 40.

39. *_Epis_*. 1.289. See also 3.91; *_Off_*. 153; *_Ess_*. 1.375, 443; 2.55, 163, 167; *_Epis_*. 1.27, 315; 2.109, 367, 433; 3.91, 227; *Mont.* 1.346; 2.85; *Hall* 98.

40. But whereas we tend to believe that anyone can be as good as the best, the stoics held that anyone can be as bad as the worst. It was correct to have low self-esteem. The stoic version of our pop psychology platitude would be, "You have to hate yourself before you can love another. See *_Ess_*. 2.125, 213; *_Epis_*. 1.203; *_Epis_*. 2.45, 49; *_Epis_*. 3.289; *Hall* 91.

41. *Mont.* 1.252; see also *_Off_*. 51, 55, 101, 115; *_Ess_*. 2.119,

123; 3.405; _Epis_. 1.163, 249; 2.367; 3.389; _Gov_. 229; Mont. 1.138, 352; 2.92, 122-3, 124; James 38.

42. Notably Brooke, Elton, Kott, Calderwood, Matchett.

43. Mont. 1.324; see also _Off_. 69, 83, 93, 123; _Ess_. 1.17, 37, 43, 61-3 63, 73-5 75, 93, 105, 149, 319, 441; 2.21, 27, 31, 35, 47, 69, 83, 111, 169, 245, 251, 267, 309, 313, 317, 343, 343, 363-5, 381, 405, 427, 477-9; 3.457, 491; _Epis_. 1.51, 93, 103, 121, 249, 457; 2.59, 89-91, 117, 127, 159, 167, 191, 199, 215, 243, 301, 433, 441, 447; 3. 107, 119, 123 149, 203, 207, 297, 363; Mont. 1.11, 22, 46, 49, 69, 135, 139, 179, 263, 266, 324, 327, 329, 392, 397, 408, 421; 2.36, 51)

44. _Epis_. 3.387; see also 389.

45. For Stoic discourse on this point, see especially _Ess_. 1.143, 185, 323.

46. Notably Brooke.

47. See also Leggat xxi, 28-9, 31, 66-8.

48. Wherever did the critical establishment get the idea that Christianity is optimistic? See Myrick for a definitive refutation of this error.

49. _Gov_. 140; see also 120, 204; _Ess_. 3.71.

50. James 3; see also James 55, 292; Hall 100.

51. _Gov_. 8-14; James 292; see also _Gov_. 241 and Robertson (140) on early modern warnings against plural rule.

52. See Matchett for the pattern of dashed hopes.

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