

## Article

# King Lear and the Ethics of Brutal, Caring Faith

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**Abstract:** This essay engages with *King Lear* to perform an ethical meditation. The essay finds within the play an ethic resembling the ethics of care: health and flourishing are present not merely in individual human beings but in bonds between human beings. *King Lear* sets this ethic within a context characterized by finality and human finitude and frailty. Human beings must act within a ripe moment, without being able to consider every contingency and possibility; these acts can (and probably do) affect the wellbeing of those around the actor; and once these acts are completed, they are irrevocable. *King Lear* sets this state of affairs against a backdrop of indifferent, intractable realms of nature, the divine, and politics. Nevertheless, the essay finds in *King Lear* the possibility that human beings will grant one another the gift of dignity—even within all that is bleak, contingent, and absurd—a possibility that is ultimately grounded in faith.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare; *King Lear*; ethics of care; post-secularism; mental health

## 1. Introduction

It is not difficult to read *King Lear* as a gloomy play, to choose the most general adjective I can think of. Terms applied to the play include catastrophic, apocalyptic, absurd, grotesque, and (naturally) tragic (Ashby 2021; Poole 2019, pp. 234–51)<sup>1</sup>. I cannot deny that there is overwhelming evidence to justify these characterizations, but the play also contains painfully beautiful humanity, sometimes below the bleak bits, sometimes above them, and sometimes hidden in their midst. I find *King Lear* to be an astonishingly intricate and subtle piece of work, speaking in hints and with lines that are apparently clear until the reader attends to them for a moment and sees that the meanings offered immediately on the surface are withdrawn just as quickly. As a consequence, everything in the play becomes contingent—or nearly everything. What is not contingent is human frailty and finitude, but still there are people who grant one another the gift of dignity, even in contexts that are one way but need not be that way, with pain and hunger lurking in every shadow, among people with the capacity for achieving feats of magnificent cruelty. This is the painfully beautiful—and simply painful—humanity that I see in *King Lear*: human beings can mutually create dignity and caring social states, which are deeply valuable, but human dignity and caring social states do not cure humanity of our frailty and finitude.

This essay project began with a meditation on health (mental health in particular) and care, depending heavily on the ethics of care as presented by Virginia Held (Held 2005). It quickly moved to the relationship between those two terms and performance: performing to ask for care; performing to give and/or receive care; performing to promise or assure; performing to punish; performing to lie; and performing to create, to make real. Each of these terms proved rich and complicated, but “health” was especially layered. The play has significant interest in what kind of a thing a human being is, and so I too was led to consider what kind of a thing a human being is and what it should do, because ultimately a human being’s ability to be what we are and do what we do is the measure of health, or at least one important measure of health. Invariably, I saw religious history and religion generally present in and imbricated with each of these terms, since religion is fundamentally concerned with what kind of a thing a human being is and often with healing as well. The play does not offer answers to questions about what sort of a thing a human being



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is. In fact, it raises questions about the nature of human being and social, interpersonal being by placing characters in situations characterized by tension, conflict, and mutually exclusive duties. Ultimately, the path forward that I see offered in the play is faith in a Kierkegaardian sense, which begins with Abraham in Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac. In *Fear and Trembling*, we learn that for Abraham's actions to be truly grounded in faith, he must simultaneously believe that he will kill and sacrifice Isaac and that through Isaac he will be the father of many nations. Just so, human beings dedicated to the promotion of care and wellbeing must choose a course of action, acknowledging that the effort to exercise virtue requires accepting responsibility for unintended consequences and for imperfections in the attempt (Kierkegaard 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

There are two primary interventions that I am making. First, I approach religion more as a cosmological frame of reference than a phenomenon of belief or a function of theology. The field of literary studies tends to, as Kristin Poole says, “understand Christianity through the lens of pietism”, an assessment Poole makes only of “many readers of Shakespeare’s plays”, but one I feel comfortable applying to the main current of literary studies—and, I should add, an assessment of literary studies that is true of religion generally and not just Christianity (Poole 2019, p. 234; also see Jackson and Marotti 2004). Poole says that early modern religion was not so much the personal, interior belief that is prevalent in our time but rather a way of understanding the order and trajectory of the cosmos and a way of understanding a person’s place in that cosmos and their course of life. Approaching religion through the lens of cosmology does not necessitate moving to theology or other theoretical realms of organized knowledge. I follow Susan M. Felch’s lead and focus “not so much on belief systems or theoretical abstractions as on practices, rituals, sensibilities, liturgies, affects, and other rich, embodied aspects of religious traditions”, because religion is not and never has been only what a person believes about the divine, what people do in places of worship, or what theologians and the clergy write in books or say from pulpits (Felch 2016, p. 15). Second, I choose to pursue ethics over politics. For quite some time, some of the primary concerns of literary studies have been politics, political critique, cultural studies, and historical genealogy, as a consequence of the influence of theorists like Michel Foucault and as part of the admirable project of promoting justice. I do not intend to diminish the virtue of these projects or their accomplishments. After 2016, however, they are projects with which I personally have become disillusioned. I find myself drawn to Jan Kott’s account of politics and political history as the Grand Mechanism: although human beings may believe that they are themselves making political history, in fact history makes itself using human beings as its raw material<sup>3</sup>. With this sense of political powerlessness has come a shift in my thinking. Instead of aiming for justice on a political scale (which, it is not controversial to say, lies beyond my particular powers and influence), I have turned my attention to my own character, my own actions, my own attitudes, and my own development as a person aspiring to live a human life with skill—that is, my focus has shifted from politics to ethics. My *scopus*, both personally and in this essay, is individual human being, but that is not to say that I will disregard the influence of community and politics on individual human being. Human being can never be fully separated from the political or the social, but my *scopus* is individual human being and not the political or social context of human being. It is my impression (which may be wrong) that the field of literary studies tends to conflate or combine the distinct philosophical disciplines of ethics and politics—to the detriment of the field, since the most basic site of literature in our time is, more often than not, one lone person reading silently or listening. (See Appendix A. An Apology for Methods Ethical and Subjective).

I give this overview of the constellation of concepts in this essay because, considering the subtlety and intricacy of my primary text, I was unable to herd it into the conventional, predictable essay form; I found the result satisfying stylistically, but I recognize it may be inconvenient for the busy academic reader. I am happy to take some responsibility for the meandering course this essay takes, but I am firm in my conviction that Will shares some

of the blame. If any of the essay is over-earnest and takes itself too seriously, on the other hand, that is entirely my fault.

## 2. An Ethical Meditation on *King Lear*

A fundamental conflict of the Protestant Reformation was about spiritual merit: would God honor works and rituals performed by human beings by bestowing spiritual merit upon the human actors? The Church of Rome held that the merit of Christ's sacrifice was mediated by the church. God, through his church, instituted certain practices within the realm of human achievement that he accepted as if they were meritorious, and, additionally, the practices were supposed to cultivate in human beings the virtues required of Christians. These practices include things like Communion, Confession, and works of charity. The reformists, however, claimed that the Roman Catholics had simply invented a system of spiritual merit, one that they used to turn sin and redemption into worldly power and profit, with indulgences serving as a prime example. In response, the reformists claimed that Christ was all of the spiritual merit a person needed, and therefore works and rituals performed by human actors could have practical and ethical merit but not spiritual merit. It bears saying that this reframing of the value of actions is sometimes presented in the critical literature as diminishing the value of human life, but the reformists understood themselves to be making human life legitimately valuable by locating its value in human life itself, not in an artificial system of spiritual value. Grades serve as a useful (if flattering) analogy for this reformist perspective—which is more valuable, learning or the grade?

In England, questions regarding liturgy generated a considerable amount of anxiety related to this debate<sup>4</sup>. Near the beginning of the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, there is a prefatory essay called “Of Ceremonies, Why Some Be Abolished and Some Retained” (Booty 1976, see pp. 18–21). The essay explains that some ceremonies were instituted by God and some ceremonies were instituted by human beings. The ceremonies that the *Book of Common Prayer* abolishes are not, surprisingly, those that were instituted by human beings but rather the ceremonies that have become superstitious, regardless of their origins. The ceremonies that are retained are those that edify and those that are practically useful for maintaining a common order, again, regardless of their origins. (Incidentally, the essay never explicitly undertakes the task of classifying which ceremonies were instituted by God and which were instituted by human beings). This essay is a politic expression of a reformist charge against Roman Catholic rituals: that they have distorted legitimate Christian practices, rendering those practices absurd, pointless, and, as Daniel Swift shows, theatrical (Swift 2019, pp. 52–66). In his commentary on 1 John, William Tyndale writes in a much more confrontational register when he contrasts the value of service done to images of saints to the value of service done to actual people. He says, “But if thou haue deuotion to helpe thy brother in al his misfortunes/because he is thimage of God and price of Christes bloude/then thy deuotion certifieth that thou arte in the favoure of God or state of grace” (Tyndale 1531, Dv). The reformist characterization of the difference between reformism and Roman Catholicism (partisan and polemical, of course) is that Roman Catholics participate in absurd, superstitious rituals and ceremonies that don't do anyone any good (except for the Roman Catholic religious elites), and that Protestants are invested in actually caring for real people.

Act 1, scene 1 of *King Lear* makes use of this reformist anxiety around ceremonies<sup>5</sup>. The text indicates that the dividing and distributing of the kingdom has already happened. Lear says, “Know that we *have divided* / In three our kingdom” (1.1.35–36), and Burgundy, deciding whether to continue pursuing Cordelia in light of the fact that she has apparently been disowned, says, “Royal King, / Give but the portion *which yourself proposed*, / And here I take Cordelia by the hand, / Duchess of Burgundy” (1.1.240–43) (Shakespeare 2008)<sup>6</sup>. Clearly, everyone already knows who is going to get which portion of the kingdom, so what is the point of the daughters' speeches? The whole occasion is, in truth, an empty ceremony without any practical value, only questionable symbolic value.

During the ceremony, Cordelia's poor performance (or refusal to participate) is the main problem, but Lear's mental wellbeing also comes up during the ceremony and continues to be a concern after. When Kent stands up for Cordelia and Lear tries to silence him, Kent says, "Be Kent unmannerly/When Lear is mad!" (1.1.143–44). After everyone else has left, Regan and Goneril talk about Lear's mental wellbeing:

**GONERIL:** You see how full of changes his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little. He always loved our sister most, and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.

**REGAN:** 'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.

**GONERIL:** The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash. Then must we look from his age to receive not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

**REGAN:** Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment.

**GONERIL:** There is further compliment of leave-taking between France and him. Pray you, let's hit together. If our father carry authority with such disposition as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.

**REGAN:** We shall further think of it.

**GONERIL:** We must do something, and i'th'heat. (1.1.288–306)

In other words: Dad seems dangerously erratic; did you see what he did to Cordelia and Kent? We had better be ready to do something about this. Essentially, they plan a preemptive strike to protect their interests because they perceive, not without cause, that their father's infirmity poses some danger to them.

It is not entirely clear, however, what standards are being used to attribute "madness" to Lear. Banishing Kent and disowning Cordelia are erratic, rash, and, to use an adjective the play offers us, foolish, but do they rise to the level of madness?

Helpfully, the play puts on stage Poor Tom, a persona adopted by Edgar that is supposed to be legible as "mad". Edgar is being pursued because his bastard brother Edmund has orchestrated a plot to make it appear as though Edgar is a threat to Gloucester, their father. Edgar says that he will attempt to elude capture by disguising himself:

... Whiles I may 'scape  
I will preserve myself, and am bethought  
To take the basest and most poorest shape  
That ever penury in contempt of man  
Brought near to beast. My face I'll grime with filth,  
Blanket my loins, elf all my hair in knots,  
And with presented nakedness outface  
The winds and persecutions of the sky.  
The country gives me proof and precedent  
Of Bedlam beggars, who with roaring voices  
Strike in their numbed and mortified arms,  
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;  
And with this horrible object, from low farms,  
Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,  
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,  
Enforce their charity. "Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom!"  
That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am. (2.3.1–21)

In a play obsessed with “nothing” (the word and concept), it’s significant that Edgar calls this character of the Bedlam beggar “something”, and immediately follows that assessment with “Edgar I nothing am”. Perhaps we could think about the difference between Edgar and the Bedlam beggar using the terms “essence” and “existence”. Imagine for a moment my pet rabbit. He is white; his name is Bugs; his favorite food is cabbage; he sleeps in a magician’s top hat. Can you picture this rabbit? He doesn’t exist. I just made an essence for you, but it has no existence. (Or no existence outside of our minds, at any rate.)<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps “Edgar” is similarly an essence without existence (not to mention Poor Tom), but the Bedlam beggar does have existence. If that’s the case, then this speech is metatheatrical in at least two ways: first, we have a character telling us that he is going to play a different role; second, the role that he is going to play gestures towards the real world outside of the play<sup>8</sup>. And what properties do Bedlam beggars have, according to this speech? They are poor and brought near to being a beast by their poverty. They are dirty, unkempt, poorly clothed, and exposed to the elements. They are loud. They harm themselves. Onlookers are forced to help them because of their performance of self-harm and their prayers or “lunatic bans”, which the Norton critical edition glosses as “angry curses”. The people from whom they seek charity are presumably working folks: shepherds, millers—those who live in “low farms” and “Poor pelting villages”. Notably, not much in this description really describes a human being’s mental functioning, precisely; rather, most of the description describes *poverty* and what poverty drives a person to do.

Does Edgar’s performance as Poor Tom match this description? (I pause to note that we never see a character that the play presents as an *actual* Bedlam beggar, and so we should not assume that verisimilitude is a goal in the writing and playing of Poor Tom, either by Edgar or the actor playing Edgar and Poor Tom. It therefore bears repeating at this moment that I am undertaking an ethical, philosophical, and religious discourse, not a work of historicism or of conventional literary or theatrical reading.). Poor Tom certainly presents as being brought near to a beast by poverty. He is certainly dirty and exposed to the elements. He’s certainly loud and shouts oaths and prayers. And the company he keeps is certainly not wealthy, at least for the time being—down on their luck, we might say. But significantly, we don’t have any explicit references to Poor Tom harming himself. That is an important part of the “object” that Bedlam beggars use to “enforce their charity”. And there are explicit stagings of other characters harming themselves: Edmund wounds himself as he’s framing Edgar, and Lear pokes himself with a pin after he wakes up to find Cordelia caring for him. (We might wonder, therefore, about the sanity not only of Lear but of Edmund.). There are other behaviors that Edgar exhibits in his madness: he sings, speaks in non sequiturs, and refers to “the foul fiend” as if everyone else should know who that is—but “lunatic bans” and “prayers” don’t correspond precisely with this verbal performance. Prayers would make most sense as requests for mercy and aid, and lunatic bans (if we are to understand them to be angry curses) would make most sense as accusations in the face of onlookers’ indifference and neglect. It seems, then, that Edgar’s description of a Bedlam beggar has a prominent bodily, physical quality, but Edgar’s performance as a Bedlam beggar omits part of this bodily, physical quality, and instead emphasizes verbal performance. In other words, Edgar’s account of madness prioritizes action and social position, but his portrayal of Poor Tom tends to prioritize speech and therefore reason, thinking, and communication. Gloucester also suggests that Poor Tom’s madness is legible in his speech. In act 4, scene 6, when Poor Tom is wearing a peasant’s clothes and is leading Gloucester to believe that they are ascending the cliffs of Dover, Gloucester says, “Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speakest/In better phrase and matter than thou didst”; Edgar contradicts him, saying, “Y’are much deceived. In nothing am I changed/But in my garments”; Gloucester is unconvinced: “Methinks y’are better spoken”, he says (4.6.6–11). This emphasis on speech has resonance with the interpretation of Lear’s madness. Later in act 4, scene 6, Lear is acting mad, and he delivers a speech the general meaning of which is “Plate sin with gold, / And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks; / Arm it in rags, a pygmy’s straw does pierce it” (4.6.160–62). (I note



that once again, what is being described here is material conditions, class, and so forth). Edgar responds to Lear's speech by saying, "O matter and impertinency mixed, / Reason in madness" (4.6.168–69). At first glance, we might read Edgar's statement "Reason in madness" as saying only that Lear's speech is partly rational and partly mad. But if we consider "madness" to be about poverty and vulnerability, then perhaps we might also understand this line to mean that rational speech is emerging from Lear in his "mad" condition and material circumstances.

Although Poor Tom's behavior emphasizes verbal performance over bodily performance, Edgar's description of the Bedlam beggar, Poor Tom's performance, and Lear's condition share an important implied quality: they enforce charity from onlookers, meaning that their social position is a source of tension and conflict, not the nurturing bonds of human community, care, and reciprocity—granting, of course, that Kent, the Fool, Gloucester, and eventually Cordelia do their best to look out for Lear. Nonetheless, I would suggest that a significant threshold between health and madness that we might draw from the play is the point at which charity becomes enforced<sup>9</sup>. In other words, "madness" is located in those around the sufferer in addition to, and perhaps as much as, it is located within the sufferer. This latent theme is something like the social model of disability ([Hobgood and Wood 2013](#))<sup>10</sup>. Consider a person who has a hard time getting around on their feet. The medical model of disability would seek to find medical interventions to increase the person's mobility. The social model, on the other hand, would ask why the physical spaces where this person lives are designed in such a way that only people who get around easily on their feet can navigate them comfortably, instead of being designed in such a way that people who use various means of getting around can also navigate them comfortably. Similarly, rather than leading us to attend primarily to symptoms, the play might lead us to ask why these Bedlam beggars are reduced to enforcing charity from shepherds and millers—and, as the case may be, why Lear is on this heath in this storm.

On this reading, the play obviously suggests that the conditions and wellbeing of Bedlam beggars and Lear are in part the result of a lack of care. The play, through Cordelia, expresses outrage at the neglect Lear suffers. Speaking in shock that her sisters left Lear out on the heath in a storm, Cordelia says, "Mine enemy's dog, / though he had bit me, should have stood that night/ Against my fire" (4.7.36–38). Cordelia wouldn't have even left a dog outside in that storm, and not just any dog, but her enemy's dog, and not just her enemy's dog, but her enemy's dog who had so thoroughly taken her enemy's side that it had bitten her. No creature deserves to be locked out in a storm to fend for themselves, all on their own.

And yet, the play gives voice to precisely the opposite expectation as well. Recall that Edgar disguises himself as a Bedlam beggar precisely *because* he believes that people will ignore him or neglect him or not notice him. The play therefore acknowledges that people who are vulnerable, alone, and in need may be treated like an inconvenience and left to enforce charity through display and performance.

This social position, as Edgar tells us, brings a human being near to a beast, or below mine enemy's dog, as Cordelia says. These statements presuppose that there is some kind of distinction between human beings and beasts, but the play is, I think, rather curious about what that distinction might be. When Regan and Goneril are taking away Lear's knights, saying he doesn't need them, Lear responds, "Oh, reason not the need! Our basest beggars/ Are in the poorest thing superfluous. / Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is cheap as beast's" (2.4.260–63). When Lear meets Edgar as Poor Tom, he says, "Is man no more/ than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, / the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. / Ha? Here's three on's are sophisticated, thou art the thing/ itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, / bare, forked animal as thou art" (3.4.96–101). These lines suggest that Lear sees accommodation as what separates human beings from beasts: having more than nature needs—clothes, perfume, and so on. It seems to me, however, that it is not necessarily the things themselves that Lear is suggesting separate a human being from a beast, but rather the symbolic value of the things. And from one point of view, I agree with Lear: human beings should take joy in our

clothes, our living spaces, and our meals. What I think Lear doesn't appreciate (and then appreciates too much) is that these accommodations are contingent and temporary—human life can and does exist without them. We can see Lear's overinvestment in the symbolic elements of human life in act 1, scene 1, when he hopes that a ceremony will ensure his authority, despite his abdication. We can also see this overinvestment in the mock trial of Regan and Goneril: Lear wants to hold his daughters accountable to a social order that they have renounced. What Lear fails to see in these moments is that social order and human symbols only have power if people give them power. He can make his daughters give speeches about how much they love him, but if they don't love him, then the whole ceremony is purely an empty symbol. He can put Regan and Goneril on trial, but if no one else grants that trial any power, then it is, again, purely an empty symbol.

The same is true of the play's presentation of human dignity. (I use the term dignity in its modern ethical sense, not in an early modern sense.). In my reading, the play suggests that human dignity does not exist necessarily and inherently in a person; it only exists when one person confers it upon another person. When someone does confer it upon someone else, the receiver genuinely possesses human dignity, and the giver also receives human dignity. Cordelia and Lear are both dignified by the former's care for the latter; Edgar and Gloucester are dignified in the same way (sort of, anyway—acknowledging that what Edgar does to Gloucester is bizarre and cruel from a point of view different from Edgar's). The play also suggests that when human dignity is withheld from a human being, it is genuinely withheld from that person, but it is also withheld from those who withhold it. Regan, Goneril, and Lear are all debased as the daughters neglect, bully, and abuse their father; Cornwall, Regan, and Gloucester are all debased when Cornwall and Regan pluck out Gloucester's eyes—which, remarkably, is set in immediate contrast in the Quarto text by the servants who treat Gloucester's wounds<sup>11</sup>. When one human being treats another human being with dignity, both are dignified; when one human being debases another human being, they are both debased. The existence of dignity is therefore grounded in faith—faith in the existence of a referent for the modern term “dignity”, faith in the idea that we can genuinely possess dignity if we give it and receive it, and faith in others that they will give and receive it.

This is a decidedly intersubjective ethics, like the one we find in the ethics of care, as presented by Virginia Held. The ethics of care emerges from feminist discourse and departs from Aristotelian ethics, Kantian ethics, and Utilitarianism (the primary foundational ethical theories) in a couple of noteworthy ways. Aristotelian ethics is a form of virtue ethics, an agent-centered ethical theory. One of my favorite summaries of Aristotelian ethics is that it doesn't help you to be a good person so much as it helps you to be good *at* being a person. It asks, “What sort of a thing is a human being? What is a human being supposed to do? How can you be good at doing those things?” Held notes that the ethics of care is sometimes understood to be a form of virtue ethics, and although she grants that there are similarities, she argues that the ethics of care is distinct from virtue ethics: the former is a feminist ethic and the latter is patriarchal, and the former is rooted in relations whereas the latter is agent-centered (Held 2005, pp. 19–20)<sup>12</sup>. For my purposes, the parallels between the ethics of care and virtue ethics are convenient. *King Lear* allows for an ethical meditation in the mold of the ethics of care, and Aristotelian ethics is an exceptionally productive framework for understanding ethical situations that arise in early modern texts, a framework I will return to in this essay. Kantian ethics is grounded in the universal principles of reason: how can you act in such a way that everyone ever should also act in that way, without creating any contradictions? Utilitarian ethics has a similarly universal scope, but its goal is to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. The ethics of care is much more local. It holds that you should take care of *your* child (or elderly father); you don't have to think about children in the universal rational sense, and you don't have to think about the happiness and suffering of the totality of human children; you take care of *your* child, and that is good and right<sup>13</sup>. The ethics of care is also located in bonds between human beings. Instead of focusing primarily on the agent or on the universal scale of

reason or on the happiness of the totality of humanity, it is occupied with the ways in which specific human beings are invested in the flourishing of other specific human beings. In exploring this connection, the ethics of care rejects distinctions (either facile or tortured) between altruism and selfishness: I can be invested in the flourishing of my partner and take great personal satisfaction in her success, but I don't have to figure out which part of this experience is selfish and which part is altruistic. We flourish together, and that's not contradictory.

I think *King Lear* makes a similar argument. When one person treats another person with dignity and strives to promote the other's flourishing, they both flourish; when one person withholds dignity from another, they are both impoverished. This intersubjective flourishing is not without risks. Edmund reminds us of the risks as he takes advantage of his good-natured, unsuspecting father and half-brother.

But Edmund's arc contains something even more extraordinary. In act 5, when Edgar fatally wounds Edmund, Edmund says to Edgar (still in disguise), "But what art thou/That hast this fortune on me? If thou'rt noble, I do forgive thee" (5.3.165–167)—truly a fascinating line. Edgar's reply begins, "Let's exchange charity" (5.3.167). Is this forgiving, charitable violence and revenge? Is the play suggesting that it's possible for people to treat one another with dignity *even as* they punish one another and use violence against one another? If so, then violence and revenge are not mutually exclusive with forgiveness, care, and flourishing—at least in the play.

A way into this apparent contradiction is offered by "ethics" in its Aristotelian sense: rather than focusing on right and wrong or good and evil, we might explore what kind of a thing a human being is, what is good for a human being, and how human beings go about pursuing that good. How can we be good *at* being a human being? Naturally, the answers to these questions vary across time and place, with religion playing no small part in producing these answers. In our own time, we might be inclined to distinguish secular goods from spiritual or religious goods, perhaps by defining the former as natural, bodily, or rational and the latter as supernatural or matters of faith. Post-secular scholars have convincingly challenged this distinction, however. A great many values and assumptions that we still have either originate with a specific religious tradition or are accepted in the same way as religious values and assumptions. For instance, the legal definition of religion can closely reflect a dominant religion, meaning that the legal tradition does not accommodate other religions well. Similarly, there are often religious aspects or undertones to the contemporary faith in the ability of science to solve human problems and promote human flourishing. Talal Asad has discussed the things that contemporary western secularism assumes are good for human beings (Asad 2003, see especially pp. 21–124). I will draw on his discussion and offer some contributions of my own. We assume that a long life is good. We assume that "happiness" is good. The ultimate end of our idea of happiness is sentimentalist: we assume that contentment, the absence or near-absence of pain, and the experience of appropriate pleasures are the ends dictated by "happiness".<sup>14</sup> There are other ends that we assume serve this kind of happiness: wealth, prosperity, and comfort; success in business, whether as a laborer or an owner; social standing and influence—and fame, for the most part, but probably not unconditionally. These ends tend to be lesser or secondary ends. We treat them as good so long as they culminate with sentimentalist happiness, but we acknowledge that sometimes they can get in the way of sentimentalist happiness. These properties of happiness are plainly liberal or neoliberal, since they are rooted in economics, property, and status (class, for example). As (neo)liberal, this idea of happiness emerges from capitalism, and as liberal capitalism was only beginning to take shape in the early 17th century, we should not assume that *King Lear* shares this idea of happiness. Furthermore, the distinction between the secular and the religious is one that also would have been foreign to the early modern period, and so things that appear entirely unrelated to religion from a modern perspective often have prominent religious properties and associations.

So if we were to turn to *Lear* to find what it positions as the good for human beings—keeping in mind that this good may not be mutually exclusive with violence and revenge—what



would we find? Even in act 1, scene 1, a number of goods emerge, but perhaps the most salient is duty. When Lear encourages Cordelia to acquiesce and give a speech claiming her love for him, she says:

Good my lord,  
 You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I  
 Return those duties back as are right fit,  
 Obey you, love you, and most honor you.  
 Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
 They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,  
 That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
 Half my love with him, half my care and duty.  
 Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
 To love my father all. (1.1.93–102)

In the case of Cordelia and Lear, duty is clearly familial, but Kent shows that duty can also be political and take the form of a bond from a subordinate to a superior. Kent and Lear share this exchange as Kent tries to defend Cordelia:

**KENT:** Royal Lear,  
 Whom I have ever honored as my king,  
 Loved as my father, as my master followed,  
 As my great patron thought on in my prayers—  
**LEAR:** The bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft.  
**KENT:** Let it fall rather, though the fork invade  
 The region of my heart. Be Kent unmannerly  
 When Lear is mad! What wouldst thou do, old man?  
 Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak  
 When power to flattery bows? To plainness honor's bound  
 When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state,  
 And in thy best consideration check  
 This hideous rashness. Answer my life, my judgment:  
 Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,  
 Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds  
 Reverb no hollowness. (1.1.137–52)

In these cases, duty appears to be a recognition of a connection between two people and the responsibilities that come with that connection: caring, loving, serving, or honoring. This duty is plainly not without limits, as Cordelia argues; it plainly does not require absolute deference, as both Cordelia and Kent suggest; and it plainly entails assuming risk on occasion. This duty has something to do with familial heritage and with procreation, and it has something to do with the state and the sovereign<sup>15</sup>. The justification for the existence of this duty appears to be something like reciprocity.

Naturally, act 1, scene 1 also assumes other goods, such as land ownership, having a share of an estate, and political authority. However, in the play, each of these goods comes with the risk of loss or conflict, and they also come with the responsibility to use the goods appropriately and justly. (How does Lear manage his political authority? How do Regan, Cornwall, Goneril, and Albany manage their political authority and territory, once they have control over them, and how do they manage their estates with respect to Lear? How does Gloucester manage his estate, with respect to his sons and with respect to Lear?) These good ends, then, turn out to have the same structure as duty: they are good when they are used actively and appropriately and when the corresponding burdens are accepted. A

person can fail by not actively using a good, by using it inappropriately, or by shirking the burden that comes with a good. Following my reading, *Lear's* staging of goods or ends is a more-or-less direct reproduction of justice as found in Book V of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which strives to give each their due, both in terms of benefits and duties (Aristotle 1995, 1129<sup>a</sup>1–1138<sup>b</sup>14).

Following Asad's lead in his critique of secularism, let's compare the (neo)liberal, sentimentalist good life with the one offered by *Lear*, in the (perhaps polemical) attempt to make the familiar seem precarious, unsteady. The former is concerned with feeling, experiencing, having, and having done. The latter is similarly concerned with having but also with using; it is concerned with having done but also with doing. It is concerned with giving and receiving. In short, the good life assumed by *Lear* is contextualized within a network of social and political relations and a material context with resources and responsibilities. It allocates to each person a place, a position, a station—and the good life emerges from their virtuous inhabitation of that station. Naturally, one of the liberal critiques of this version of the good life is its dependence on hierarchy, at least, if not subordination, subjugation, and slavery. Viewed sympathetically, the (neo)liberal order allows for social mobility. Viewed critically, the (neo)liberal order claims to allow for social mobility, but in fact allocates to each a position, a place, and a station. Another liberal critique of the kind of good life assumed in *Lear* is the dependence on the use of force<sup>16</sup>. From a sentimentalist point of view, violence and pain generally seem at odds with the good. But if we assume the other version of the good life, in which each person's good emerges from their virtuous inhabitation of their station, then we could see how it could follow that one is able to violently put someone in their place benevolently, charitably. If a person's station is the source of their good, and they leave their station, then they should be returned to that station for their own benefit.

This is the frame of reference through which I read the forgiving exchange between Edmund and Edgar in act 5, scene 3—and also France's invasion of England<sup>17</sup>. But the play does not endorse violence of this kind with a broad brush. There is *Lear's* choice to disown Cordelia and banish Kent, Gloucester's treatment of Edgar, and the brutality of Regan and Cornwall against Gloucester. In other words, the play does not condone the use of violence by any authority figure for any reason. To paraphrase Aristotle, an action must be done by the right person, to the right person, at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reason. The use of violence is not good or bad in itself; the action is virtuous or vicious only with relation to justice. The play suggests that Regan and Goneril have not punished their father at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reason, but (through the Fool) the play gives reason to believe that the action might not be entirely wrong, given that *Lear* has given up the responsibilities of a sovereign but wishes to maintain the trappings of a sovereign, with his entourage of knights, for example.

While Regan and Goneril's treatment of *Lear* is unnecessarily cruel, the play does have an example of a child (apparently, but certainly not unproblematically) correcting a parent with care: Edgar and Gloucester. Moreover, this interaction between Edgar and Gloucester turns out to have the quality of an ad hoc religious ceremony, since it is a staged miracle used by Edgar for the purpose of curing Gloucester of his despair and his suicidal intentions. This interaction is precisely the kind of elaborate ceremony of reformist nightmare, and it also satisfies the reformist standard that religious ceremonies edify.

Cornwall and Regan have gouged out Gloucester's eyes and thrown him out on his own to "smell/His way to Dover" (3.7.92–93). Gloucester now knows that Edgar was framed and, suffering from despair, intends to throw himself off the cliffs of Dover. Initially led by an old man, Gloucester encounters Poor Tom, who agrees to lead him the rest of the way to Dover. Edgar then convinces Gloucester that they are walking up a steep hill (even though they aren't) and that they can hear the sounds of the ocean (even though they can't). To explain why Gloucester doesn't feel the incline or hear the ocean, Edgar says, "Why, then your other senses grow imperfect/By your eyes' anguish" (4.6.5–6). Edgar then tells

Gloucester that he stands on the very edge of the cliffs, and Gloucester gives Edgar a jewel and, kneeling, delivers this speech before falling:

O you mighty gods!  
 This world I do renounce, and in your sights  
 Shake patiently my great affliction off.  
 If I could bear it longer and not fall  
 To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,  
 My snuff and loathed part of nature should  
 Burn itself out. If Edgar live, O bless him—  
 Now, fellow, fare thee well. (4.6.35–42)

Gloucester opens by addressing the divine, meaning he frames his choice to end his life as a statement or response to the “mighty gods”. Gloucester’s speech does not suggest that he anticipates an afterlife. He does not ask for mercy in the hereafter, for example. Rather, Gloucester attends to his unbearable affliction in this world. He implies that the divine is responsible for this affliction. The second sentence does not make all that much sense as written. The subjunctive “If I could bear it and not fall/To quarrel with your great opposeless wills” might be glossed as “If I had the capacity to bear it without quarreling with your great opposeless wills”. He therefore acknowledges that this impulse to quarrel with the divine is absurd. (Why oppose an opposeless will?) He says that if he were to undertake this argument, his “snuff and loathed part of nature should/Burn itself out”, a curious line. “Snuff” here refers literally to the portion of a candle’s wick that burns, and in this context I read it as a metaphor for the animating force of a human being, something like “life-force” or “soul”, suggesting that the animating force is fleeting or precarious (OED 2023, see I.1.a–c). The ability or capacity implied by “could” in the hypothetical is followed, then, by death—which sounds more like succumbing to the affliction or, to put it more directly, the *inability* to bear the affliction. In what sense could we understand a person to bear an affliction that is not mutually exclusive with being killed by the affliction? To complicate matters further, Gloucester chooses to “Shake patiently [his] great affliction off”, meaning he chooses to die by suicide. This statement also apparently undermines itself, since, as Hannibal Hamlin notes, “to commit suicide might well be considered an impatient act, as Edgar (disguised) reminds him, redefining the crucial term: ‘Bear free and patient thoughts’ (4.6.80)” (Hamlin 2011, p. 142). Both bearing the affliction and not bearing the affliction therefore have the same outcome: death. Death, it seems, is accidental to the bearing of or not bearing of affliction, and as a result, what it means to bear or not bear an affliction is hidden behind death as a smokescreen.

Importantly, the act of bearing the affliction would appear to be an option that contrasts with quarreling with the gods. Defining negatively the act of bearing the affliction, we might say that bearing the affliction is *not* opposing the opposeless will and *not* objecting to loathing. I conclude, then, that the bearing of affliction is simply accepting it. What Gloucester’s speech, both what it says and the dead ends it offers, serves to do is draw our attention to the profound difficulty of accepting affliction. An afflicted person might be inclined to argue with themselves, with others, or with the divine. An afflicted person might feel loathed, and they might be inclined to object to that loathing or correct it. I do not mean to suggest that any of these courses of action are necessarily bad or wrong—certainly, there are circumstances where any of these courses of action are appropriate. What I think Gloucester’s speech illustrates, using a negative definition, is the difficulty and serenity of accepting what is.

After Gloucester falls and Edgar convinces him that he landed at the bottom of the Cliffs of Dover without injury, Edgar asks who was accompanying Gloucester at the top of the cliffs. Gloucester’s reply “A poor unfortunate beggar” is immediately contradicted by Edgar:

As I stood here below, methought his eyes

Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,  
 Horns whelked and waved like the enrag'd sea.  
 It was some fiend. Therefore, thou happy father,  
 Think that the clearest gods, who make their honors  
 Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee. (4.6.70–76)

A strange feature of these lines is Edgar's initial assessment that Gloucester's companion was a fiend—followed by the conclusion that Gloucester has been preserved by the "clearest gods". If it were a fiend accompanying Gloucester, it might seem as though Gloucester's preservation is an act of torture, forcing him to continue to endure his affliction. To conclude that the gods have acted by way of a fiend is to trouble or obliterate the distinction between good and evil spirits/divinity or benevolent and malevolent spirits/divinity, assuming the term "god" implies some degree of actual or potential benevolence and "fiend" malevolence. Call this series of events what you will, but no part of it and no agent involved can be justifiably characterized as "clear".

It is precisely this lack of clarity, however, that offers a way in to understanding a possible distinction between the human world and the world outside of this human world, a distinction that I suggest is sustained by the rest of the play<sup>18</sup>. Essentially, what this explanation by Edgar does is it undermines notions that the divine is inherently invested in the wellbeing of humans. In fact, the explanation may even suggest that it is likelier that the divine is indifferent, or even antagonistic, to human beings. What the gods are unequivocally invested in is their honor, and this may come at the expense of human wellbeing. Nevertheless, Edgar's explanation does attribute some spiritual or divine significance to Gloucester, even if his significance is purely based on the fact that the gods can use him to promote their own honor. The gods acknowledge Gloucester enough that it is somehow worth their while to do something to him, whether that is benevolently preserving him or cruelly preserving him. The nature of the divine is unclear and uncertain—but Gloucester's nature as a being with worth and significance (at least to a degree) is affirmed.

It is true, however, that Edgar's actions make very little sense from within the world of the play. His justification that he is attempting to cure his father of despair is weak. Surely, the easier, more generous course of action for relieving Gloucester's despair is for Edgar simply to reveal himself to his father. I find Stanley Cavell's reading, that Edgar is avoiding recognition, a convincing approach to understanding this interaction. For Cavell, "recognition" requires knowing oneself and presenting oneself to the other, opening the possibility of encountering the other and knowing oneself through the other. Cavell concludes that Edgar's cruelty in denying Gloucester this recognition "shows how radically implicated good is in evil" (Cavell 2003, p. 55). This reading begins from within the story world: it makes sense (and good sense) of Edgar's actions psychologically and intersubjectively.

But the scene also invites a metatheatrical interpretation. The scene is, after all, the staging of a scene within a scene in a play, and the scene also has the features of a morality play. What the scene does is deny the audience the climactic encounter between suffering father and disenfranchised son, whether that encounter would be affectionate, tense, or openly cruel. There is no dramatic revelation of Edgar's identity in this scene, and when Edgar reveals himself, it takes place off stage. The only dramatic closure granted to the audience is Edgar's account of his interaction with his father, and the audience is therefore denied firsthand closure of the kind involving the staging of both characters and of Gloucester's response. The effect of granting closure would be to offer a glimpse of clarity, whether that clarity is warm, lukewarm, or cold. The effect of denying closure is to create uncertainty.

The scene does, as Cavell says, show how radically implicated good is in evil—but this implication of good in evil takes place within the human realm, and the scene also speaks to the nature of the divine. It could be said that the scene similarly implicates good in evil in

the realm of the divine, but that is not the reading I prefer. Rather, I prefer reading the scene as raising doubts about whether the terms “good” and “evil” may be predicated of the divine at all. “Good” and “evil” may be predicated of human beings in the play, if without complete certainty, but the divine is both and neither—the terms are simply inadequate and inappropriate for understanding the divine<sup>19</sup>. If Edgar were to reveal himself to his father, it would relieve Gloucester (and the audience) of inhabiting the genuine human position of tumultuous, arational uncertainty, where nothing makes all that much sense and our efforts to make sense of it (perhaps through astrology) seem pathetic to an honest observer<sup>20</sup>. That is, if Edgar were to reveal himself to his father, it would relieve Gloucester and the audience of the brutal but authentic responsibility to accept what is. By denying this revelation, Edgar puts Gloucester and the audience in their cosmological place as human beings, one characterized by faith. In Søren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, the sphere of the ethical (where good and evil reside) is the universal, the rational—it makes sense to us. Faith falls outside the realm of reason; it is not irrational, against reason, but arational, outside of reason. The primary subject of the book is the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22. Surely, following God’s commandment must be good, but what if God commands something evil? For Abraham’s actions to be grounded in faith, so the book contends, he cannot rationalize God’s command but must believe two contradictory things simultaneously: that he will kill Isaac and sacrifice him to God, and that God will make Abraham the father of many nations through Isaac. Thus Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, repeats over and over the refrain that he cannot understand Abraham (Kierkegaard 2006). Richard Ashby argues that the play illustrates the catastrophe of reason, which was originally a tool for human beings to categorize and classify objects in the world but came to be used to categorize and classify human beings. This catastrophe renders human beings objects, and it culminated with the horrors of the Holocaust (Ashby 2021). Following my reading (which is not necessarily mutually exclusive with Ashby’s), the play is concerned with the points beyond which reason is inadequate, requiring faith. Gloucester’s speech suggests that he wants to quarrel with the divine, suggesting that the divine is responsible for something bad or wrong, but Edgar’s morality play suggests that “badness” or “wrongness” are not applicable to the realm of the divine—and, in so doing, he cruelly takes care of his father by preserving his life and by attempting to convince him of his worth and dignity.

The play positions the realm of nature as beyond moral reason, just as it does with the divine. Does it make any sense to say that the storm is “bad”? Certainly, it is oppressive to Lear, Kent, the Fool, and Poor Tom, but that badness carries a different sense than the sense in which we could say that Edmund is bad because he frames Edgar. Indeed, Edmund’s soliloquys in act 1, scene 2 complicate the relationship between badness in human behavior and badness in nature. In his first speech, he begins, “Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law/My services are bound” (1.2.1–2). His second speech creates even more confusion:

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 the stars; as if we were villains on necessity, fools by  
 heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treacherers 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! My father compounded with my mother  
 under the Dragon’s tail, and my nativity was under Ursa  
 Major, so it follows I am rough and lecherous. Fut! I  
 should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the



firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. (1.2.111–24)

On first reading, Edmund appears to deny the notion that human beings are “villains by necessity” and evil “by a divine thrusting on”. If people are not villains by necessity, then it would seem that they are responsible for their villainy—villains by volition. However, the last two lines call this conclusion into question. Edmund denies that the *heavenly bodies* have determined his character, but his character still seems inevitable. He should have been what he is regardless of the movement or positioning of the stars; it’s just that the cause of this “should” is removed from the realm of natural movements of the heavens. In short, his evil character emerges from his humanity, perhaps unavoidably, perhaps of his own free will, and perhaps as a function of how society has classified him, and therefore evil is removed from the realm of nature and relocated in human being. The play thus allows for the possibility that evil is proper to neither the natural world nor the divine, but only to the human.

The same can be said of the realm of politics. I return to Kott’s view of political history as the Grand Mechanism, a force that acts on humans rather than something humans control and guide. Similarly, politics in *Lear* churns out human suffering and war, in spite of the presence of good-natured actors like Cordelia, Kent, Gloucester, Albany, and France<sup>21</sup>. Although politics seems to move on despite human character or choice, it also seems that nothing about human politics is necessary in the philosophical sense of the term, meaning it must be this way and cannot be different. Nothing about reason, nature, or the divine requires that humanity live in precisely this way and no other. For that reason, it would be an error to become what Simone de Beauvoir calls a “serious man”, someone who gives up their freedom to choose in deference to law or convention (de Beauvoir 1976, See pp. 45–62). It is better to have the orientation Kott admires, in which a person recognizes the absurdity of the way things are, does not presume to “fix” everything (the kingdom will probably never be just, and Cordelia cannot be brought back to life), but plays their role with a wink and a nod.

Better still, in my view, is adopting a view that emerges from *Lear* in small glimmers. *Lear* is, among other things, a relentless meditation on finality and human finitude. This is not a play that will offer a messianic, millenarian solution to human problems, political or otherwise. The humans in the play are finite. They don’t act perfectly. They undertake projects that seem good to them, even though it may not always be clear to others why these projects seem good, and they undertake these projects imperfectly by acting now, in a ripe moment, without being able to consider every contingency or possibility. Once the decisions are made and the actions are performed, that’s it—they are final. Even the good we mean to do may be a day late and a dollar short. But in this absurd, grotesque, tragic, or catastrophic world, people still acknowledge one another and care for and about one another, even as they perform apparently careless actions required by absurd circumstances. The view that emerges from *Lear*, then, recognizes that human political and natural circumstances are tragic, absurd, and grotesque (to borrow Kott’s terms) and that they need not be that way—and yet they *are* that way, and it is beyond human powers to change them. The human responsibility is to do what is required by the moment, acknowledging the contingency and uncertainty of that state of affairs, striving to reach out to others, to acknowledge them, and to promote their dignity, regardless of the specific duty one must carry out, whether that be caring, bearing, accepting, punishing, or exacting revenge. I see this response as grounded not in nihilism or irony, the direction in which I see Kott’s reading trending (particularly his reading of *Lear*), but rather in faith, faith like Abraham’s.

This reading does not undermine or explain away the tragedy in *King Lear* but rather rests on one specific feature of the genre of tragedy. Tragedy provides catharsis; it provides occasions for moral instruction; it provides the occasion for a culture to express and affirm its vision of itself; it provides the occasion for creators to express and affirm their visions of themselves, others, culture, and the world—all true. However, tragedy is also festive and celebratory. Although tragedy takes as its subject events that are somber, serious, and unfortunate, tragedy itself is not somber, serious, and unfortunate. Why do we dream up

imaginary human beings, torment them, and then go watch them be tormented—as a form of entertainment?<sup>22</sup> (In a theater, we are all Edgar, and all of the characters are Gloucester.) Other more historically located versions of this question are why early modern British actors finished performing a tragedy and then performed a comic jig, and why ancient Greek tragedy was staged during the City Dionysia, a festive occasion. My answer is that tragedy is a celebration of the totality of human being, warts and all.<sup>23</sup> We read and go to tragedies (at least in part) to accept, bear witness to, and (again) celebrate the full range of human existence, including human frailty, human finitude, and the (apparent and occasional? certain and fixed?) indifference of nature, politics, and the divine. But, of course, the somber, serious, and unfortunate aspects of human being don't look worth accepting or celebrating, and so we go to the theater to tell ourselves and one another that they are. We are accustomed, I think, to view only the fortunate as good, but tragedy prompts us to celebrate human being in its totality. Human being involves suffering, loss, and many other misfortunes, and still human being is good. This is the theodicy of tragedy: we go to keep the faith that human being is, and that in being, it is good.

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## Appendix A An Apology for Methods Ethical and Subjective

My interpretative goal in this essay is to draw ethical insights out of *King Lear*, in part by putting the play in conversation with ideas from philosophical ethics. This is a style of humanistic inquiry that has fallen out of favor within the discipline of literary studies. It has not disappeared entirely—Debra Shuger, Sarah Beckwith, Julia Reinhard Lupton, and Ken Jackson (cited above) are all interested in this kind of exploration. The difference is that where they have been graceful and played by the rules of accepted methodologies, I have been intentionally blunt and irreverent. In early modern studies specifically, the prevailing methodology is, of course, historicism, which sets as its goal finding a feature of a literary text that can be usefully illuminated by a slice of historical context. Some of the goals of historicism are precise historical knowledge (either about the text, about the period, or both), uncovering meanings that have become obscured over time, and recovering a story or idea that has been suppressed, forgotten, or neglected. Often, these goals are motivated by exploring some facet of an intellectual, political, or religious genealogy. Other common methods are those informed by critical theory, which generally use the tools developed through the linguistic turn for performing political critique, understanding identity, or scrutinizing an episteme, among other things.

My goal of drawing ethical insights from *Lear* is different from these goals. It is important to say that I am working from a broadly ancient and specifically Aristotelian definition of ethics (discussed in the body of the essay), primarily concerned not with right and wrong or good and evil but rather with interrogating what sort of a thing it is that we call a human being, what is good universally and/or specifically for the kind of a thing we call a human being, and how to be *as* a human being, that is, how to be a human being skillfully. These are questions that obviously—*obviously!*—occupied Shakespeare. Is a human being a bare, forked animal, or perhaps a worm (ultimately a meal for worms, at any rate), or just a quintessence of dust? In using the text of *King Lear* to pursue ethical insight, I feel absolutely certain that I am taking an avenue offered by the text itself. And, to slip into historicist methods for a moment, these were questions that occupied Shakespeare's contemporaries as well, for is not the ending of poetry according to Philip Sidney well doing and not well knowing only?

With reference to the prevailing literary methods, my methods may not seem rigorous, since my thinking is occasionally historicist and occasionally presentist. “Is this author interested in precise historical knowledge or following an intellectual genealogy up to the

present day?” you may wonder. The answer is that I am interested in historical knowledge and intellectual genealogy only insofar as they aid me in addressing my main question: what in this text illuminates, complicates, challenges, or nurtures human being, especially with reference to goodness? This is the standard that I have held myself to, and so I ask that you also hold me to this standard.

My methods also may not seem “objective”, since I am not especially concerned with meeting the established, recognizable goals of contemporary scholarship. I welcome—wholeheartedly and warmly—the label “subjective”. To slip into linguistic turn critical theory methods for a second, I am not an object (or at least I am not *only* an object); I am a subject, the kind of a thing that has agency to do and to cultivate my way of being in the world. My experience of others, of art, of objects, of events, is not “objective”. I do not apprehend what I encounter in the world in its ontological totality; rather, I have subjective interactions with what I encounter. As I take a sip of coffee, I do not automatically take a measurement of the temperature, the volume, the density, and the acidity of the liquid, and I do not immediately apprehend a list of ingredients and note their concentrations. Rather, I see the steam rising off the cup as I lift it; I smell the roasted coffee beans as I bring the cup to my mouth; I feel the warmth of the beverage and enjoy the interplay between bitter coffee, sweet sugar, and rich oat milk. My style (to adapt a phrase of Susan Sontag’s) is a means for insisting on this subjective dimension of my thinking (Sontag 2001). I am present in what I write, as are *you*, dear reader, as you read it.

Although my thinking is enthusiastically subjective, I still recognize that some observations and interpretations are of higher quality than others—and some are incorrect. (For too long have we humanities types said, “There are no wrong answers”.) An observation or interpretation can be of poor quality if it is not well motivated. For example, it might merely restate a common point of view without showing why it is necessary to restate that point of view. An observation or interpretation can be of poor quality or wrong if the distance between the text and the interpretation can only be covered by way of high-flying mental gymnastics—an affliction shared more or less equally by historicism, presentism, and theoretical interpretations. A third way (but surely there are more) in which an observation or interpretation can be of poor quality or wrong is if it is not aimed at goodness. An interpretation is aimed at goodness if it promotes human freedom for all human beings. To promote human freedom, the interpretation must not position some other value or law beyond human freedom, because doing so would undermine the very concept of freedom. Freedom is not freedom if it is accountable to something else; freedom is only and unavoidably accountable to freedom.

The kind of interpretation I am undertaking in this essay is certainly not new. The works of scholarship that I have read (for this project and others) over the past few years that I have found most inspiring and nourishing are *Disowning Knowledge* by Stanley Cavell, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* by Jan Kott, *Young Man Luther* by Erik Erikson, and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James (Erikson 1958; James 1987). Cavell intuits that “Shakespeare’s plays interpret and reinterpret the skeptical problematic”, and he considers the possibility that the human response (particularly the feminine response) to this problematic “may be representable not as doubt but instead as love” (Cavell 2003, pp. 3, 17). Kott processes the trauma of being a Pole who lived through the German occupation, turned to communism as the answer to fascism, and then abandoned that ideological commitment in the face of the Stalinist USSR. (He writes, for instance, that the scene in *Richard III* between Richard and Anne “should be interpreted through our own experiences. One must find in it the night of Nazi occupation, concentration camps, mass-murders” [Kott 1974, p. 44].) Erikson follows Luther’s life asking how his identity developed in the way that it did, and how his identity formation responded to his father—and, given that Erikson gave up his surname, we might justifiably conjecture that he had a personal stake in this exploration. Finally, James studies varieties of religious experience to see what they do for human beings, how they are pragmatically useful, and how they might be grounded in an understanding of the human mind and psyche. If you chat with a contemporary

literary scholar about the value of their work, they will arrive ultimately at the desire that their work contributes something to how people understand the human condition and how they can live their lives well. I hope our discipline can make room for scholarship that tries to achieve this goal directly, in the mold of Cavell, Kott, Erikson, and James.

After the Big Bang, in the unimaginably distant past, hydrogen and helium atoms rushed out into the universe. These atoms formed into stars, where nuclear fusion took place, turning smaller atoms into larger atoms like nitrogen, oxygen, carbon, and iron. These stars eventually went supernova, scattering these larger atoms across the universe. Somehow, these atoms came together to form you and me—physical, spiritual, intellectual stardust, to adapt Carl Sagan’s famous expression. And here we are, on a rock hurtling through space, a rock that has just enough gravity and just enough magnetic field to hold our atmosphere in place and to hold liquid water. Someday, however, as the sun continues to warm, our oceans will evaporate and our planet will become so hot that lead liquifies, evaporates, and falls as snow. Then, eventually, as the sun turns into a red giant, it may even expand so far that it consumes our planet. Later still, in the unimaginably distant future, the universe will reach the cosmic silence of heat death. In cosmic time, are we not grass that flourishes for a moment, only to be blown away by the wind? Are we not a breath, a shadow? And yet we (physical, spiritual, intellectual stardust) can endeavor to know what we are and to be what we are as well as we can. Among all of the matter and energy in the universe, we can aspire to be good and labor to achieve goodness—how bizarre. “Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” (Plato 1997, p. 29d–e) Shouldn’t the writing of, the reading of, and the study of literature participate in this enterprise? Shouldn’t this be something that occupies literary critics?<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The final three are key terms in Kott (1974).

<sup>2</sup> For a book-length discussion of Shakespeare and Genesis 22, see Jackson (2015). The sense of the term “virtue” I’m using here comes from Niebuhr (2008).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Kott’s (1974) chapter on the history plays, Shakespeare Our Contemporary, pp. 3–55.

<sup>4</sup> Naturally, this was, properly speaking, a reformist anxiety. There was considerable resistance to reformism in England. See Duffy (1992) and Haigh (1993).

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion of ceremony and representation in this scene in Weimann and Bruster (2008, pp. 199–223).

<sup>6</sup> I cite the text parenthetically by line number.

<sup>7</sup> My example of the rabbit is an adaptation of a thought experiment in Adamson (2013).

<sup>8</sup> For more on metatheatricality in early modern theater, see Gurr (2009). For metatheatricality, see pp. 6–13. Gurr says that metatheatrical elements were often used to avoid illusionism, a Puritanical charge against theater. Conversely, Gurr also discusses the rise of “personation”, or the effort to imitate precisely the person or type of person played. See chapter 3, “The Players”, pp. 100–38. These conflicting demands, to avoid illusionism and to “personate”, make the figure of Poor Tom a challenge to read: was he staged as a transparently theatrical mad person, or was he supposed to closely mirror mad people that audience members would have encountered? Also see Weimann and Bruster (2008), Shakespeare and the Power of Performance, especially pp. 139–59.

<sup>9</sup> My reading has resonance with Jason Kerr’s. Kerr sees in the play the potential for intimate bonds of recognition and also the risk and vulnerability that comes with those bonds. See Kerr (2021).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the medical model and the social model of disability, see “Ethical Staring: Disabling the English Renaissance” by Hobgood and Wood (2013, pp. 1–22).

<sup>11</sup> See the Textual Variants listed in the Norton Critical Edition of King Lear, p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> Kerr (2021) also discusses the ethics of care with respect to King Lear.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 1 of The Ethics of Care for Held’s discussion of the ethics of care with respect to the dominant ethical theories.

<sup>14</sup> Pleasure and pain are central to Asad’s analysis of liberalism and secularism. For instance, he notes that “it is not difficult to see how the utilitarian calculus of pleasure and pain has come to be central to cross-cultural judgment in modern thought and practice” (Asad 2003, p. 109).



- 15 For a discussion of the relationship between the sovereign of the state and God in early modern political theology, see Shuger (2001).
- 16 See Asad (2003), *Formations of the Secular*, particularly chapter 2, “Thinking about Agency and Pain”, and chapter 3, “Reflections on Cruelty and Torture”, pp. 67–124.
- 17 This reading stands not in opposition to but in tension with Sarah Beckwith’s exploration of forgiveness in Beckwith (2011). Beckwith finds in Shakespeare’s late romances something like the theory of acknowledgement in Cavell (2003), discussed below. While I agree that Shakespeare’s plays often revolve around acknowledgement, I also see violence and punishment coexisting with this acknowledgement. My reading is also indebted to Shifflett (2018, pp. 33–53). Shifflett finds in Shakespeare’s histories a notion of forgiveness and pardon that is used to consolidate state and sovereign power.
- 18 By contrast, Poole’s reading in “Poetic Creation in an Apocalyptic Age” might suggest how the play troubles the distinction between the human, the natural, and the divine.
- 19 Hamlin cites Martin Luther’s *De servo arbitrio* and John Calvin’s sermons on Job as examples of the presence of this idea in Reformation discourse (Hamlin 2011, pp. 147–50).
- 20 James Kearney sees in this scene the possibility that Edgar reveals to Gloucester that Poor Tom is more than he appears as a means for demonstrating an authentic, ethical encounter with the other (Kearney 2012, pp. 455–67).
- 21 The trajectory of this discussion calls to mind the tensions between citizen and saint explored in Lupton (2005).
- 22 I am drawing inspiration from Cavell’s (2003) “speculative” half of his essay on *Lear*, pp. 81–123.
- 23 I am drawing inspiration from Nietzsche (2008).
- 24 I am indebted to my student Sidney Butler for encouraging me to include this paragraph.

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