Nature and Convention in *King Lear*

The conversation between Kent and Gloucester which opens the play indicates that the division of the kingdom was not in fact designed to be dependent upon the love test, as might at first appear both to the audience and much of the assembled company, but has been carefully planned in advance, possibly with the help of Lear’s counsellors, and certainly with their approval (1.1.1-7). Although Lear has rejected Cordelia by the time that he fully reveals his plan to secure his succession, we can infer from the speech in which he formally transfers his power to Goneril and Regan that the original plan was to “invest” his “pre-eminence” in his youngest daughter, as well as giving her “a third more opulent” than her sisters, and then to surrender to Burgundy, who was clearly designed to be her husband, the regal “sway, revenue, execution” which he ultimately presents to Albany and Cornwall, while retaining for himself only “the name, and all th’ addition to a king” (1.1.81, 1.1.189-208, 1.1.127-39). It is significant that neither Gloucester nor the forthright Kent expresses any objection to this original scheme in their opening conversation. When Kent does eventually intervene, it is not to reprimand Lear for surrendering his power, but specifically for transferring it to Goneril and Regan (1.1.151-54, 1.1.182-85).

Kent and Gloucester are surprised only by one aspect of the plan: they had “thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall,” but “now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the Dukes he values most” (1.1.1-7). Under the original plan, which must have been long in the making, since it presumably predates their marriages, Goneril and Regan would have been deterred from attacking each other precisely by this “equality,” and from uniting to oppose their sister by the fact that Cordelia’s “more opulent” territory would have divided Albany in the north from Cornwall in the south of the kingdom. Given that the aged Lear clearly needs a plan of succession, this plan was therefore much more prudent than might at first appear, since, as subsequent events demonstrate, it is based on an accurate understanding both of Cordelia’s superior virtue and her sisters’ potentially disruptive ambition. Indeed, we can even infer from the conversation between Kent and Gloucester which opens the play that Lear has understood that Cornwall is less trustworthy than Albany, although he decides in the end that it would be imprudent to act on this understanding, since to assign more land to the latter, and hence to Goneril, might disrupt the delicate balance of power whereby he hopes “that future strife may be prevented now” (1.1.44-45). Overall, despite its ultimate failure, for which, I will argue, Lear is not primarily to blame, the plan could even be seen as an expression of the vigilant prudence which has enabled Lear to become “the greatest of Shakespeare’s kings,” as we meet him at the start of the play, standing “at the head of a united Britain…and at peace, not only with all domestic factions, but with the outside world as well.” The rage which overcomes the king when Cordelia refuses to cooperate with the scheme is treated as a “mad” aberration by Kent, who has previously seen no reason not to “honor…” and “lov[e]” him (1.1.140-46).

As has been argued persuasively elsewhere, the “darker purpose” of the love test is both to justify the prearranged, unequal division of the kingdom, in which the youngest daughter is to be given the controlling share, and to use the ambition of Goneril and Reagan to trick them into complying with the scheme with an appearance of devoted obedience (1.1.36). Lear is aiming to avoid investing his power in his eldest daughter in the way that convention would normally dictate, exploiting the fact that there is no absolute right of primogeniture in this case, since, as noted above, once the king’s “pre-eminence” has been transferred to one or more of his daughters, it is the husband, or, as it turns out, husbands who will actually succeed to the throne, and acquire the royal “sway, revenue, execution” (1.1.127-39). The plan for the love test is kept entirely secret, even perhaps from Kent (1.1.146-54), in order to ensure that the two elder sisters do not hear of it, in which case they could simply have vacated the court without incurring major losses, since under the loosely centralised system of the day, their husbands effectively control the territories which Lear grants them anyway, despite having sworn allegiance to the king. In this way, the king ensures that, for all Goneril and Reagan know, they could indeed earn a larger share of the kingdom by excelling in the love test. It is only Cordelia who is in a position to understand that this is not actually the case, since the rest of the territory has already been allocated when it comes to her turn. Regan might perhaps have discovered the scheme if given the time to do so, but Lear hurries through the exercise in order to conceal its inconsistencies.

The brilliance of Lear’s scheme is that it aims to use Goneril and Regan’s artificial expressions of love to circumvent the arbitrary convention of primogeniture with a public appearance of justice, in order to invest his power in a daughter whom he knows to be naturally just: as the play unfolds, we can see that her “care and duty” is indeed commensurate with her “love” (1.1.100-02). From one point of view, the very tortuousness of the plan reflects Lear’s sense that primogeniture cannot be dismissed lightly, since it is an established custom which serves to stabilise the succession. Any attempt to act on the potentially disruptive truth that younger children may be the natural superiors of those to whom arbitrary custom assigns a higher rank must be carefully justified in terms which are accommodated to conventional opinion. The court would no doubt simply have accepted Lear’s authoritative word that Cordelia’s speech was the most passionate of the three speeches, if she had given Lear any scope whatsoever to argue the point, without ever drawing a distinction between the conventional nature of the elder sisters’ flattery and Cordelia’s sincere feeling, or understanding that Lear has set the elder sisters up to fail.

All of this suggests that in order to rule justly, patriotic statesman must also ensure that they maintain the decorous appearance of justice, which is not at all the same thing. Lear has to foster the general perception that his choice of successor is perfectly just in a populace who cannot be expected to understand Cordelia’s superiority to her sisters. This perception is only one aspect of the appearance of infallibility which he must strive to project in order to maintain his authority. He comes close to acknowledging the effort which it takes to ensure that his “potency” is always “made good,” and to manage the constraints under which he habitually works, when he warns Kent that he “durst never yet” “break [his] vow,” since “nor our nature nor our place can bear” to be opposed -especially, he might have added, in this public situation (1.1.168-72). This remark may imply that Lear is already regretting his rage in his “nature,” but is aware that, as always, his “place” prohibits any appearance of indecision. Lear’s eventual decision to scale down the territory which is to be offered to Albany, despite his personal affection for the duke and even his wise understanding that he would in fact rule more justly than Cornwall, provides further evidence of his recognition that “the uncompromising quest for truth and love, which can be ultimately understood as different names for the same thing, destroy[s] justice…that is, serving the common good” (p.137).

Lear’s initial concern is not that his daughter does not love him, but that she responds to the love test in a manner so utterly shorn of sentiment as to make it absolutely impossible to pretend that her vow is more passionate than those of Goneril and Regan: “Nothing will come of nothing, speak again” (1.1.86-90). Just a “little” adjustment on her part would no doubt have allowed him to declare that he preferred her heartfelt and understated style to the fulsome eloquence of her sisters: “Mend your speech a little, lest you may mar your fortunes” (1.1.94-95). The king has presumably decided not to inform Cordelia of his plans precisely for fear that she might dislike the artificiality of the test, or possibly even reveal his “darker purpose,” but he can have had no idea that she would register her disapproval by refusing to admit to the heartfelt affection which he knows that she actually feels, reducing it merely to a decorous “bond” (1.1.91-104). His furious insistence that Cordelia’s “plainness” is a form of “pride” is arguably entirely justified, for it is surely her dignified sense of her own virtue and fastidious distaste for anything that seems contrived rather than her passionate heart which prevents her from expressing her affection (1.1.129). The pride which Cordelia takes in her own absolute sincerity is evident in her subsequent anxiety to ensure that France and Burgundy should know that she is being rejected for lacking “the glib and oily art to speak and purpose not,” rather than for any “dishonored step” (1.1.223-233).

Lear’s affection for Cordelia and the forthright Kent, not to mention for Albany, Gloucester and the fool, implies that he shares their passionate nature (1.1.139-42, 1.1.155-57). One of the main purposes of his intricate plan is to secure his own future with Cordelia, and at the same time to protect and reward a daughter who is his “joy,” the “balm of [his] age, the best, the dearest”: “I lov’d her most, and thought to set my rest on her kind nursery” (1.1.82, 1.1.214-16, 1.1.123-24). Lear’s desire to retire with Cordelia shows that he values his attachments above his regal status, which at best yields the insubstantial benefit of being revered by subjects whom he will never meet, and at worst exposes him to flattery of the sort that Goneril and Regan provide (1.1.224-25). As he himself admits, Lear is furious with Cordelia most of all for thwarting his attempt to engineer a situation in which he might finally be able to prioritise the attachment which is in fact his ruling passion (1.1.122-24). As the scene goes on he begins to believe, perhaps with some justice, that she is indeed “untender” in her own “heart,” not because she does not love him, but precisely because she values her sense of her own passionate sincerity too much to make a public profession of love, which might at that moment be contrived rather than directly heartfelt, but which would in the long term safeguard the kingdom, and consequently enable him to focus on his own greatest “joy” (1.1.105-06, 1.1.38-41, 1.1.82). By contrast with Cordelia, although Lear’s own motives are as sincerely passionate as his daughter might wish, he is prepared to use contrived professions of love as a means to achieve his personal and political objectives.

However, there is perhaps another reason for Lear’s anger, beyond even the thwarting of a plan which would have allowed him simultaneously to secure the stability of the kingdom and to consolidate his personal attachment to Cordelia. Given the king’s passionate nature, the forced professions of love which the love test is designed to elicit must be as uncongenial to him as they are to Cordelia. Indeed, his vacillation over the issue of whether to give Albany a greater territory than Cornwall shows that he too often wishes that he could simply prioritise his real thoughts and feelings over his sense of responsibility for the common good. (The tension between these two motives is absolutely key to Shakespeare’s underlying argument, as is suggested by the fact that it forms the subject of the play’s opening lines.) It is likely, therefore, that Lear envies Cordelia’s freedom to express her feelings directly, since he knows that his own responsibility for the kingdom as a whole ensures that he cannot “unburthen…” himself of the “cares and business” of regal authority and devote himself to his own “joy” without first attempting to secure political stability in the tortuous manner outlined above (1.1.38-41). Anticipating that both Burgundy and France would reject Cordelia after he has cut her off, he perhaps takes a spiteful delight in showing his favourite daughter what life is like with “truth” as her only “dow’r,” when she is no longer “neighbor’d, pitied, and relieved” by his authority (1.1.108-20). Lear’s implicit message to Cordelia–ironically, in the light of subsequent events–is that the sincere relationships which she so treasures are much more reliant than she acknowledges on the security provided by this authority, and therefore on the benevolent manipulations by which it is sustained.

The paradox which infuriates Lear so much is that while constant attachments may only flourish where there is civic stability, those who are responsible for that stability are themselves often unable to enjoy the fruits of their efforts, because of all the hypocrisies and accommodations which their role inevitably entails. In desiring to “unburthen…” himself of “all cares and business,” and rest in Cordelia’s “kind nursery,” Lear implicitly acknowledges that his political role has in fact partially alienated him from his own nature (1.1.38-41, 1.1.123-24). Although he feels a patriotic concern for the kingdom as a whole (see 3.4.28-33), such diffuse ties are bound to lack the intrinsic rewards which are provided by intimate relationships. It is significant that whereas Goneril and Regan strain to gain power and status, Cordelia, who, as her name implies, is usually ruled by her heartfelt attachments, remains completely unmoved by the prospect that she might “mar [her] fortunes” through her plain speech (1.1.94-95).

Ironically, Lear’s revised plan accidentally instigates a genuine love test. Kent’s courageous intervention confirms that he is inspired partly by a deep personal attachment to Lear: he has “lov’d” him as a “father” (1.1.140-42). Like France, who immediately offers to marry Cordelia, even though she is now dowerless, and like Cordelia herself, who later on in the play makes good her claim to provide a level of “care and duty” which is commensurate with her “love,” Kent understands that the rewards of deep attachments are worth any amount of self-denying service (1.1.189-261, 1.1.100-02). His banishment is merely the culminating sacrifice of a life “held but as a pawn to wage against [Lear’s] enemies,” which he “never fear’d to lose,” the king’s “safety being motive” (1.1.155-81). Subsequently, he tells himself, “If thou canst serve where thou standst condemn’d, so may it come, thy master, whom thou lov’st, shall find thee full of labors” (1.4.4-7). Kent is thus undoubtedly one of the considerable number of characters in the play who prioritise their attachments over their self-love; a list which includes Lear himself, who aims to surrender his “pre-eminence” to Cordelia in order to be free to focus on his “joy” (1.1.130-31, 1.1.82).

In many instances the natural constancy of the play’s more passionate characters is also supported by artificial codes. Kent’s affection for Lear is strengthened by conventional conceptions of honour, piety and dutiful deference, as well as by grateful affection: not only has he “lov’d [Lear] as a father,” but he has “ever honor’d [him] as [his] king,” “follow’d” him as his “master,” and “thought on [him] in [his] prayers” as his “great patron” (1.1.140-42). Similarly, when Gloucester helps Lear at considerable personal risk, having been ordered not to “sustain him” in any way, he is motivated both by pity, combined with a passionate revulsion against Cornwall and Regan’s “unnatural” callousness, and a habitual respect for “the King my old master” (3.3.1-19).

However, just as Cordelia’s moral principles prevent her from delivering the forced professions of love that her sisters are only too keen to supply, Kent’s piety and honour impel him to speak to Lear in a direct and blunt manner which proves to be completely counterproductive. The parallels between the two characters are underlined by the fact that Lear accuses both of them of displaying “pride,” and highlighted by the fact that Kent prides himself on the very “plainness” which the king condemns in his daughter: “To plainness honor’s bound, when majesty falls to folly” (1.1.148-49; compare 1.1.129). Because Kent shares Cordelia’s self-regarding “plainness,” he cannot see that it was precisely her misplaced sincerity which forced Lear to abort his plan in the first place. Overall, Kent and Cordelia’s behaviour in the opening scene suggests that, although in many cases conventional codes of piety and honour ensure that self-love is sublimated into loyal service, they may at the same time encourage passionate individuals to take pride in their own virtuous constancy in a manner that actually prevents them from mounting a prudent and effective defence of these bonds.

At the end of the scene, we are given an ominous glimpse of Goneril’s ambition. Once Lear has surrendered the territory which he controlled, and therefore his military might, she sees no reason to defer to him. Restrained neither by passionate affection nor by established principles of honour and piety, Goneril seems more quick-witted and practical than Kent or Cordelia, as she begins her campaign to marginalise Lear on the grounds of senility: “If our father carry authority with such disposition as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us” (1.1.304-06).

Shakespeare uses Edmund to deepen his exploration of potential tyrants and the danger which they pose. Edmund himself is convinced that his ambition is entirely natural; in fact, he enshrines “Nature,” which he identifies with self-love, as his “goddess” (1.2.1-6). He smuggles in his real view in his forged letter, where he has Edgar declare that he “find[s] an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffer’d” (1.2.49-51). From Edmund’s enlightened and loveless perspective, sons restrain their natural desire to oust their fathers, merely because of established “custom” (1.2.3). In what may well be a coded reference to the Christian doctrine of original sin, he contrasts his own spirited freedom with the abject passivity of those who imagine that they are “villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion” (1.2.118-31).

However, whereas Lear’s attempt to manipulate “custom” is motivated by a natural concern for the fate of the kingdom and a passionate devotion to Cordelia, Edmund’s has been artificially stimulated by his frustration with the conventional beliefs which have caused him to be treated so unfairly: “Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit” (1.2.183-84). Gloucester, who seems genuinely to hold Edgar “no dearer” than Edmund, has nevertheless not only ensured that the latter “hath been out nine years,” but already determined that “away he shall again,” in order to conceal a “fault” which he “blush[es] to acknowledge” (1.1.290, 1.1.10-33). He has denied him access to the court so consistently that even Kent, who seems to have been Lear’s closest companion for many years, has to be introduced to him at the start of the play (1.1.8-31, 1.1.139-42). Edmund’s claim to be pursuing his natural ambition freely– “I should have been that I am, had the maidenl’est star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing” (1.2.131-33)–is undermined by the obsessive intensity of his rage at the unfairness of established convention: “Why bastard? Wherefore base? When my dimensions are as well compact…as honest madam’s issue” (1.2.6-9). He is perhaps even more affected by the emotional neglect which he has undoubtedly suffered than by his low social status and lack of material prospects: he attempts unavailingly to gain Gloucester’s sympathy for a self-inflicted wound, and appears to take a bitter relish in representing Edgar as having denied that he could ever carry sufficient “trust, virtue, or worth” for his father to believe his putative accusations (2.1.41, 2.1.67-77).

Thus, ironically, despite his claim to be completely emancipated from convention, not only has Edmund’s natural self-love been brought to the fore by the injustices of the established order, but it culminates in an effort to advance his status within the same arbitrary hierarchy. Judging solely by the example of Edmund, one might assume that self-love may only come to dominate in cases where the innate need to form attachments has been artificially stunted, which would imply that it is natural to enshrine this need as a ruling passion. As we shall see, however, this would be to oversimplify Shakespeare’s position.

Shakespeare implicitly endorses Gloucester’s assumption that civil societies ultimately stand or fall by the strength of the natural bonds of love, friendship, kinship and patriotism upon which they are founded: “Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond crack’d ‘twixt son and father” (1.2.106-12). Just as families are normally bound together by passionate attachments, so on a political level, the king’s tortuous plan to secure the succession shows that he cares deeply about the welfare of his subjects, a care which is spontaneously reciprocated by characters like Kent and Gloucester. Patriotic attachments of this sort are entirely natural, although they tend of course to be weaker than those which unite families, friends and lovers.

However, the play reminds us that even the passionate commitments of lovers and families, let alone the more diffuse ties which bind nations together, often appear to rely on the support of rigid imperatives, underpinned by traditional conceptions of shame and piety. The institution of marriage seems to be designed to satisfy a natural need to safeguard families when “love cools,” but it can only do so by imposing artificial restrictions which, among other things, condemn the generation of ‘natural’ offspring. Similarly, the stable civil order that is required for these loyal personal commitments to flourish in the first place is ultimately reliant on the authority of a sovereign power, which, while doubtless often being reinforced spontaneously by patriotism and grateful love, can only be consolidated by invoking conventional conceptions of deferential duty and, ultimately, the threat of military force. Paradoxically, therefore, it seems that the need for lasting attachments naturally tends to generate rigid conventional restraints, both in the domestic and the political sphere, restraints which, as Edmund knows to his cost, may seem arbitrary in their particular manifestations.

Gloucester himself embodies the mixture of passionate ties and conventional beliefs that underpins the domestic and civic order which he so values. As a loving father, he is naturally deeply shaken by Edgar’s apparent treachery, which merges in his mind with the king’s “fall…from bias of nature; there’s father against child” (1.2.110-12). However, Shakespeare uses Gloucester’s astrological theories to hint that conventional piety in particular can also play a crucial role in reinforcing domestic bonds and naturalising an arbitrary social hierarchy by presenting them as both reflecting and depending upon an overarching, supernatural order. Dismissing the materialistic philosophy favoured by the enlightened Edmund– “Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourg’d by the sequent effects”–Gloucester assumes that it is some higher power which has caused “love [to] cool”: “these late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good for us” (1.2.103-09). Like Kent, who prays regularly for the king, and hopes that the gods will offer Cordelia “dear shelter” after she has been cast out (1.1.142, 1.1.182), Gloucester invests justice with a cosmic significance. Again, as with Cordelia and Kent (see above), we can see that conventional piety and honour are implicitly presented as sublimations of self-love, since they derive their power from the urge to feel distinguished either in the eyes of others or in the grander scheme of things.

Shakespeare seems to endorse Edmund’s implication that, as well as cementing loyalties, piety can encourage naivety, timidity and fatalism: Gloucester declares that “we have seen the best of our time…and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves,” even though the only evidence for this view seems to be the king’s unexpected volte-face and Edgar’s alleged treachery (1.2.112-14, 1.2.118-33). He wearily delegates the investigation of his son’s “villain[y]” to Edmund almost in a parenthesis, after which he resumes his fatalistic ruminations (1.2.103-17). Later, Edmund’s declaration that it is “unnatural” and at the same time opposed to the will of “the revengive gods” for a child not to be “bound to th’ father” shows that he perfectly understands the potent mixture of passionate attachments and conventional belief which motivates Gloucester (2.1.45-46). He easily plays on his father’s credulity in order to intensify his awed horror at Edgar’s alleged treachery by presenting his brother as a satanic figure, “mumbling of wicked charms, conjuring the moon to stand’s auspicious mistress” (2.1.39-40).

There are early indications that Edgar is as radically emancipated from conventional opinion as Edmund, although he bases his thinking on a very different conception of human nature (see below). If Edmund raises the subject of astrology with his brother in the hope that he might be induced to resign himself fatalistically to his father’s sudden hostility, he is disappointed. Edgar’s own intellectual scepticism may be inferred from his evident surprise at Edmund’s apparent interest in astrology (1.2.136-51). Even as Edmund dismisses Edgar as hopelessly naïve, he shrewdly draws a distinction between “a credulous father and a brother noble, whose nature is so far from doing harms that he suspects none” (1.2.179-81). Edgar is indeed not at all “credulous,” as his brother’s experimental reference to astrology reveals, and although he is initially as vulnerable as his pious father to Edmund’s ploys precisely because such schemes are so alien to his passionate nature, he quickly shows himself to be much more astute and resilient. Edgar offers a mundane and entirely accurate explanation for his predicament, which contrasts with Gloucester’s fatalistic response to Edmund’s allegations in that it allows him to respond in a manner which is both measured and–ultimately–spirited: “Some villain hath done me wrong” (compare 1.2.165 and 1.2.103-17).

Overall, the first two scenes indicate that, whereas the social order is rooted in natural attachments, it is sustained by an artificial hierarchy and conventional conceptions of authority and dutiful service. As the play proceeds, we are invited to compare and contrast three groups of characters in the light of this dichotomy between nature and convention: those like Edgar, the fool and Lear himself, as he first appears–later he is revealed to be a shifting and intermediate character, who shares some of the characteristics of the second group–who are primarily driven by natural attachments and their innate prudence rather than by self-love or customary beliefs; those like Kent, Cordelia, Gloucester and Albany, who are moved both by these attachments and by a variety of moral conventions; and those like Edmund, Cornwall, Goneril and Regan, who disregard both these motives in their pursuit of their ambitions.

The first and the third group resemble each other in that they are able and often willing to subvert customary conventions, albeit for contrasting and potentially conflicting reasons. Although Edmund differs radically from Lear in the way that he defines human nature, he nevertheless resembles him in that he seeks to prioritise natural right over the arbitrary rules which govern succession: just as Lear understands that it is precisely the daughter best fitted to succeed him who is least likely to do so according to convention, so Edmund knows that it is merely “custom” which “deprive[s]” him of power and status, since he is “as well compact, [his] mind as generous” as Edgar, despite being a bastard, as well as “twelve or fourteen moonshines lag of a brother” (1.2.2-9).

As we have seen, the conventional codes which reinforce the loyalty of the second group of characters to the established hierarchy also handicap them in contrasting ways, inspiring an imprudent boldness in spirited characters like Cordelia and Kent and a timorous, enervating resignation in moderate characters like Albany and Gloucester. As the play goes on, Kent is driven to provoke, not just Oswald, but Cornwall himself, partly by his passionate and noble loyalty to the king, but also by his proud, and as it turns out, completely unfounded assumption that he can do so with impunity, because Cornwall will eventually have to “do…respects” to “the grace and person of [his] master” (2.2.128-32). Thus, Kent is again hampered by his proud “plainness”: the term, which has already been used to link him to Cordelia in the opening scene, is again used repeatedly in act 2, scene 2 (2.2.92-113). As with Cordelia’s behaviour in the opening scene, it is difficult to disentangle Kent’s fervent desire to defend loyal attachments from his haughty pride in his own superiority to hypocrites and flatterers (2.2.15-33, 2.2.54-67). In direct contrast to Gloucester, his misplaced sense of security also appears to be enhanced by his faith in divine justice: he believes that the “intrince” bonds of affection which he accuses Oswald of undermining are “holy cords,” and, presuming that Lear has forfeited “heaven’s benediction”–by implication perhaps as a punishment for his rejection of Cordelia–prays for “miracles” to save the day (2.2.73-75, 2.2.160-66; see also 1.1.182-83). Although Kent’s self-love has been sublimated into a noble and pious virtue which broadly supports his passionate attachments, it is precisely this proud sense of his own virtue which encourages him to give free rein to his natural impetuosity in a manner which is both ineffective and dangerous.

This is not to deny that Kent’s punishment in the stocks goes some way towards showing him the imprudence of his passionate and noble defence of the king: he eventually admits that he showed “more man than wit” in challenging Oswald (2.4.42). Oswald, who flourishes precisely because he is unimpeded by a sense of honour, never had any intention of responding to a spirited challenge, and in fact he turns Kent’s manliness against him by accusing him, not entirely inaccurately, of having been concerned merely to “put upon him such a deal of man that worthied him, got praises of the King,” in their previous encounter (2.2.1-43, 120-21). Kent is perhaps slowly learning that sincere attachments are at times best served by indirection. Although he “profess[es] to be no less than [he] seem[s],” and to be a true and “honest” servant to Lear, who can “deliver a plain message bluntly,” it is significant that he has to do so while in disguise (1.4.10-35).

Gloucester’s timorous respect for the established hierarchy is equally ineffectual: he declares that the disguised Kent’s “fault is much,” purely it seems because of the latter’s lack of conventional deference, but points out that the stocks are a “low correction” for “basest…wretches,” having apparently been impelled to speak by his fear that “the king must take it ill” to be “so slightly valued in his messenger” (2.3.140-59). He feels browbeaten by Cornwall’s “fiery” and “unremovable” character, declaring that the latter’s “disposition, all the world well knows, will not be rubb’d nor stopp’d,” but only “entreat[ed]” (2.3.91-94, 2.3.140-54). Similarly, Albany’s “milky gentleness,” which contrasts with the more forceful temperaments of Cornwall and Kent, combined perhaps with his trust in the “gods that we adore,” eventually induces him to resign himself reluctantly to Goneril’s determination to halve the number of Lear’s knights (1.4.290, 1.4.310-48). Just as Cornwall silences Gloucester with a peremptory phrase– “I’ll answer that”–so Albany’s measured attempt to intercede on Lear’s behalf is easily overridden by Goneril: “Pray you, content” (2.3.147, 1.4.311-13). Overall, we can say that, although the conventional loyalty of the second group of characters–whether boldly assertive, as in the case of Kent and Cordelia, or cautiously deferential, as in the cases of Gloucester and Albany–may well reinforce a just regime, it may also at times facilitate tyrannical ambition. The contrasting temperaments of Kent and Gloucester hamper them in almost opposite ways, but in both cases their failings are aggravated by their habitual convictions.

Lear too fails to respond in a flexible and prudent manner to Goneril and Regan’s efforts to remove the last vestiges of his sovereign power, partly of course because he is deeply pained by their ingratitude, but partly also because he is hampered by his piety, pride and engrained sense of his own status. To take his natural response first: as well as blaming himself for his harsh treatment of Cordelia, whose “small fault…wrench’d [his] frame of nature from the fix’d place; drew from his heart all love” (1.4.266-69, 1.5.40), he is naturally appalled by Goneril’s “monster ingratitude,” which he sees as more “hideous…in a child than the sea-monster” and, by implication, more “disnatur’d” (1.4.259-61, 1.4.281-83). He ultimately brands both his elder daughters “unnatural hags” for their ingratitude and lack of filial feeling (2.4.278). In direct contrast to Edmund, Lear expects “Nature,” that “dear goddess,” to instil gratitude, since he knows it to be one of the essential elements of the intimate attachments that fulfil his own deepest needs (1.4.275). His exasperated rebukes are completely ineffective, however, because this aspect of Goneril and Regan’s natures has clearly been stunted and overlaid by their ambition. Despite apparently understanding his daughters well enough to foresee and attempt to forestall the disruption which this ambition might cause after his death, it is inevitable that he should be slow to realise that they are guided entirely by self-love, since his own deepest priorities are so radically different. These points apply also to Gloucester, who does not dream that Edmund would do something so “unnatural” as betray his father to Cornwall (3.4.1-25).

Moreover, Lear is also hampered by some of the customary convictions which render characters like Cordelia, Kent, Gloucester and Albany vulnerable to potential tyrants. His feeling that he has lost his identity– “This is not Lear”–as a result of Goneril’s disrespect reflects a failure to understand the fragility and arbitrary nature of the “marks of sovereignty” which have hitherto symbolised his authority (1.4.226-34). His ongoing reliance on such conventions is illustrated by his expectation that Cornwall and Regan “durst not…could not” put his servant in the stocks, since this act “do[es] upon respect such outrage,” and his continuing assumption that he will be obeyed automatically whenever he “commands, tends service” (2.4.12-27, 2.4.102). Over the years Lear has clearly become so habituated to the conventional deference which his position as monarch and patriarch has commanded that he can hardly imagine a world without it. His professed hope that Regan “better know[s] the offices of nature, bond of childhood, effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude,” combines appeals to her “nature,” which he supposes to be more “tender-hefted” than Goneril’s, with conventional conceptions of “courtesy” (2.4.177-79). As is typical of the second group of characters in the hierarchy outlined above, Lear conceives of the devotion which he attributes to Regan both as a natural passion and as his established “due.”

Furthermore, although Lear is no stranger to the humbling effects of intimate attachments, as is evident not only from his willingness to transfer his power to Cordelia, but from his unfailing encouragement of the critical fool, it is nevertheless clear that he still takes a spirited and noble pride in his status as monarch and patriarch. He is concerned that it would not “become…the house” to sue Goneril for forgiveness, or to, “squire-like, pension beg” from the “hot-bloodied France” like a “slave and sumpter” (2.4.153, 2.4.212-17). A combination of pride and piety impels Lear to assert himself against Goneril and Regan in a manner that is at best ineffectual and at worst highly imprudent. “Asham’d” that they have the “power to shake [his] manhood” and reduce him to tears, he asks the gods, who he thinks may have “stir[red] these daughters’ hearts against their father,” to enable him to respond to their ingratitude with “noble anger,” rather than resorting to “women’s weapons, water-drops” (1.4.296-99, 2.4.271-84). His prayer to “Nature…dear goddess” that any child of Goneril’s should prove “a disnatur’d torment to her” is futile, since there is no sign that she has sufficient filial feeling or superstitious credulity to be tormented by “the untented woundings of a father’s curse” in the manner that he would wish (1.4.275-89). The same can be said of Lear’s lofty appeal to her code of honour and fear of divine sanctions: “Let shame come when it will…I do not bid the thunder–bearer shoot, nor tell tales of thee to high-judging Jove” (2.4.225-31; see also 2.4.164-68).

There are signs that events could have proceeded very differently if Lear had responded to Goneril in a more measured way. “Begg[ing]” from France and accepting Goneril’s conditions would in fact be serious options, since Cordelia would surely welcome him, while even his elder daughters would have no reason not to “receive him gladly –there is perhaps a trace of shame in this mutual determination–if he abandoned his “follower[s]” and made no attempt to “manage those authorities that he hath given away” (2.4.288-93, 1.3.16-18). Moreover, there are signs that Albany–who, despite his “milky” moderation and piety, ultimately proves himself to be eminently capable of standing up to Goneril–could have become a powerful ally even at this early point in the play, if Lear had not been too distracted to draw on this potential support, partly by his spontaneous anguish, but mainly by his proud effort to convert this grief into a noble and pious indignation, and his expectation that Regan will be ready to pay her father ”dues of gratitude.”

Although Lear asks Albany to “speak,” having guessed that he is “guiltless,” he does not give him time to state his view, so intent is he on reproaching Goneril and rushing away to seek succour with Regan (1.4.257-72). Furthermore, distracted by his efforts to substitute spirited curses for shameful tears, and enticed by his hope that Regan will allow him to resume his royal “shape,” he never actually fulfils his promise to tell his host what “the matter” is (1.4.295-310). Albany perhaps would not have consented to the disbanding of Lear’s knights if he had had a chance to examine both sides of the case, since his initial instinct is that Goneril “may fear too far” (1.4.328). Although hampered in comparison to his unscrupulous wife by a gentle courtliness, he is certainly prepared to dispute the issue with her– “I cannot be so partial, Goneril, to the great love I bear you…”–but Lear departs so abruptly that he leaves Goneril free to present her father’s erratic behaviour and violent curses simply as evidence of his “dotage”: “Do you mark that?” (1.4.310-13, 1.4.326-27). It is noticeable that Goneril has to engineer matters so that Albany is absent when she and Regan finally forbid Lear to retain any knights at all (2.4.243-63).

The fool implies that there is no point in remonstrating with Goneril and Regan, because their self-love is by no means monstrous or “disnatur’d,” as Lear claims, but rather a primitive and fundamental element of the human psyche, which may often be adopted as a ruling principle (1.5.40, 1.4.281-83). In the fool’s view, his master has simply “fed the cuckoo for so long, that it had it head bit off by it young,” as would be entirely in accord with the bird’s instinct, were it so well nourished by its adopted parent as no longer to need their support (1.4.214-16). We may infer from this that Lear’s relative lack of affection for Goneril may ultimately be a function as much as a cause of her domineering character, though over time, cause and effect are of course bound to interact in complex ways within families. Goneril’s observation that Lear “always lov’d our sister most” cannot necessarily be used as evidence that her self-love has been encouraged by her upbringing, for the purpose of this comment is not to analyse her relationship with her father, or even apparently to express resentment, as Edmund frequently does, but, in typically practical fashion, to use his rejection of Cordelia to justify her plan to side-line him on the grounds that he is losing his judgement (1.1.290-91). Far from arguing with Lear’s conviction that he was “so kind a father”–as he would certainly be perfectly capable of doing–the fool rebukes him only for his naivety in expecting any more from Goneril than callous ingratitude (1.5.32; see also 3.4.14-20). We may infer that tyrannical dispositions are by no means necessarily fostered by emotional deprivation -although this is not to deny that Edmund probably represents at least a large minority of such cases.

Being an irreducible element of the psyche, self-love is not in itself amenable to analysis, although we may infer from the example of the cuckoo that it is ultimately an extension of the survival instinct. The processes which lead some souls to enshrine self-love as a ruling principle are often as shrouded in mystery as the origins of the Pleiades: the fool observes that no-one can determine why “the seven stars are no moe than seven,” leaving his master to recall both that the constellation was also known as the Seven Sisters and that it was traditionally associated with grief (1.5.34-38). The fool’s metaphor also hints that he is no believer either in astrology or the gods. He has no explanation, either natural or supernatural, for “how an oyster makes his shell,” but, he seems to suggest, simply accepts that pearls form in some souls and not in others for reasons which are so intricate as literally to be imponderable (1.5.25-26).

The fool’s advice is essentially that there is no point responding to self-love with passionate, noble or pious indignation, since it is simply a force of nature. When Lear starts to wonder whether he should attempt “to take… [his kingdom] again perforce,” the fool reprimands him for not being as “wise” as he is old, implying that this would be simply a futile expression of noble pride, since he lacks the military force to do so (1.5.39-45). Because passionate souls who lack political power, and who are at the same time able to “spy into” what may be impossible to “smell out” in detail, will see that self-love is a potentially dominant element within human nature, they should strive to emulate the snail, who “put[s] ’s head” in his own “house,” and “keep[s] in a’ door” (1.5.19-31, 1.4.125). Such prudent and passionate souls might be compared to oysters, in that they shield their pearls with a hard outer shell. They should avoid attempting to correct ambitious narcissists with passionate, pious or noble recriminations, since self-lovers do not share the underlying assumptions on which these are founded, and should simply strive to restrain the self-regarding and sensual elements in their own nature in order to protect themselves and their intimate attachments: “Have more than thou showest, speak less than thou knowest…Leave thy drink and thy whore, and keep in a’ door” (1.4.117-28).

Although the fool recommends self-contained moderation for private citizens in this way, he is far from advising the political elite to emulate such passivity, since it is only through their authority that self-love can be moderated to some extent in the kingdom as a whole. He repeatedly lambasts Lear for giving up his “land,” his “crown…” and, by implication, his military force to Goneril and Regan: “thou gav’st them the rod, and put’st down thine own breeches” (1.4.128-65, 1.5.28-31, 1.4.172-74). He seems to approve of the ageing Lear’s original scheme to invest his authority in Cordelia as a prudent means of securing stability for the kingdom, criticising him, not for his determination to transfer his power in itself, but for having “par’d [his] wit o’ both sides, and left nothing i’ th’ middle” (1.4.187-88). As Lear himself seems guiltily to realise, the fool is probably also recognising the prudence of the projected threefold division of the kingdom when he points to the benefits of “keep[ing] one’s eyes on either side’s nose” (1.5.19-24).

The fool also therefore supports the traditional conventions which bolster the authority of the established hierarchy, while understanding that they must be carefully manipulated at times for the common good. Thus, he does not question Lear’s use of the love test to provide an apparent justification for disrupting the tradition of primogeniture, but simply criticises him for failing to exploit Cordelia’s bluntness more prudently, echoing the fateful conversation with bitter precision: “Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?” (1.4.129-35). Unlike Kent, the intelligent fool sees that Lear was not blinded by his elder daughters’ flattery, but became enraged because he could not see a way to “make…use of” his youngest daughter’s unexpected recalcitrance -1.1.152-54.) Indeed, Shakespeare hints that politics is precisely all about “mak[ing]…use of nothing”: just as Lear strove to disguise the artificial nature of his authority by projecting an image of infallibility (see the analysis of 1.1.168-72 above), so he hoped that he could justify transferring his sovereignty to Cordelia by presenting what was in fact a cunning manipulation both of an entirely arbitrary convention and of Goneril and Regan’s insubstantial expressions of devotion as a natural response to declarations of passionate love.

The play as a whole appears to endorse the fool’s suggestion that, far from defaulting to attachment under normal circumstances, human nature is permanently torn between two incompatible and quite equally matched natural forces. The chaos precipitated by Lear’s sudden volte-face introduces a genuine love test, as noted above, which ultimately shows that the old order has always concealed a complex mixture of passionate fidelity, which may often be reinforced by conventional principles, as in the cases of Kent and Gloucester, and a self-love which is masked by an expedient conformity to the established hierarchy, and at times itself tempered, in a slightly uneasy manner, by the same engrained principles (see below).

Many knights desert Lear after his confrontation with Goneril, because they know that necks can be broken “when a great wheel runs down a hill,” indicating that in the final analysis they “follow…but for form,” whereas “five or six and thirty” of the hundred remain “hot questrists” after the king, no doubt moved by the same mixture of personal love and engrained respect for authority that we see in Kent and Gloucester (2.4.63-74, 3.7.16-20). This ratio is repeated when one of the three servants present during Gloucester’s blinding risks his life in order to defend him, apparently because, having served Cornwall throughout his life, he is now concerned to prevent him from committing a deed which he might regret forever (3.7.72-82). It is suggestive that the truly dutiful knights and servants are both outnumbered by the same ratio. In the case of the servants, it is impossible to dismiss the two who do not intervene as arrantly self-serving: in fact, they are sufficiently god-fearing to be appalled by their master and mistress’s actions -though not to help their victim further than to anoint his eyes and send him off under the guidance of an apparent madman (3.7.99-107). It may be inferred from the contrast between their behaviour and that of the first servant that in public life at least, most are moved to conform to the established hierarchy by a combination of self-interest and conventional beliefs, but that about a third are driven by a mixture of habitual convictions and deep attachment to offer an intransigently self-denying service, which, as is evident from Kent’s intervention in the opening scene, may well defy that hierarchy. Thus, it may be presumed that, rather than consciously adopting self-love as a ruling motive in the manner of Goneril and Edmund, many of the knights who desert Lear are torn between self-preservation and pious and noble duty. Albany seems to embody this uneasy mixture of motives, since, having attempted to reprimand Goneril for her treatment of Lear, he is then swayed by her argument that the allegedly senile king’s knights might “hold our lives in mercy,” though without ever fully subscribing to it: “Well, you may fear too far” (1.4.311-12, 1.4.322-33).

The fool himself has “pin’d away” since Lear’s rejection of his beloved mistress, an event which was so devastating for him that it seems to have transformed his whole demeanour (1.4.73-74, 1.4.170-78). He is one of those who passes Lear’s involuntary love test, despite his talk of prudence and of his own folly in “taking one’s part that’s out of favor”: if “thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou’lt catch cold shortly” (1.4.97-101). We may infer from his apparently foolish loyalty that he has enshrined his deepest attachments as his ruling passion, which means that they must ultimately override even his instinct for self-preservation. Although he is certainly capable of protecting himself on occasion, as we can see when he pursues Lear in order to avoid the risk of being hanged by Goneril, we may infer that self-preservation is for the fool only a means to his ultimate goal, which is to establish and maintain lasting friendships (1.4.315-21). (*Put in note*: It is noticeable that the courageous fool is the only one of Lear’s followers to defy his command to leave at this point in the play, perhaps, as Goneril seems suddenly to realise, because he is hoping to overhear Albany’s response to her machinations.) The fool has realised that he can only fulfil himself by continually restraining, not only his spending, speech and physical appetites, as noted above, but his attachment to life itself, since these are all factors which might limit his devotion to his beloved (1.4.117-28). The fool is unique among Lear’s friends, in that he is bound to him purely by affection, and has no regard for codes of duty and deference.

Although he criticises Lear’s naivety, the fool implies that “ladies” who are bent on “snatching” power are in the final analysis even more foolish (1.4.152-55). His lamentation that a king should blindly play “bo-peep, and go the fools among,” suggests that enlightened narcissists reap no substantial benefits from their superior shrewdness (1.4.175-78). His seemingly nonsensical inversions actually hint at the folly of pursuing status in the conventional hierarchy: “this fellow has banish’d two on ‘s daughters, and did the third a blessing against his will” (1.4.102-03). Although, as we have seen, he implicitly endorses the original plan to stabilise the succession, he nevertheless indicates at this point that the failure of the scheme was a “blessing” in disguise for Cordelia personally, since she would otherwise have had to shoulder the unrewarding cares of political rule, while, conversely and paradoxically, her foolish sisters are “banish’d” from any chance of true fulfilment precisely by the realisation of their ambitions. Just as it seems foolish to “tak[e] one’s part that’s out of favor,” but is actually entirely sensible if deep attachments provide the ultimate good, so the devotees of political status appear to be shrewder than they are, since their shrewdness relates merely to the means by which they advance themselves rather than to their ability to gauge the value of their ultimate aims (1.4.97-101; see also 2.4.67-87). In the recurrent phrase of the play, such status is in fact worth absolutely “nothing–even though, as we have seen, it may be used by passionate and thoughtful rulers to create ‘something’–since it may only be relished by continually measuring one’s position relative to an arbitrary hierarchy, and is at the same time largely incompatible with the substantial joys of intimate relationships, as Lear seems to have realised at the start of the play.

Thus, although self-love and attachment may be equally powerful motives, this does not mean that the goals which they pursue are of commensurate value (1.5.34-37). As Lear inadvertently implies, his wish to maintain a train of knights after he has surrendered power is analogous to Goneril’s desire to wear “gorgeous” clothes, since it is rooted in a self-regard, which although itself natural, ultimately pursues a sense of distinction which has nothing to do with what “nature needs” for the reasons given above (2.4.264-70). Lear’s pride may be largely sublimated into piety and nobility, but it is ultimately derived from the same urge as Goneril’s ambition. He shows a characteristic ambivalence when, after acknowledging for a moment that his “true need” is for a “patience” which is derived from a radical humility–he is “a poor old man, as full of grief as age, wretched in both” (2.4.270-73)–he breaks off from the painful task of confronting his own insignificance to seek relief in a noble and pious vengefulness (2.4.274-85). Lear’s reaction to Goneril’s encroachments suggests that he might in fact have been incapable of contenting himself with a humble private life dependent upon Cordelia’s “kind nursery,” as seemed to be his aim at the start of the play (1.1.123-24). Lear unwittingly highlights the disjunction between his dignified self-assertion and the intimate attachments that provide him with real emotional sustenance by following his portentous and futile threat to unleash “the terrors of the earth” with a humble appeal to his most faithful friend: “O Fool, I shall go mad!” (2.4.286).

Whereas for the just characters, the harsh deterrents which authority must occasionally exercise are merely the ultimate means of protecting a civic order which is sustained primarily by natural attachments, and codes of honour and piety, the third group respects only force. Thus, Goneril’s priority is to dismantle Lear’s retinue of a hundred knights (1.4.138-252, 1.4.322-27). Goneril neither loves Lear nor reveres his “authorities,” which in her view were “given away” when he surrendered his power to enforce them (1.3.16-18). As we have seen, Edmund shares this view, since he hints that sons have a natural right to supplant “aged tyranny, who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffer’d” (1.2.49-51). By contrast, the disguised Kent offers Lear “service” and “call[s] [him] master,” because he continues to see “authority” in his “countenance,” even though the king now has no means of compelling obedience. As we have seen, Kent is bound to Lear both by natural affection and by a habitual respect for the socio-political hierarchy (1.4.23-30).

The third group of potential tyrants will inevitably have an advantage in pursuing their ambitions, precisely because they are largely unencumbered by the conventional beliefs through which the political order is reinforced. Moreover, as Edmund shows when he condemns his brother’s lack of reverence for fathers and gods, and as Goneril demonstrates when she justifies her desire to reduce Lear’s train of knights by accusing them of “insolent” and “shame[ful]” disrespect, these characters are well capable of exploiting such beliefs in order to further their ambitions (2.1.38-50, 1.4.201-14). The civil order therefore needs the protection of characters like Edgar (see below) and Lear as he initially appears, who are able to match their unscrupulous machinations. Guardians of this sort must be sufficiently attached to their country to apply themselves to the task of constructing a protective order for its citizens “to put [their] head in,” as well as thoughtful enough to remember that this regime is in fact a relatively fragile artifice, which needs constant tweaking in order to shore it up against the driving “wind and the rain” of self-love (1.5.28-31, 3.2.74-77). It is significant, however, that by the time the play begins, the aged Lear has lost patience with a role which requires him to concentrate ceaselessly on maintaining the political order; a role that, ironically, lacks intrinsic personal satisfaction for the reasons given above, even though it allows many of his subjects to find fulfilment through lasting attachments. Those who sense the insubstantiality of the benefits of high status have no motive to rule apart from love of country, which, however heartfelt, is the least rewarding form of attachment, since it cannot be requited with a trusting intimacy.

The fool’s mock prophecy, delivered on the heath at the height of the storm, brackets self-love and incontinent desire together as forces which routinely disrupt society and degrade attachments, aided by the fact that the established hierarchy of priests and “nobles” are often too distracted by their own pompous or lavish displays to mount any serious resistance (3.2.81-92). The fool implicitly compares these disruptive urges to “the wind and the rain,” suggesting that they must simply be endured as pervasive, arbitrary natural phenomena (3.2.74-77). A thoughtful man should exercise prudent control over his ambition and physical desires, since, if he can “make content with his fortunes fit,” he will be able to protect himself from being abused by those who fail to exercise a similar level of control, thus freeing himself up to forge truly fulfilling relationships, which, the fool implies, must be founded on restraint and mutual trust (3.2.76). He illustrates this point through his cautionary tale of a man who is tormented as a result of an impetuous marriage based entirely on sexual desire (3.2.25-36). His practical advice is that Lear should now use his “tine wit” to restrain his self-love and administer “court holy water”–that is, abject flattery–to his daughters in order to secure “a dry house” (3.2.74-76, 3.2.10-13).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Throughout the play, apparently trivial images such as horse-riding, clothes and particularly houses are used to represent the range of prudent strategies and constructs which human “wit” generates in order to resist the encroachments of self-love. The fool introduces his cautionary tale with a precise echo of his earlier advice that Lear “keep in a’ door” and imitate the snail, which has a house “to put’s head in”: “He that has a house to put’s head in has a good head-piece” (1.4.126, 1.4.27-31, 3.2.25-29). It is only in the fantastic utopia envisaged by the mock prophecy that usurers can “tell their gold i’ th’ field;” in reality they must strive to acquire houses in order to protect themselves from “cutpurses,” as well as from the “the wind and the rain” (3.2.90-91). Similarly, it is only in this utopia that “going shall be us’d with feet;” in the real world, as the fool advised earlier, travellers are best advised to “ride more than [they] go,” presumably as much for their own safety as for speed (3.2.93-94, 1.4.121).

The process by which Lear’s small company secures the use of the hovel illustrates the political corollary of the moderation which the fool advises individuals to exercise in their private lives. Whereas the civil order is shown to be derived ultimately from passionate attachments, as is implied by the way in which Lear progresses naturally from attempting to find shelter for the fool– “Come, your hovel. Poor Fool and knave, I have one part in my heart that’s sorry yet for thee”–to a warm-hearted acceptance of the need to redistribute any “superflux” of wealth in order to provide “houseless heads” with secure accommodation, the play also insinuates that such just and public-spirited motives can only override self-love in the end if they are supported by established political authority and military deterrents (3.2.68-73, 3.4.26-35). On the heath–which is initially portrayed as a sort of state of nature, where all are reduced to the same level by the struggle for survival–it seems at first that Lear can only fulfil his generous impulse to protect even his beloved fool alone–leaving aside his indigent subjects, whom he now has no power to protect–through the efforts of Kent, who evinces a typically dutiful determination to return to the “hard house” to which the company has previously been denied access “and force their scanted courtesy” (3.2.62-67). Later, however, the power of the traditional hierarchy to compel the discourteous to serve the community is illustrated by the relative ease and speed with which Gloucester commandeers the hovel (3.4.153, 3.4.174). One may infer from this sequence of events that the civil order relies originally on the threat of military power, but that subsequently it is usually sustained by established political authority -although of course such authority continues to be underwritten by military deterrents, even where it seems to command respect purely in its own right.

Just as the civil order is sustained by systematic military and political support, so it is strengthened by noble lies. One purpose of Lear’s hypothetical redistribution of wealth to the “houseless heads” would be to “show the heavens more just” than they actually are (3.4.28-36). His wish is presumably that habituation to the comfortable accommodation which he hopes to provide might eventually lead his subjects to underestimate the ferocity of “the wind and the rain” and assume that nature is fundamentally benevolent. If houses and storms are viewed symbolically in the manner outlined above, then Lear’s projected deception may be seen as a way of reinforcing the conventional values and institutions which help to protect the civic order by presenting them as reflecting a natural, or in this case supernatural, cosmic order, even though they are in fact artificial constructs, which in reality merely preserve a small enclave of restraint and harmony from the pervasive tumult of self-love. Lear’s wish to use the products of human ingenuity to instil a faith in divine justice resembles his earlier attempt to use a contrived love test to present what was in fact a prudent political decision as driven entirely by natural passion. Such deceptions are calculated to reinforce the civil order by presenting it as sustained entirely naturally by a great chain of love (1.2.106-12). They do so, however, at the expense of side-lining the harsher elements within human nature, presenting them as monstrous or beyond the pale, while at the same time glossing over the vital role that political authority and the military power by which it is ultimately guaranteed play in containing ambition. Thus, characters like Lear, Kent and Gloucester are as vulnerable to the abuses perpetrated by Goneril and Regan and Edmund as those who are suddenly made homeless are to storms, having become habituated to the comforts of secure accommodation.

It is clear that Lear himself longs for religious faith as fervently as for filial devotion. Thus, he rationalises the arbitrary and indiscriminate lashings of the storm as a divine scourge of “ingrateful man” (1.2.103-10, 3.2.1-9). He knows that churches are being “drench’d” along with everything else, and that his own “old and white” head is in danger of being “singe[d],” but, so engrained is his religious sensibility that, rather than accepting the fool’s teaching that the storm is simply an arbitrary phenomenon, like self-love or the Pleiades, he prefers to see the “rain, wind, thunder, fire” as “servile ministers” to his “pernicious daughters,” conducting “high engender’d battles” against those who are largely innocent (3.2.3-6, 3.2.19-24). Ultimately, despite acknowledging that he himself is “a man more sinn’d against than sinning,” he takes uneasy refuge in the idea that the storm is a punishment administered by “the great gods” for “undivulged crimes” (3.2.49-60). Although Lear’s self-love is sublimated in such a way as generally to reinforce his attachments, rather than impelling him to pursue worldly ambition or exposing him to flattery, he cannot dispense with the assumption, reinforced by traditional teachings, that his life is of great significance in the grand scheme of things, whether he is being persecuted or avenged by the gods. Lear’s contorted and contradictory meditations on the storm illustrate the way in which the ingenious constructions which society erects to reinforce communal ties inevitably blind non-philosophers to the true nature of self-love, precisely in the process of shielding them from its more turbulent effects.

Although Lear’s insistence on staying out in the storm may be taken as a sign that he more capable of confronting the nature of reality than Kent or Gloucester, for instance, his motive in so doing is partly to “shun” the inner tumult caused by “ponder[ing] on things would hurt me more” (3.4.6-25). By exposing himself to the elements, Lear is trying to distract himself, not only from his daughters’ ingratitude, but from the radical scepticism which it has provoked in his own soul. Unlike the fool, Lear longs for a religious explanation for his suffering, since he cannot accept that it is simply an inevitable consequence of the incessant “wind and the rain” of self-love. It is significant that the fool lingers in what he calls “a brave night to cool a courtezan” to deliver his mock prophecy–even though he admits that the storm “pities neither wise men nor fools,” and, as we have seen, urges Lear to seek out “a dry house” (3.2.79-80, 3.2.10-13).

The fool may therefore be expecting too much of Lear in encouraging him to gain a measured, philosophical understanding of self-love, since this project assumes that the king is capable of restraining his passions and renouncing his conventional convictions. He is temporarily successful in persuading Lear to strive to “be the pattern of all patience,” but the king’s efforts to engage his “tine wit” in order to “make content with his fortunes fit” are constantly impeded both by his piety and by his natural revulsion against “filial ingratitude” (3.2.25-37, 3.2.74-76). The fool, whose hallmark is that he tells the truth, albeit often elliptically, may not therefore simply be bantering earlier in the play, when he exclaims that he “would fain learn to lie,” since it is not at all clear that the truth is useful to Lear (1.4.179-80). He treats Lear as if he were a fully-fledged member of the first group of characters, but, as we have seen, the king also shares many of the characteristics of the second group, whose attachments are inextricably bound up with their pious and noble convictions. Lear’s ambivalent attitude to philosophy is indicated by that fact that, having threatened to “whip” the fool during their opening conversation for exposing his imprudence in giving his “living” to his self-serving daughters, he subsequently encourages him to give his full view of the situation, and in the end, although the resulting conversations are obviously deeply painful, even threatens to have him “whipt” if he should lie (compare 1.4.105-14 and 1.4.181).

It is a measure of the fool’s superior resilience that he controls his grief through philosophical reflections by which he seeks to align himself with the painful reality; reflections which are often, uncharacteristically, presented musically, perhaps precisely as a way of ensuring that he retains this control (1.4.73-74, 1.4.170-71). In this way the fool resembles Shakespeare himself, since he adroitly combines careful thought and music. He differs from his creator, however, in that he does not see that the contrast between his own reaction to the storm and that of the king points to the natural distinction between the philosopher, who enjoys “ponder[ing]” even on the harshest truths, and the non-philosopher, who does not. Ironically, Lear is closer to dealing successfully with non-philosophers than the ever-truthful fool, when he hopes to “show the heavens more just” than they actually are to his subjects. In fact, his projected deceptios could be seen as compassionate, not simply because they are designed to support civil order, but because he understands from his own bitter experience the depth of the non-philosopher’s need to believe in the ultimate benevolence of nature.

At the other extreme from the fool, Kent illustrates this need perfectly, since he is much less willing to confront the harsh aspects of nature even than Lear: he focuses entirely on the need for “the king to enter” the hovel, on the grounds that “man’s nature cannot carry th’ affliction nor the fear” of the storm, and since “the tyranny of the open night’s too rough for nature to endure” (3.2.48-49, 3.4.1-5, 3.4.22, 3.4.156, 3.4.161-62, 3.4.175-79). Kent’s fear of the storm parallels his reluctance to confront the fact that self-love is more deeply rooted than the artificial framework of authority and deference to which he has been habituated for so long. He continues to address the king as “your Grace,” whereas it is a sign of Lear’s partial and reluctant emancipation from such *conventions* that he simply replies, “What’s he?” (3.4.125-26). It is no coincidence that it is the two characters who represent the ancien regime, Gloucester and Kent, who are most urgent in entreating Lear to enter the hovel, although, as we have seen, the philosophical fool also recognises the need for shelter (compare 3.2.10-13, 3.4.3.4.110-11, 3.4.148-53, 3.4.170-71)

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By echoing the song that concludes *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare points to the importance of the internal struggle to control sensuality and self-love, which I have argued elsewhere is the main theme of that play.

Moreover, although the dictates of honour are often in accord with natural attachments, they may also aggravate the collateral damage generated by the conventional order: although Gloucester’s code of honour reinforces his natural feeling that Edmund must be “acknowledg’d,” problems are primarily caused by the shame which he feels for having fathered an illegitimate son.

The almost schematic contrasts between the just and the unjust characters which the play presents–Edmund/Edgar, Cornwall/Albany, Goneril and Reagan/Cordelia, Burgundy/France, Oswald/Kent.

Although self-love is of course entirely natural, the status which it naturally pursues is literally worth “nothing,” to use one of the play’s recurrent phrases. This point applies, not only to the ruthless ambition of Edmund, who strives to gain a distinguished position in the very hierarchy which he has dismissed as arbitrary, but to the group of characters whose pride is sublimated into nobility and honour. Thus, from one point of view piety, honour and ambition can all be ranked together as forces which distract one from a prudent

(The rest of the play furnishes evidence that even Lear has not fully grasped the depths to which human nature can sink when there is no such authority to underwrite civic stability.)

Although their underlying motives are completely incompatible, the first and third group resemble each other in that both tend to base their conduct on nature rather than common opinion, whereas the second and third group differ in their attitude both to nature and to convention. These latter two groups are, however, both motivated by a proud desire to distinguish themselves, which is rooted in natural self-love, although the self-regard of the second group is sublimated into pious and honourable service. The first and second groups resemble each other up to a point, since codes of nobility and piety usually tend to reinforce passionate constancy, but the tension between natural attachments and conventional conceptions of honour is exposed by Gloucester’s determination to keep Edmund away from court, despite the fact that Edgar is “no dearer” to him than his illegitimate son (1.1.19-24).

It is down to characters like Lear, who are not primarily influenced by established conventions, to attempt to control the ambitions of potential tyrants: the king’s original plan offers a public appearance of justice by which he hopes to circumvent the convention of primogeniture and pass on his power to the only one of his daughters who is capable of ruling with “love, care and duty” (1.1.102). Rather than cultivating a gratifying, but entirely counterproductive “plainness,” he recognises that he can best protect his kingdom through a deception. Such deceptions are an inescapable requirement of political life, as is implied by the fact that Lear’s authority itself demands that he maintain an appearance of infallible wisdom and justice. This pervasive insincerity actually frustrates the king as much as it does Kent and Cordelia, since–in contrast with the third group of characters, whose ambitions naturally thrive in this world–Lear’s primary need is for lasting attachments, which depend upon mutual trust.

Although their underlying motives are completely incompatible, the first and third group resemble each other in that both tend to base their conduct on nature rather than common opinion, whereas the second and third group differ in their attitude both to nature and to convention. These latter two groups resemble each other, however, in that they are both motivated by their innate self-love, although in the case of the second group this is sublimated into pious and honourable service. The first and second groups resemble each other up to a point, since, not only are the characters in the second group partly motivated by natural passion, but codes of nobility and piety usually tend to reinforce passionate constancy. However, the potential tension between natural attachments and conventional conceptions of piety and honour is exposed by Gloucester’s determination to keep Edmund away from court, despite the fact that Edgar is “no dearer” to him than his illegitimate son (1.1.19-24).

1. This advice might seem ill-judged given later events, but Goneril, Regan and Cornwall would have had no reason to act against Lear if he had not sought to assert his authority, and only plan to kill him after they have been told that France is attempting to avenge his treatment and restore him to the throne (3.3.9-25, 3.5.10-13, 3.5.88-89). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)